

Goethe's *Faust* and
Cultural Memory
Comparatist Interfaces

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Herder as Faust

Robert E. Norton

It has been celebrated as one of the pivotal events in German intellectual history, even as a moment of far-reaching consequence for the later development of German culture as a whole. During the second week of September 1770, in the Alsatian university town of Strasbourg, a newly matriculated student by the name of Johann Wolfgang Goethe happened to meet another recent arrival to the city, Johann Gottfried Herder, as Herder was climbing up the stairs to his hotel, improbably named "Zum Geist." This chance encounter sparked a period of intense adulation on Goethe's part, forming the basis of a friendship that grew over the following weeks and months and would last a quarter century. Goethe's initial veneration of Herder was due not only to his being the younger of the two—Goethe had just turned twenty-one, and Herder was his senior by almost exactly five years—but also because Herder was then something of a minor celebrity, having already earned a precocious notoriety with several books on literature and philosophy that began to appear in the mid-1760s. They had attracted the notice and even the ire of some of the most prominent writers of the day—including Winckelmann, Lessing, and Moses Mendelssohn—whose works Herder had subjected to extensive and occasionally blunt criticism. There was, when Goethe met him, even a whiff of scandal surrounding Herder's name, for he had published his polemical essays anonymously and when confronted publicly about his authorship, he had vigorously, and perhaps foolishly, denied any association with them. In addition, in June of the previous year Herder had suddenly left his post as pastor and teacher in Riga—among other things, there were rumors about his attachment to a married woman there—whereupon he had embarked on a lengthy sea journey via Denmark and the German-speaking territories

all the way to France, where he had met some of the leading lights of Paris, especially the principal editors of the *Encyclopédie*, d'Alembert and Diderot, the latter of whom Herder called "the best philosopher in France."¹ Herder kept a diary of his travels that he filled with ambitious plans both for himself and for his country, ideas for books and essays he intended to write, and reflections about almost every conceivable aspect of history, society, art, and life. Even though the *Journal meiner Reise im Jahr 1769* (Journal of my travels in 1769) was not published until 1846, it has been rightly called "the most illuminating document of the inner story of Herder's mind"² that we possess from the time just before he arrived in Strasbourg. In short, Herder in the autumn of 1770 cut an almost irresistibly exciting figure: he knew and was known by important people—on top of everything else, he had also studied philosophy for two years in Königsberg under Immanuel Kant—he was widely traveled, creative, prolific, and even slightly dangerous. He was the first genuine intellectual Goethe had met, and the effect on the impressionable younger man was electric.

Even the prelude to this fateful meeting seems to be the stuff of legend. Goethe had agreed to enroll at Strasbourg at the behest of his doting but ambitious father, who was eager to see his son finish his studies and finally complete the law degree he had begun in Leipzig five years before, in 1765, when he was only sixteen. Life had been a little too easy for the teenage Goethe in modern and bustling Leipzig, called "Little Paris" for its intellectual vibrancy—in addition to its university, Leipzig also possessed the distinction of being the book-publishing capital of Germany—but also for its fashionable elegance and for the relative abundance of attractive diversions on offer there. Supported by a generous allowance from his father, who remained vigilant over his son's academic progress but at a reassuringly safe distance in his native city of Frankfurt, the young Goethe had devoted much of his time to extracurricular pursuits. Quickly disenchanted and bored by the Leipzig law professors, Goethe concentrated his energies instead on art and poetry, honing his drafting and etching skills and composing verses in the gallant but rather artificial style of the Rococo, which celebrated pastoral love in Arcadian settings. Only a serious illness that struck Goethe in June 1768 put a premature end to these pleasant but ultimately trivial dalliances and Goethe spent the next six months convalescing at home in Frankfurt. But after he had finally fully recovered, the question of his future still loomed. Leipzig had proved educational, but not in the way his father had wished, and Strasbourg, he hoped, would provide a more congenial, which is to say less distracting, environment for his bright but unfocused son who, perhaps forgivably, preferred writing poetry to studying law.

It fell to Herder to jolt Goethe out of his Anacreontic complacency. While he was in Strasbourg, Herder was busy writing the work for which he is still most famous today, the *Abhandlung über den Ursprung der Sprache* (Treatise

on the origin of language), which later won the prize contest announced that year by the Berlin Academy of Sciences. Over the winter, Goethe read the treatise as it was being composed, and it revealed to him a dynamic conception of language and its place within human experience. Herder placed particular emphasis on the creative power of language and on its inseparable connection to the history, culture—or, to use a then fashionable term, the “spirit”—of the people who spoke it. These were not ideas unique to Herder—Montesquieu, for one, whom Herder greatly admired, had written extensively about the particular *esprit* of individual peoples, and Condillac, whom Herder pretended to disdain but secretly appropriated, had applied this insight specifically to the study of language—but these ideas *were* new to Goethe, and the lesson he learned was that his native language, indeed all languages, were just as capable of expressing poetic vigor, dignity, and beauty as classical Latin and Greek, not to mention the *lingua franca* of educated Europeans, French.

This, then, was Herder as Goethe first saw him: already immensely learned, inexhaustibly curious, impetuous, emotionally volatile and physically restless, exuding an intellectual vitality coupled with a quick impatience, all of which formed a potent mixture that beguiled, and often enough alienated, those who encountered him. Although driven to comprehend history in all of its breadth and complexity, Herder was also very much a man of the moment, attuned to the extraordinary intellectual ferment taking place throughout Europe that was challenging long-held beliefs about every facet of human experience, from religion and art, to education and law, to politics, epistemology, and science—all of which were subjects to which Herder would devote his many essays and books during the rest of his life. Through the accident of birth, Herder thus enjoyed the good luck of coming of age just as the Enlightenment reached its zenith, making him the fortunate beneficiary of one of the most intellectually vibrant and productive periods in history. It is easy to imagine that Herder must have seemed to Goethe the very incarnation of the kind of expansive mind that all of his university professors so disappointingly were not: a seemingly endlessly inquisitive spirit who stopped at no disciplinary boundaries, in fact disdained such boundaries as obstacles to real insight, a thinker whose goal was to strive for nothing less than the achievement of the Enlightenment dream: to attain a comprehensive understanding of humanity, even more to aspire to universal knowledge. Herder personified an ardent but indefinite longing, he embodied an unquenchable yearning, a striving for something perpetually, because necessarily, beyond our grasp: in short, in the words of more than one later observer, for the young Goethe “Herder is Faust!”³

There is much that speaks in favor of the notion that, as someone else more cautiously suggested, “Herder became a model of Goethe’s Faust,”⁴ or, as another put it even more circumspectly, “Herder’s desire for life is

in Faust."⁵ First, as I have indicated, Herder's personality, his intellectual profile, his vast ambition and insatiable drive, all find an easily identifiable resonance in the figure of the tormented scholar familiar from Goethe's drama. Too, not long after they had met and under the lingering influence of Herder's powerful example, Goethe began to write what became the first draft of the play, the so-called *Urfaust*, which, however, he abandoned unfinished in 1774. Finally, although the story of Faust had long been popular in Germany, usually transmitted in some corrupted version of Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*, it was first in Strasbourg that, as Nicholas Boyle reminds us, "Goethe may have seen a performance of the story by strolling actors,"⁶ thus perhaps forging a lasting bond in the poet's mind that fused Herder and Faust inseparably together. This connection seemed in fact so compelling that in 1911 a German scholar by the name of Günther Jacoby published a nearly five-hundred-page book, *Herder als Faust*, which set out to prove, in exhaustive—and exhausting—detail, that "Herder himself is Faust" and "that we must see in Faust the concentration of the human impression of Herder and a wealth of impulses that, at the beginning of the 1770s, passed over from Herder to Goethe."⁷

However, as intriguing as the question of Herder's possible paternity of *Faust* may be, what interests me more and will form the focus of my comments in this chapter, are not so much the eighteenth-century circumstances from which Goethe's work emerged, but rather the early-twentieth-century context in which such a claim as "Herder is Faust" could make sense. For in that statement there lies buried an entire world, a tradition and style of interpretation, a particular set of assumptions about German culture and its meaning, which rested not so much on historical as on ideological grounds. Ultimately, the claim that "Herder is Faust" entailed not a description of Herder or of Goethe—or, for that matter, of Faust—at all, but rather conforms to a broader effort to define the German past as a means of shaping the German present and future. As we will see, the meeting between Herder and Goethe was from the beginning invested with extraordinary significance, and as time went on that significance grew to encompass not just the individual lives of the two men involved, but the greater fortune and destiny of Germany itself.

Given the tremendous importance granted to Herder for having ostensibly inspired Goethe in writing his masterpiece, indeed for having helped to set modern German culture on its proper course, it is remarkable how minor and indistinct a role Herder played until relatively recently in the collective German consciousness. It was not until 1877 that a critical edition of his works began to appear—the surest sign of canonical status—and as late as 1895, in one of the few monographs then written on Herder, the author lamented the relative ignorance about Herder as compared to his other illustrious contemporaries: "If one speaks to a German about Lessing, a very

definite and almost palpable figure arises before his eyes. If one mentions the name of Herder to him, nothing stirs in his soul except a vague memory. He looks at us with that minor embarrassment that befalls us when we realize that we ought to know about something and yet know nothing."⁸ Paradoxically, this lack of familiarity with Herder remained a kind of topos in the literature about him for decades, so that as late as 1941, Hans-Georg Gadamer still complained that "among the very great figures of our literature, Herder is the only one who is no longer read: no poem, no work can be named by someone who has a working notion of Klopstock's odes, of Lessing's dramas and critical works, of Goethe and of Schiller."⁹ Thus it remained for years thereafter, and, indeed, in no small measure continues to hold true today as well. The International Herder Society was not established until 1985—by comparison, the Goethe Society was founded a full century earlier, and the Schiller Society ten years later, in 1895—and only recently have many of his works become available in English translation.

But what was deplored as shameful negligence toward the memory of a great cultural forebear turned out in practice to be a useful advantage for his later would-be champions. For it was precisely the comparative neglect of Herder, whose works went relatively unread and whose thoughts and opinions thus remained all but unknown, that allowed his name to become a kind of empty cipher, a tabula rasa onto which successive interpreters could project their own image of Herder without fearing contradiction from readers who might know what he had actually said. So great was the ignorance about Herder prior to the early twentieth century, and so persuasive was the narrative subsequently constructed to explain what he meant, that to an unusual degree Herder is, or has become, what others have said about him and not what he actually was. In the absence of any widespread agreement or even knowledge about what Herder meant, his early-twentieth-century interpreters had extraordinary license not just in shaping his image, but in actively creating it. Thus, as odd as it sounds, the Herder many people think they know, as ill-defined as that notion may be, is in actuality not Herder at all, or is at best a partial and distorted reflection of the Herder who lived and wrote in the second half of the eighteenth century. Instead, the Herder handed down to us, and the Herder I will be focusing on here, is an artificial construction wholly invented by later critics who purported to explain Herder but really exploited him to further other ends. Herder as Faust was a fiction in every sense of the word, but it was a fiction that was treated as truth.

The process of turning the historical Herder into what one might call an ideological placeholder began as early as 1867, when Wilhelm Dilthey, the father of German *Geistesgeschichte*, held his inaugural address at the University of Basel. Called "The Poetic and Philosophical Movement in Germany 1770–1800," the title of the lecture already signals Dilthey's determination

to see those thirty years as forming a coherent whole, indeed as constituting a "movement," a word that itself conveys a programmatic, even implicitly political, sense. "There arose at the time," Dilthey wrote to explain the origin of this "movement," "not only within individual people of a significant constitution, but rather within the educated classes of the nation in general the *urge to form a new ideal of life*—an inquiry into the purpose of man—into the content of a truly valuable life, into genuine culture."¹⁰

We already see in this brief passage a tendency toward the abstraction and generalization of concrete particulars that would become one of the hallmarks of subsequent commentary on Herder, combined with an eagerness to view him not as an individual thinker, but rather as a representative of ideas and forces much larger than himself, and indeed that were identical with German culture as a whole. And it is far from accidental that Dilthey dates the first stirrings of this "urge to form a new ideal of life" to the year Goethe met Herder. For Dilthey, that is, 1770 marks the birth of a "genuine culture" in Germany out of the spirit of Herder as Faust. As Dilthey explained it, "the transformed ideal of life of this new generation was the poetically, scientifically, morally productive genius. And I know of no more precise expression of this ideal of life in the reality of life than Herder's well-known travel journal in which he draws the line of his future existence as if into infinity, embracing the entire world, reforming all the sciences. But there is only one completely adequate representation of the same thing in literature: the oldest fragments of *Faust*."¹¹

Here, then, at the beginning of Dilthey's career and, not coincidentally, just three years before the unification of the German Empire, we can make out the outlines of what would become the dominant perception, or rather the willful portrait, of Herder that would predominate in the decades to come. In this account, Herder stood as both the advocate and personification of original genius, that unfathomable, creative force of nature, inaugurating what Dilthey identified as a completely new culture that opposed and overcame the supposedly exhausted and defunct culture that had come before and had been given consummate expression in Goethe's *Faust*. Although Dilthey spoke in fairly neutral, and often rather positive terms about the Enlightenment itself—he praised Lessing's *Nathan der Weise*, for example, by saying that "the idea of the Enlightenment is transfigured in the hero of this play into perfected moral beauty"¹²—there is the unmistakable suggestion that it was precisely what Dilthey elsewhere called the "intellectual culture" (*Verstandeskultur*)¹³ that defined the Enlightenment, which the new "ideal of life" came to supplant.

In the following decades, what Dilthey had merely hinted at or alluded to hardened into a sort of secular dogma among educated Germans: the "new ideal of life" represented by the generation of "poets and thinkers" during the last third of the eighteenth century was understood as having

inaugurated a distinct culture, one that took shape in reaction to, or more precisely in rejection of, the Enlightenment era that preceded it. In 1908, for instance, a former student of Dilthey, the literary historian Oskar Walzel, published an essay devoted to "Goethe and the Problem of the Faustian Nature" that offers one of the first attempts to combine the themes touched on by Dilthey into a unified interpretive scheme—namely, to trace the rise of a distinctly new cultural moment, or movement, which was exemplified by the original genius Herder and codified in Goethe's *Faust*—and to argue that this shift largely consisted in repudiating the supposedly facile culture that Walzel identified with the Enlightenment. This is how Walzel, with a pronounced air of bemused condescension, characterized the social context that Herder ostensibly confronted at the end of the 1760s.

The eighteenth century still believed it could elevate people above all difficulties through a one-sided intellectual culture. The sacred conviction of Wolff's Enlightenment philosophy that the understanding could put everything on the best path has something touching and poignant about it. The more enlightened a person is, he thought, the better he would also have to be. Intellectual culture led without fail to virtue. All natural drives were to be tamed through intellectual culture. Decent, civilized people, upright and full of healthy common sense, were the goal of the Enlightenment. They were convinced they had come wonderfully far by breeding vapid natures that had nothing to fear from their instincts. The result was a sad philistinism that, confined within the tightest boundaries, banished everything beautiful and good.

Walzel was of course not alone in regarding what he, following Dilthey, also called "intellectual culture" with suspicion and even open disdain. In the intervening years and especially around the turn of the century, a number of thinkers—most prominently Nietzsche and Bergson—had engaged in a sustained critique of the value and meaning of reason, truth, and objectivity, arguing that these very concepts were, at best, partial and naïve, serving to obscure rather than reveal the full and complex nature of reality. The Enlightenment, with its constitutive emphasis on the power of human reason to answer all questions about nature and existence, thus came to be regarded not as an exemplary period of human achievement but as an embarrassing episode of human self-delusion, shortsightedness, and smug folly. Reason did not liberate, it acted as a constraint; thinking did not disclose reality, it ensconced itself in its own self-reflexive illusions. And, in Oskar Walzel's eyes, it was none other than Herder who first recognized and repudiated what Walzel called "the narrowness of this cultural program," and that it was his "Faustian Nature" that prompted this revelation:

The man who touched Goethe most powerfully when the idea of the Faust play germinated within him, Herder, wrestled and struggled from the beginning to

grant equal worth to spirit and life. He wanted to embrace all of the wisdom of the earth in a Faustian manner, and simultaneously achieve a vital effect. . . .

Conscious of being able to approach this lofty goal only from a distance, the young Herder repeatedly displayed the Faustian dissatisfaction and torment of the thinker who desires an actively worthwhile life and thus turns away from arid speculation full of aversion and disgust. A dissatisfied craving for knowledge also drove him to the desire to enjoy life to its fullest. The diary of his journey has become an entirely indispensable document of Faustian struggle around the time of 1770: Herder sees in himself merely an inkwell of scholarly scribbling, a dictionary of arts and sciences he has not actually seen and does not understand, a repository full of books and paper that belongs only in a study. He wants to put experience in the place of rumination, he wants to seize and grasp life where before he had only thought and pondered.¹⁴

In this relatively brief account, Walzel thus performed a remarkable fusion of the major themes of Herder's early life story by fashioning an integrated narrative that blends biography, literary criticism, cultural history, and philosophical analysis into a seamless, and thus convincing, amalgam. Herder as Faust literally embodied the "new ideal of life" envisioned by Dilthey, enacting in and through his own experience the very ideas he was said to espouse. Thus Herder became both the herald and the exemplar of the forces that transformed the German intellectual landscape, ushering in a development that early-twentieth-century observers felt led directly to themselves.

While we may smile at the circularity of this argument—wherein the past is read through the lens of one's own immediate preoccupations, which produces amazement at how uncannily that past prefigured the present—it would be a mistake to underestimate its influence on the perception of both Herder and of his relevance for contemporary concerns. Indeed, it was increasingly the imagined pertinence or applicability of Herder's thought to current circumstances that moved to the center of discussion. In an overview published in 1909 of "Recent Research on Herder," a literary scholar named Rudolf Unger made this intention explicit. Unger began by repeating the almost ritualistic complaint that "for a long time, too long," Herder had "stood to one side unnoticed, indeed almost invisible,"¹⁵ but that ever since the 1860s things had begun to change for the better: "More or less simultaneously with the national ascent of his people," Unger explained, "Herder's star began slowly to rise up over the horizon of the German spiritual firmament." Unger called this belated rediscovery of Herder a "penitential act of objective historical justice for the enthusiastic prophet of German greatness."¹⁶ "In a word, through this transformation he has been moved out of the distant perspective of history into the proximity of the current questions and struggles of our own, immediate intellectual life."¹⁷ Similarly, Unger singled out as particularly noteworthy the new writings on Herder he was reviewing: "They have set themselves the task not merely to

place Herder's thoughts and ideals in a vital relationship to ours, but rather to reveal those relationships that are already everywhere present and to make them productive for the advancement of our own intellectual life."¹⁸

There are several things that warrant mention here and have a bearing on the further evolution of our subject. First, in addition to putting almost exclusive stress on Herder's importance for contemporary issues, Unger even more closely associates Herder with German culture itself, or, as he puts it, with "German greatness." This linking of individual and national destinies, together with the dehistoricization that inevitably results from the desire to find meaning in the past only insofar as it is thought to be reflected or continued in the present, further intensified that tendency toward the generalization and abstraction of individual lives into grand cultural-historical developments that had already animated Dilthey's reading. That is, Herder—already regarded principally as the living personification of a literary figure—had turned into not just the starting point, but also the validation for modern German culture. Just as Goethe's *Faust* had become a kind of national secular bible, Herder as Faust thus became a national cultural prophet.

For the next decade or so, there were other aspects of the modern world other than Herder's significance for it that demanded attention—there was a world war to fight and a revolution to muddle through—but in the politically charged climate of the Weimar Republic, Herder was pressed ever more forcefully into compulsory service for his country. One of the most sophisticated and influential attempts to lend intellectual history a covert political relevance was by Hermann August Korff, who more than anyone else gave the notion of a *Goethezeit*, or "Age of Goethe," its intellectual, or rather ideological, content and justification. In 1923, Korff published the first of ultimately three volumes dedicated to elucidating what he called the "Spirit," or "*Geist*," of the *Goethezeit*. Symptomatically, Korff viewed what he called "Faustian man" as "symbolic" of the entire phenomenon. "The spirit of the Age of Goethe," he wrote, "can be provisionally described as the spirit of an irrationalistic idealism" as opposed to the "questionable qualities of an interpretation of reality governed solely by the understanding"¹⁹ that Korff also insisted characterized the Enlightenment. To his credit, however, Korff understood the Enlightenment and the *Goethezeit* not as discrete points along a chronological axis, but as the twin poles of an eminently dialectical struggle. As he conceded,

it is true that the Enlightenment remains the basis of modern culture, just as the former cannot deny its origins in the completely opposite theological system of the Middle Ages. And the Age of Goethe, in which this development takes place, cannot be viewed as a world-historical epoch in the same sense as the modern culture of European humanity that begins with the Enlightenment, because it is born out of contradiction to the Enlightenment, but from

a contradiction that not only destroys the idea of the Enlightenment, but also continues it in a higher sense.²⁰

It is this same dialectical tension that Korff saw played out within Goethe's drama itself. Korff thus similarly claimed:

Of all the imaginative realizations of this eternal problematic of the idealist who battles against reality and understanding for his very existence, none symbolizes it more powerfully than the Faust drama, which in its two great antagonists represents, in terms of the history of ideas, nothing other than the world-historical, yet basically eternally human, battle fought throughout the history of the Age of Goethe between idealism and Enlightenment.²¹

Not surprisingly, for Korff as well Herder epitomized the struggle between the new German culture and the old, mainly French, culture of the Enlightenment. But in line with his dialectical perspective, Korff also perceived elements of that other tradition, exemplified by Rousseau, as still operative within Herder, adding to the internal conflicts that supposedly beset his Faustian nature. Typically, Korff also focused on Herder's journey to France as expressive of his essential nature:

And the diary of this journey is one of the most important documents for the emergence of Rousseauism in the German spirit. Herder considered himself to be a victim of the same intellectualism and of that entire ink-stained culture which Rousseau also felt suffocated his wild, unfettered nature. Indeed, Herder's entire youth, which had been artificially "driven" by the needs of a precocious mind, had been a life spent purely in books, and his world—"and that is called a world!" [another quote from *Faust*]—had been the world of literature. But the more he had thirstily sought the springs of life in the desert of scholarly culture, the more dissatisfied he had felt. Like Faust in the dead confines of his study, he also yearned finally to escape from his confined existence in Riga and into the freedom of creative life. And like Faust who bursts open the prison of his life with the cry "Flee! Away! Out into the open land!" and, pulled by his worldly and active genius, throws himself into the arms of a new, immediate life, so too Herder with sudden resolve liberates himself from the dungeon of his study and seeks to save himself by setting out on the open sea, which becomes symbolic for him of the open sea of life. . . . This sea journey is the symbol of the Faustian world journey and the attempt on the part of a man suffocated by culture to recuperate in nature from the curse of cultural life and to awaken from the cultural death to natural life. And the entire mood during this journey also swings in Faustian fashion between the highest expectations and deepest resignation. For just as Herder is driven out into the radiant pulsation of immediate life, so too he is simultaneously tormented by bitter regret not only over his lost youth, but rather, what was worse, by his lost youthfulness. And his diary is the chaotic testament of an impassioned, self-reproachful, forward and backward-looking, Faustian-Rousseauistic self-reflection.²²

Korff's portrait of Herder as a tormented soul, who rejected the culture of his time as an impediment to his own self-realization, and in particular renounced reason as too partial and restrictive, turning instead to a fuller range of experience and feeling, is fully in line with the image Korff's predecessors had also elaborated. Too, the weaving together of multiple literary, philosophical, historical, and cultural perspectives within a captivating narrative has by now become familiar. And, indeed, that very familiarity was largely responsible for the enormous appeal and longevity of the story: the tale of Herder as Faust, of the intrepid traveler who turned his back on his time to embrace an uncertain future, had been told and retold so many times that it had become almost as well known as the Faust legend itself.

In 1924, one year after Korff's book appeared, another prominent literary historian, Josef Nadler, gave the by then standard version of Herder as Faust a dramatically new twist when he published an essay that posed a seemingly innocuous question in its title: "Goethe oder Herder?" (Goethe or Herder?).²³ But there was nothing innocuous about Nadler's motives. For Nadler, the question was no longer what Herder meant within the context of the eighteenth century or even what significance he might have had for Nadler's own time, but rather what role Herder might play in shaping the future. In Nadler's hands, the view of Herder as the implacable opponent of a moribund Enlightenment culture thereby metastasized into a previously unthinkable heresy: in his effort to make Herder even more relevant to the present day, Nadler relegated none other than Goethe himself to the exemplary role of representing the old, stifling order, and promoted Herder to the forefront of the national pantheon not merely as the champion of a new culture, but also as the inspirational leader of a new political order to come.

With Nadler, then, a new stage in the appropriation of Herder began, one that would have enormous consequences for the subsequent perception of Herder by both his admirers and detractors. At first glance, it appears that Nadler merely adopted some of the essential components of the established image of Herder—his elemental originality, his hostility to the Enlightenment, his craving for experience and authenticity—and raised them to an even higher level of intensity. That Nadler did, but he also added a new, even more potent ingredient to the mix. Nadler later became famous—or notorious—for his multivolume work titled *Literaturgeschichte der deutschen Stämme und Landschaften* (The literary history of the German tribes and landscapes). In it, Nadler tried to demonstrate that every region—or "landscape"—of Germany had a specific and identifiable quality that materially influenced the character and mentality of the people—or "tribe"—and hence the writers, who inhabited it. It is not quite literally a racist theory—and Nadler, who lived until 1963, always rather primly denied that it was—his ideas could and did easily converge with those of other writers

who had no such scruples. This, then, is how Nadler describes Herder's lasting importance:

With his first minor writings, the young Herder already set the reversal of his time in motion by taking up the question of the origin of language, myth, and poetry, while combining the roles of historian, natural scientist, and philosopher simultaneously. . . . Herder was the first to see the preeminent value of what is originary over what is developed, of what is growing over what has been made, of the youth of a people over its mature years. He was not concerned with the opposition between nature and culture, but rather between the culture of the lower class and the civilization of the upper class. He discovered the people [*Volk*] as the true breeding ground of great cultural processes. And if he demanded progress instead of regress, return to what is originary, that is to the people, to the youth of "*völkisch*" existence, then he was not playing a rough natural state against refined culture. He was opposing true culture to false, growth against completion and senile preservation.²⁴

Not content with giving Herder credit for having discovered the meaning and value of *das Volk*, Nadler also drew up a whole catalogue of other innovations that he ascribed to Herder and were presented as a direct consequence of his presumed elevation of the Volk. "Various scientific disciplines today are breathing Herder's spirit, not still, but again," Nadler proposed. "Think of certain movements in modern geography and of what today we call geopolitics."²⁵ Further, Herder was, according to Nadler, "the originator of the new concept of the state that arose during Romanticism, the triumphant concept of the national state [*Volksstaat*]."²⁶ Likewise, Nadler claimed that Herder "laid the groundwork for ethnology [*Volkskunde*], that is, for the consciousness of a people of itself."²⁷ Even more, Nadler asserts that Herder anticipated the greatest political upheaval of his time: "Twenty years before the outbreak of the French Revolution," Nadler writes, "Herder was the discoverer of the people [*Volk*] as the producer and supporter of all social life. He is thus the originator of those insights which perhaps of all eighteenth-century ideas have most effectively influenced the reconstruction of the world from the nineteenth into the twentieth centuries."²⁸

Curiously, it never seems to have occurred to Nadler to consider why, if Herder had indeed been responsible for so many and such momentous advances, it had escaped everyone else's notice but his own. But, again, Nadler was not actually interested in history at all, but rather in using history—or a version of it—to advance another cause. And that cause was the German people itself. In Nadler's deliberately provocative scheme, Goethe represented not the pinnacle of modern German culture, but rather an enervated internationalism, an individualistic cosmopolitanism that inevitably lost its vigor as it distanced itself from its specific cultural context, or landscape. Thus, Nadler wrote that "Goethe's national [*gemeinvölkisch*] attitude was

that of individual to individuals and thus basically not a national attitude at all."²⁹ Specifically, Nadler argued that Goethean Classicism, with its center in Weimar, was nothing but a minor clique of rootless, elite aesthetes far removed from the lives of the German people. "Goethe's Europeanness," Nadler explained, "which again fundamentally was not one, was based on the last remnant of common humanistic culture. But how can one speak of Europe if a half dozen people present themselves as a class? A single individual cannot form a race with itself alone. He thus can also not step out of his race and form a higher species, for instance a 'Europe,' with others who are each in the same situation, at most he can form a class of raceless people."³⁰ In sum, Nadler saw Goethe essentially as a holdover from an age that had outlived itself. "Goethe represented the educated upper class of a declining age. It was the old monarchical state, the old society that had managed to save itself following 1789, the old 'International' of individual to individual, it was the age of the French encyclopedists and the Germany of the Confederation of the Rhine,"³¹ the latter being the name given to the collaborationist occupational government under Napoleon.

It was on this basis, then, that Nadler concluded that despite, or perhaps precisely because of, his status as the great Olympian of Classical culture, Goethe could not serve as an inspiration or model for the present. "For how could Goethe," Nadler wrote,

the cultural aristocrat and individualist, help where it is a matter of the decisive question of our social life? The uprooted masses who today act as a people, who lack precisely what Herder sought, namely what is primordial, undeveloped, rejuvenating, they have to be integrated in Herder's sense back into the earth. . . . These uprooted masses have to be integrated into an energizing place to live. And if today everywhere hands are in motion to make a people out of the masses who merely fill a state, then that is Herder's will that moves us.³²

It is at this point that Nadler's political intentions become manifest. What he was most concerned with is how to shape the masses—the German people—into something more than merely inhabitants of a geographical region. More specifically—we remember that Nadler was writing only six years after the end of the war—in the wake of military defeat, revolution, an unpopular government, and economic turmoil, Nadler like many others of his generation was looking for a leader who could guide the people out of their current uncertainty and toward a better future. Nadler explains:

The cultural type of our developing era is not Goethe, but Herder. We, a generation of swirling chaos, are fated not to preserve passed-down forms, but rather to be formless, form-free, form-liberated in the service of a creative and procreative idea. . . . We, who were condemned to experience, are called on to create a new content, but not to form where there is nothing to form. What

our generation produces in terms of ideas, what we experience and engender in our suffering, will be the material that another great creator of form after us will once again give shape. Precursors of this form-giver live among us. But they are forward posts, destined to perish, as is the fate of forward posts. Thus we have Goethe at our backs and before us the work of a new form still to be done. . . . The destiny of Moses repeats itself in great rhythmical cycles. No age sees the form-giver it creates out of its ideas.³³

Here the language of literary criticism has clearly ceded to the rhetoric of messianic demagoguery. No longer merely the living embodiment of a literary hero, Herder had now become a national prophet who would lead the German people toward their promised geopolitical destiny. However, contrary to Nadler's assertion, Herder did not in fact invent "geopolitics," at least not in name. It was instead the Swedish scholar Rudolf Kjellén who coined the term "geopolitics" during the First World War. As it happens, Kjellén may have also been the first person to use the term "National Socialism," whose proponents in Germany were all too eager to submit their individual lives to the service of their cause. The author of a dissertation written at the University of Jena in 1936 put it succinctly: "The essence of the Revolution in 1933 carried out by the National-Socialist movement is founded in the overcoming of individualism through National Socialism, which replaces the single person with the people [das Volk] at the center of all thought."³⁴

Throughout the 1930s, numerous studies of Herder appeared in Germany that sought to align him with the aims and spirit of the new regime. Heinz Kindermann, who became head of the department of German literature at the University of Danzig in 1927 and joined the Nazi party in 1933, typified this intellectual *Gleichschaltung* or "synchronization." In an introduction to an anthology of several works by Herder published in 1935, Kindermann wrote that: "the battle against the spirit and form of life of the pan-European Enlightenment" initiated by Herder "was a first attempt to liberate the German people from the domination of Western influences and thereby to clear a path for a species-appropriate, German culture and disposition, for an organic and natural formation of German life and German art arising from the people."³⁵ In Kindermann's view, therefore, the Enlightenment was not just antithetical to life, but also opposite to the German character as such.

Not surprisingly, Kindermann's sketch also drew primarily on details from Herder's life, particularly from the period when he met Goethe, as indicative of the larger significance he had for German culture. But Kindermann's political allegiances also infuse his style with a shrill vehemence that, in its undisguised hostility toward the perceived opponents of "Germanness," has an unmistakably menacing ring:

The theoretical and abstract book and encyclopedia learning of the age of reason weighs like a nightmare especially on those who have already recognized its injurious effects, its obsolescence, its corrosive influence on Germanness. It required a radical, explosive act to gain mastery over these repressive forces; but that is what Herder did through his flight from the enlightened narrowness of the philistine, bourgeois world [*Lebensraum*] into the elemental freedom and expanse of his ocean journey around half of Europe.³⁶

Kindermann of course fails to mention that Herder himself regarded as one of the high points of his journey his acquaintance with that arch encyclopedist, Diderot.

But, as was the case with his fellow critics, Kindermann was fundamentally concerned not so much with Herder's stance toward or within the eighteenth century, but rather with his presumed influence on the twentieth, and particularly on the new German reality. In 1938, a colleague of Kindermann named Wolfdietrich Rasch emphasized that connection when he wrote of Herder that "we recognize in this work an often surprising proximity to our time, a deep affinity with many of the fundamental views that make Herder appear to us as a prophet, inspiration, and precursor to the forces that today are active in our people; as a man who—in the words of Alfred Rosenberg—"became a teacher particularly for our time, as only very few did among even the greatest."³⁷ As we will recall, Rosenberg was the author of *Der Mythos des zwanzigsten Jahrhunderts* (The myth of the twentieth century), published in 1930 and intended to consolidate the disparate themes within National Socialist thought into a unified theory. The apotheosis—or nadir—of the same line of reasoning was achieved in a book published a few years later whose title tells us all we need to know: written by Hans Dahmen, it is called *Die nationale Idee von Herder bis Hitler* (The national idea from Herder to Hitler).³⁸

As one historian has aptly put it: "German fascism transformed not only cities and landscapes, but also the 'regions of the spirit,' into blackened fields of rubble."³⁹ It has taken a very long time for Herder's reputation to emerge from the ruins left by his early-twentieth-century champions, and in many respects the process of rehabilitation is far from complete. In an essay published as recently as 2006, Wolfgang Pross, one of the best scholars writing about Herder today, still found it necessary to point out the "grave injustice" done by those who have perpetuated the "erroneous identification" of Herder with the so-called "Counter-Enlightenment."⁴⁰ "Although there is scarcely a grain of truth in such perspectives," Pross rather pessimistically writes, "legends ascribing to Herder doctrines of medievalism, nationalism, and irrationalism" seem "ineradicable." "Yet," Pross goes on, "Herder was profoundly acquainted with the political, philosophical, and historical writings of contemporary European thinkers [who] helped him

to frame an interpretation of man as a social being with reference to different stages of human culture."⁴¹ Although Pross does not stress the point, one of the most bizarre after effects of the misappropriation of Herder is that those who continue to claim he was an early advocate, if not the father, of a chauvinistic nationalism in Germany, a promoter of the ideal of a pure and autochthonous Volk, and an implacable opponent of reason, are thereby continuing, one assumes unwittingly, an interpretive tradition that achieved its logical culmination and fullest expression during the Nazi reign.

By placing Herder in the service of an ideology that in fact represented the very opposite of what he believed, his latter-day advocates did him and his cause—the promotion and, he hoped, the eventual achievement of universal *Humanität*—grave and perhaps irreparable harm. But it was they and not Herder who rejected the principles of the Enlightenment, who wanted to submerge the individual within the collective identity of the Volk, and who urged the abandonment of reason in order to embrace a new concept of "life" that, in fact, served only death.

Ironically enough, it was Mephistopheles himself who had warned of the dangers of disparaging our rational faculties and surrendering to seductive chimeras that only mask the unknown. In a revealing aside, he mocks Faust for his readiness to renounce his best possession, which Mephistopheles sneeringly warns will merely hasten an even greater sacrifice:

Go ahead, hold reason and knowledge in contempt,
That human power most sublime,
Let yourself be emboldened by the spirit of lies
Through magic and illusion,
Then you will be mine absolutely—

(Verachte nur Vernunft und Wissenschaft,
Des Menschen allerhöchste Kraft
Laß nur in Blend- und Zauberwerken
Dich vom dem Lügengeist bestärken,
So hab' ich dich schon unbedingt—)⁴²

In turning Herder into Faust, his modern interpreters succeeded, at least for a time, in putting him in league with the devil. Let us hope that, in the end, like Faust Herder will also manage to escape his clutches.

NOTES

1. Rudolf Haym, *Herder nach seinem Leben und seinen Werken dargestellt* (Berlin: Rudolph Gaertner, 1877), 1:347.

2. Haym, *Herder nach seinem Leben und seinen Werken dargestellt*, 317.
3. Hermann August Korff, *Sturm und Drang*, vol. 1, *Geist der Goethezeit. Versuch einer ideellen Entwicklung der klassisch-romantischen Literaturgeschichte* (Leipzig: J. J. Weber, 1923), 75.
4. Oskar Walzel, "Goethe und das Problem der faustischen Natur," in *Vom Geistesleben des 18. und 19. Jahrhunderts* (Leipzig: Insel, 1911), 143. This essay first appeared in *Internationale Wochenschrift für Wissenschaft, Kunst und Technik* (August 29, 1908).
5. Max Kommerell, *Der Dichter als Führer in der deutschen Klassik* (Berlin: Georg Bondi, 1928), 109.
6. Nicholas Boyle, *The Poetry of Desire (1749–1790)*, vol. 1, *Goethe: The Poet and the Age* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 219.
7. Günther Jacoby, *Herder als Faust. Eine Untersuchung* (Leipzig: Felix Meiner, 1911),
8. Eugen Kühnemann, *Herders Leben* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 1895), iii.
9. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Volk und Geschichte im Denken Herders* (Frankfurt: Vittorio Klostermann, 1942). The text is based on a lecture Gadamer gave on May 29, 1941, at the German Institute in occupied Paris.
10. Wilhelm Dilthey, "Die dichterische und philosophische Bewegung in Deutschland 1770–1800," in *Gesammelte Schriften* (Stuttgart: B. G. Teubner, 1957), 5:16.
11. Dilthey, "Die dichterische und philosophische Bewegung in Deutschland," 20.
12. Dilthey, "Die dichterische und philosophische Bewegung in Deutschland," 17.
13. Dilthey, "Die dichterische und philosophische Bewegung in Deutschland," 20.
14. Walzel, "Goethe und das Problem der faustischen Natur," 141–42.
15. Rudolf Unger, "Zur neueren Herderforschung," *Germanisch-Romanische Monatsschrift* 1 (1909): 145.
16. Unger, "Zur neueren Herderforschung," 145.
17. Unger, "Zur neueren Herderforschung," 147.
18. Unger, "Zur neueren Herderforschung," 147.
19. Korff, *Sturm und Drang*, 32.
20. Korff, *Sturm und Drang*, 23.
21. Korff, *Sturm und Drang*, 47.
22. Korff, *Sturm und Drang*, 75.
23. Josef Nadler, "Goethe oder Herder?" *Hochland* 22, no. 1 (1924): 1.
24. Nadler, "Goethe oder Herder?" 5.
25. Nadler, "Goethe oder Herder?" 13.
26. Nadler, "Goethe oder Herder?" 7–8.
27. Nadler, "Goethe oder Herder?" 5.
28. Nadler, "Goethe oder Herder?" 7.
29. Nadler, "Goethe oder Herder?" 8.
30. Nadler, "Goethe oder Herder?" 8.
31. Nadler, "Goethe oder Herder?" 9.
32. Nadler, "Goethe oder Herder?" 11.

33. Nadler, "Goethe oder Herder?" 11.
34. Walther Kieser, *Die Gestalt des Volkes im nationalsozialistischen Weltbild. Ein Versuch ihrer staatswissenschaftlichen Erfassung* (Würzburg: Tritsch, 1936), 1. Quoted in Bernhard Becker, "Herder in der nationalsozialistischen Germanistik," in *Herder im "Dritten Reich,"* ed. Jost Schneider (Bielefeld: Aisthesis, 1994), 145.
35. Heinz Kindermann, "Einführung," *Von Deutscher Art und Kunst*, ed. Heinz Kindermann (Leipzig: Philipp Reclam, 1935), 5.
36. Kindermann, "Einführung," 6.
37. Wolfdietrich Rasch, *Sein Leben und Werk im Umriss* (Halle: Niemeyer, 1938), v.
38. Hans Dahmen, *Die nationale Idee von Herder bis Hitler* (Cologne: H. Schaffstein, 1934).
39. Jost Schneider, "Was bleibt von Herder? Eine Einleitung," in *Herder im "Dritten Reich,"* 7.
40. Wolfgang Pross, "Naturalism, Anthropology, and Culture," in *The Cambridge History of Eighteenth-Century Political Thought*, ed. Mark Goldie and Robert Wokler (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 218, 219.
41. Pross, "Naturalism, Anthropology, and Culture," 221.
42. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Faust: Texte*, vol. 7, pt. 1, *Sämtliche Werke. Briefe, Tagebücher und Gespräche*, ed. Albrecht Schöne (Frankfurt: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 1994), 1851–55.

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