# JOHANN GOTTFRIED VON HERDER OVERVIEW

By contrast to the view that prevailed during the *Enlightenment* (the Early Modern period in general culminating in the eighteenth century) that human nature is universal (basically because we are all incarnations of Reason) and that we are all basically alike, many *nineteenth century* thinkers were struck by the fact that the opposite was true, to be precise, that people from different regions are quite different from each other for any number of reasons. The German Idealists and Hegel in particular, who continued the Rationalist tradition epistomised by Descartes and Kant, were of the view that different cultures manifest various (and often opposing) aspects of a transcendental, all-embracing Spirit (or God). Influenced by the tradition of Lockean empiricism, on the other hand, the idea that our consciousness is constructed by our intercourse with the world around us, Herder contends that the cultural differences are the product of specific geographical, historical and social circumstances, that is, material factors which necessarily impinge on and shape our identity. Herder is often seen, consequently, as the founder of one particular strain of Romanticism (c.1785-c.1830), what today is called *cultural nationalism*. Herder is the inspiration for the theories of cultural identity that has informed both African American and Post-colonial thought, among many other contemporary schools of thought.

M. H. Abrams in his celebrated The Mirror and the Lamp describes Herder as the "founding father of historical organology" (Abrams 219) and, by extension, of the related notions of nationalism and the *volksgeist* (German for 'spirit of the people'). His favourite analogy for describing personal and collective identity is the life-process of the plant, which may be his most important legacy to all subsequent discourse on personal and collective identity which is so often figured in terms of 'roots'. "Like a tree have I grown" (qtd. in Abrams, 184), he writes: the "germ was there; but air, earth, and all the elements, which I did not myself provide, had to make their contribution to form the germ, the fruit, the tree" (184). Time and again, Herder exhibits a definite propensity to seek genetic explications of a wide range of human phenomena that are couched most often in organic metaphors (i.e. by comparing people to plants and other natural organisms). The reason for so doing, he points out, is that just as the "botanist cannot obtain a complete knowledge of a plant, unless he follow it from the seed, through its germination, blossoming, and decay" (Herder 38), so too in order to understand particular humans we must trace their identity to their common roots in a community of some kind. Indeed, his *idée maîtresse*, as another distinguished commentator named Isaiah Berlin argues, is the notion of unity in difference, the organic oneness of the life of the community as a result of which all members of a given culture are thought to possess a common core of identity.

Herder believed that there is no such thing as a pre-given, universal human essence (a transcendental core of reason) and, thus, that humanity is not everywhere alike. For Herder, the uniqueness of each culture is attributable to a variety of *existential* (rather than essential) factors as a result of which the distinctive features of each human community are the product of a particular natural environment, that is, geographical, biological, and other physical factors. Humans are like plants in this respect:

> As a mineral water derives its component parts, its operative powers, and its flavour, from the soil through which it flows; so the ancient character of nations arose from the family features, the climate, the way of life and education, the early actions and employments, that were peculiar to them. (36)

"The cultivation [culture] of a people is the flower of its existence" (41), Herder writes. Arguing that each culture has become what it is "through a given series of causes and effects" (39), Herder is of the view that over time a distinctive cultural tradition is formed

and passed down from generation to generation in more or less immutable form (once the community in question stays put in the same location). For this reason, an understanding of the distinctive features of each such tradition must be sought in its roots or earliest beginnings precisely because it was the "manners of the fathers" (36) which "took deep root, and became the internal prototype of the race" (36). Each people, in other words, expresses throughout its history a common identity derived initially from the impact of the natural environment on a particular community in a specific location. This is something summed up by the term the *volksgeist* (a German term meaning 'spirit of the people' from which the modern notion of the 'folk' is derived). According to Herder, any community is made one by common traditions and memories developed through common historical experiences. Berlin sums it up this way: "to be fully human, . . . one must belong somewhere, to some group or some historical stream which cannot be defined save in the genetic terms of a tradition, a milieu and a culture" (198).

Herder also believed that this cultural tradition is expressed through the actions, thoughts and words of each member of the community. Since there are central patterns in terms of which each culture can be identified, to be a member of an identifiable group is to think and act in a certain way, in the light of specific conceptions of reality and, thus, particular values. The principle medium of the conceptions and values of a culture is its language. In language, he writes, "dwell its entire world of tradition, history, religion, principles of existence; its whole heart and soul" (qtd. in Berlin, 165). "Language expresses the collective experience of the group" (qtd. in Berlin, 169), he also writes, as a result of which in the "works of the imagination and feeling the entire soul of a nation reveals itself most clearly" (qtd. in Berlin, 181). Herder extols, consequently, the virtues of originality and invention: man must "cease to be in contradiction with himself" (qtd. in Berlin, 179) and to "return to himself" (qtd. in Berlin, 179); men must aim to "find themselves" (qtd. in Berlin, 179) and to "learn not to think in other people's thoughts" (qtd. in Berlin, 179). Imitation or mimicry of others, from ths point of view, is tantamount to a betrayal of the self. The ever-present danger is the temptation to "speak the words of strangers" (qtd. in Berlin, 180) which "wean us from our own thoughts" (qtd. in Berlin, 180).

Exile from one's natural homeland, consequently, is an unnatural and even tragic state of affairs even if often unavoidable (since, for Herder, the history of humanity is one of migration). He argues that just as transplanted plants wither in unsympathetic climes, so too do humans. If

> every one of these nations had remained in its place, the Earth might have been considered as a garden, where in one spot one human national plant, in another, another, bloomed in its proper figure and nature. (36)

But, he continues, "as men are not firmly rooted plants" (36), they "must in time remove from their place to some other more or less different" (36). The result is the adulteration of one's original culture and, thus, the betrayal, at least to some degree, of one's true self:

> though they might adhere to the manners of their forefathers with an obstinacy almost equal to the instinct of the brute, and even apply to their new mountains, rivers, towns, and establishments, the names of their primitive land; it would be impossible for them to remain eternally the same in every respect, under any considerable alteration of soil and climate. Here, the transplanted people would construct a wasp's nest, or anthill, after their own fashion. The style would be a compound arising from the ideas imbibed in their original country, and those inspired by the new: and this may commonly be called the youthful bloom of the nation. (36)

Deracination, therefore, is the thing to be avoided at all costs. "Though the tree lift it

head" (37), Herder sermonises, "and overshadow whole quarters of the Globe, it if be not rooted in the earth, a single blast of wind may overturn it" (37). As Berlin points out, no "writer has stressed more" (197), at least prior to the advent of African American or Post-colonial discourse who both undoubtedly found their inspiration in Herder, the "damage done to human beings by being torn from the only conditions in which their history has made it possible for them to live full lives" (197).

In short, there a number of core ideas which Herder promulgated and which have become profoundly influential, not least here in the Caribbean. These include:

- firstly, the broadly empiricist view that our identity is not innate or pre-given, to be precise, cultural in nature, that is, shaped by the particular society in which we live and the history which we have inherited; it is this which defines our very being;
- secondly, the view that this identity is derived *initially* from (or 'rooted' in) the impact which a particular natural environment had upon the ancestors who came to live in that location;
- thirdly, the view that this defining or 'core' identity (most often figured by means of botanical metaphors, not least in terms of 'roots') is passed on from generation to generation in more or less immutable form as long as the community in question remains more or less in the same location;
- fourthly, the view that where migration (forced or voluntary) occurs, the people of a given culture are severed from their natural 'roots' in a particular natural and social environment which must be recuperated at all costs if one is to be 'true to oneself';
- fifthly, the view that this identity is *expressed* or *manifested* in all the cultural practices of that people (i.e. everything that these people do), especially the language and artforms common to that people;
- sixthly, the view that each social group consequently defines itself in terms of a commonly shared history and, thus, inherited cultural identity which distinguishes it from other such groups;

If Herder has bequeathed anything to modern thought, it is what some today call *cultural pluralism*, that is, a belief not merely in the multiplicity but, more importantly, in the incommensurability (the sheer differences) of different cultures and communities. As Berlin points out,

> All regionalists, all defenders of the local against the universal, all champions of deeply rooted forms of life, both reactionary and progressive, . . . owe something, whether they know it or not, to the doctrines which Herder introduced into European thought. (176)

Selected Secondary Sources:

Abrams, M. H. The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition. Oxford: OUP, 1953.

Berlin, Isaiah. "Herder and the Enlightenment." Vico and Herder: Two Studies in the History of Ideas. New York: Viking, 1976.