Albrecht Wellmer has called the “vanishing point of de-mythologization.” Whether this meant the ideal was itself a “myth” remains unclear. What is certain is that the Frankfurt school locates fascist domination in an uncritical moment of freedom itself, and one might therefore characterize their position as a qualified modernism. They take up a position at some distance from Cassirer and are critical of his attempt to resurrect the Enlightenment on its own terms, without, however, assuming with Heidegger an attitude of mere “piety” external to subjectivist metaphysics. But the Frankfurt “left” and the Heideggerian “right” critique of technological domination nonetheless converge in the claim that idealism’s celebrated notion of spontaneity has spawned a specifically modern will to mastery and decontextualized technique. Against Cassirer, however, they locate the pathology of instrumental reason not in its truth, as if full enlightenment were an actual condition, but instead in the compulsive effort to proclaim as truth a species of unconditional freedom that was, on their view, constitutively impossible. From their perspective, then, autonomy might well figure as the most consequential myth of modernity.


Secularization, Scripture, and the Theory of Reading: J. G. Herder and the Old Testament

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Today, Johann Gottfried Herder (1744-1803) is regarded as a pioneer of post-Enlightenment thought. His philosophy of history anticipated much in 19th-century historical thought, particularly the idea of the “individuality” of nations and their “inner, organic” development. His art criticism made important strides toward the formulation of the modern concept of a work of art, stressing art’s historical and cultural particularity, as well as artistic subjectivity. Herder—the “theologian among the classic writers,” as Karl Barth called him—developed these modern concepts with constant reference to religious heritage. One finds traces of providence in his philosophy of history, and notions of inspiration and incarnation in his concept of art. He found in religious tradition a means to describe what the Enlightenment had ignored or suppressed.

However, religion is not merely transformed into aesthetics or philosophy in Herder’s thought. Throughout his career, Herder wrote extensively on the Bible, particularly on the Old Testament. His early works, Concerning the First Documents of Mankind and Fragments of an Archaeology of the Orient, published posthumously, elaborate on Hume’s theory of natural religion, claiming that the creation story is mainly an etiology of the Sabbath. From 1774 to 1776, in a period of renewed theological interest, Herder wrote his most voluminous and ambitious book on the Bible, The Oldest Document of Mankind, an enthusiastic and deeply theological—even mystical—reading of Genesis 1-6, reflecting also on the religions of Egypt, Babylonia, Persia, and even Kabbalistic teachings. However, Herder’s attempt to prove the

1. A shorter version of this essay was presented in August 2002 at the Conference of the North American Society for the Study of Romanticism in London, Ontario. It was developed in the context of the “Dialectics of Secularization” project at the Zentrum für Literaturforschung, Berlin. I would like to thank my colleagues Prof. Sigrid Weigel, Dr. Ernst Müller, and Dr. Martin Treml.
originality of the creation story and its primacy in respect to all other religious traditions had little success. Later, he wrote on the Old Testament in the Letters Concerning the Study of Theology (1780/81) and on the Bible in general in his The Spirit of Hebrew Poetry (1782/83), where he returns to his earlier, more critical position. In the Letters, he makes a programmatic statement:

We must read the Bible in a human way, since it is a book written by man for man: the language is human, it was written and preserved through human means, and the sense, in which one can understand it, the whole purpose, for which it may be used, is human.2

These oft-cited lines seem to reveal Herder's position: for him, the Bible is "human"; it is no longer sacred scripture, but a book among other books. Thus, Herder apparently takes a decisive step toward a modern, secular understanding of the Bible. This would reflect a double shift: a transfer in which literature is interpreted through religious ideas, while the Bible becomes literature. Dieter Gutzen describes this chiastic substitution as "secularization":

If we understand "secularization" as the transfer of a religious experience to poetry, music, and art, it implies the substitution of the Bible as revelation by the Bible as poetry. However, "secularization" necessarily goes hand in hand with the sacralization of the object which actualizes the new religious experience. Therefore, the secularization of the Bible corresponds to the sacralization of poetry.3

However, a few lines later in Herder's Letters, this interpretation is called into question: "You can be sure," he writes to the fictional young correspondent, "that the more you read the word of God in a human way, the closer you get to the intention of its author [Urheber], who made man in his own image and acts in a human way in all his works and deeds."4 Reading the Bible "in a human way" does not prevent Herder from speaking of "the word of God" or even of divine authorship. There is, for him, no clear division between a theological reading and a profane one.

2. Johann Gottfried Herder, Briefe, das Studium der Theologie betreffend, in Werke, vol. 9/1, ed. Martin Bollacher et al. (Frankfurt/Main: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 1993) 145. Hereafter referred to as Werke. All translations are mine.

To understand the ambiguity here, one needs to formulate a concept of secularization that goes further than Gutzen’s notion of a replacement or a transfer of meaning from the religious to the secular:

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Recently, it has become fashionable to speak of secularization. The relation of modern "secular" society to its own past, as well as to other "religious" societies, has been revisited. This renewed interest is seen in cultural studies and in the media, but the theoretical meaning of "secularization" has remained vague, even though most would agree that we live in an age of "secularization."5

Under the implicit postmodern consensus, however, lies an older, more controversial discourse about secularization. The heated exchanges that took place between Karl Löwith, Carl Schmitt, Hans Blumenberg, and Jakob Taubes in the 1960s and 1970s demonstrated that secularization is by no means a neutral or innocent term of analysis. Blumenberg vehemently attacked what he believed to be an ideologically concept of secularization that had never emancipated itself from its theological heritage. In his The Legitimacy of the Modern Age, Blumenberg made an important distinction:

There simply is a difference between claiming that "secularization" advances in [a] certain country (and that this fact is visible in the empirical decline of the commitment to the church), and saying that the valuation of professional success in capitalism is the secularization of personal salvation on the premises of the belief in predestination.5

In fact, most of the ambiguity of and fascination with the concept of secularization results from its often unrecognized dual meaning. On the one hand, secularization means the disappearance of religion; on the other hand, it refers to the transformation of religion. Schematically, one can distinguish an "intransitive" use of the concept (secularization takes place) from a "transitive" use (something is secularized into something). The second meaning in particular has generated strong and interesting narratives, such as the secularization of the Puritan ethos into capitalism; of the Christian concept of salvation into the modern concept of history; or of God's omnipotence into the political idea of sovereignty. Whereas

the intransitive use of secularization is relatively unproblematic for Blumenberg, the transitive category appears as an ideological concept that never lost its originally political sense: the expropriation of church property by the modern state. As a “category of historical illegitimacy,” it implies that the process of transformation is illegitimate, and that what is “secularized” has only a derivative meaning compared to its religious “origin.” Moreover, this notion is substantivist, since it assumes that some kind of identical element passes through the religious as well as the profane: “Without such substantial identity, to speak of reconstruction and transformation would have no meaning.”

Even if one doubts Blumenberg’s ideological criticism, his argument against substantivism is convincing. It is hard to prove the kind of continuity assumed in this view of secularization, e.g., that the Christian idea of providence has in fact transformed into the modern idea of an invisible hand. Similarly, it is difficult to show how the “transformation” took place, in which a quasi-chemical way changed an idea from religious to profane. Much of what is said about secularization in literary history can be criticized in the same way, a “history of ideas,” which purports to trace the fate of ideas in a sphere of pure spirit, can hardly avoid this kind of substantivism and intellectual alchemy.

However, to dismiss the “transitive” category, as Blumenberg proposes, is no solution. First, this overlooks the tension between religious and profane thought. The religious motifs in Herder’s thought are no mere “dogmatic residue,” no unnecessary veil for Herder’s “real” ideas. On the contrary, the interplay of religious and profane meaning is a productive one, and it cannot be grasped by the transitive notion of “secularization” alone. Second, it is difficult to distinguish these two concepts of secularization from each other. In a cultural sphere, the intransitive and the transitive, the “descriptive” and the “ideological” concepts, belong together and imply each other. This is clearly demonstrated in Max Weber’s narrative of modern “disenchantment” [Entzauberung], which encapsulates both the transitive and the intransitive theories of secularization. Weber’s history of the emergence of Western rationalism is a prime example of a theory of modernization and the disappearance of religion. At the same time, his thesis about the relationship of Protestantism to capitalism is the paradigm for most theories of transitive secularization. This dual orientation is deeply embedded in Weber’s entire rhetoric of “disenchantment,” which not only has a dual meaning as “a process” and the result of a process,” but also suggests that the process of “disenchantment” has an “enchanting” moment. This is all the more important because Weber did not develop a theory of secularization — he hardly uses the term — but rather a dense, overdetermined narrative in which the metaphorical analogy of capitalism to Protestantism is linked to the idea of their metonymic succession, and supplemented with an anticipation of a threatening future despotism. This complex narrative is paradigmatic for secularization narratives, which tend to be complicated precisely because they simultaneously suggest unity and difference: how the religious becomes secular while it retains its religious nature. This paradox is solved by narrative means: by symbolism, motivation, and the temporal structure of narration.

Tellingly, Blumenberg mentions Weber only in the Legitimacy of the Modern Age. For Blumenberg, “secularization” as a concept belongs to philosophy of history. As such, he rejects that it is tendentious or merely rhetorical. But there may be a deeper level on which “secularization” is less of a theory and more of a certain narrative, rhetoric, or technique of representing the religious in the profane (or vice versa). This rhetoric cannot be reduced to a philosophical position without losing its strength, which lies precisely in its ambiguity. To analyze “secularization” on this level necessitates taking into account not only the theories about secularization, but also the more intricate and indirect discourses that relate religious and profane meanings. A focus on the rhetoric and the literary techniques of these discourses is perhaps a way to prevent the concept of secularization from lapsing into substantivalism, without dissolving the tensions and conflicts inherent in the above-mentioned debates.

To return to Herder, it would obviously be substantivist to say that he


8. Recently, some scholars have called into question the dogma of secularism and the mechanical model of secularization from a postmodern perspective. Cf. Talal Asad, Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2003) and Graham Ward, True Religion (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003). Both stress that religion and the secular should always be analyzed in relation to each other with special reference to the rhetoric strategies that constitute their specific mutual relationship and their changing boundaries.
“secularized” the idea of providence into that of progress. But even to formulate it “dialectically” and to say that Herder secularized the Bible and sacralized literature is vague and problematic; it assumes the existence of two distinct spheres, sacred and secular, which was anachronistic in Herder’s time. Other concepts are more sophisticated. Meyer H. Abrams, for example, analyzes secularization as a “displacement” of ideas: an undertaking “to save traditional concepts, schemes, and values which had been based on ‘revelation,’ to reformulate them within the prevailing two-term system of subject and object.” Even if Abrams seems reductive in his analysis of the evolution of “ideas,” to speak of “displacement” and “reformulation” is obviously more complex than to assume a mere “transfer” of ideas. Concerning Herder, Abrams also speaks of “translation.” He writes that Herder, in The Oldest Document, translated the Biblical account of Eden, the Fall, and the restoration into his version of universal history; for the Scriptural story, he said, though told with a simplicity appropriate to children, embodies the true history both of the entire human race and of each member.  

“Translation” is an intricate metaphor. It is not the conversion of content from one language into another, but a complicated procedure whose objects are not ideas but texts. Since to refer to “ideas” and “concepts” necessarily runs the risk of substantialism, I will not explore Herder’s biblical “ideas,” but his reading of the biblical text. Reading has its own figurality, producing and processing tensions between text and context, writing and speech, part and whole, which cannot be reduced to a stable “content.” As demonstrated above, it is astonishing to see Herder repeatedly change his attitude toward the text. While in his early works, he sees the creation story as a man-made etiology for the Sabbath, in The Oldest Document he reads it as divine pedagogy, and later he returns to his earlier reading of the Bible as human poetry. These changes are all the more puzzling given that the fundamental nature of his reading does not change, and Herder is even able to incorporate much of his earlier drafts into his later work verbatim. It seems that his reading remains roughly the same, despite the very different presuppositions he professes regarding divine or human authorship.

Similarly, it is difficult to place Herder in relation to contemporary discourses on the Bible. Herder refers to diverse and sometimes contradictory positions, discussing scholars such as the Orientalist Johann David Michaelis (1717-91), proponent of historical criticism, Robert Lowth’s (1710-87) poetics and rhetoric of the Bible, and his close friend Johann Georg Hamann (1730-88), a vehement proponent of Pietist readings, who urges the interpreter to confront the text with humility. The juxtaposition of these different discourses is not simple, nor does Herder relate to his predecessors in a stable way. This is most obvious in his relation to Michaelis, whom he praises in his youth, despises in his middle period, and respects once again at the end of his life.

The existing interpretations deal differently with these inconsistencies. Older research stresses the “Romantic” and “modern” character of Herder’s reading, focusing on his later works, while considering The Oldest Document to be an aberration. More recent studies tend to stress the difference between Herder and his Romantic successors. For these scholars, it is in the more radical Bückeburg work that Herder is most original and where he lays out the fundamentals of his thought. Both interpretations are insufficient, as they tend to force Herder into either theological or profane categories that are, for him, not mutually exclusive. Instead of asking the vexed question of whether he “really” had religious or profane intentions, readings of Herder should prompt us to question the category of secularization itself. To do so, we must alter our starting point. Instead of constructing continuities between the old and the new, or the religious and the secular, I assume a discontinuity in order to analyze how the old is represented, or at least cited, in the new. In other words, instead of asking how Biblical motifs are transformed into secular ones, I ask what happens to the Bible after it is secularized.

It must be emphasized that Herder’s reading of the Bible is a reaction. Biblical interpretation, especially of the Old Testament, underwent a crisis in response to rationalist and deist criticism of the 17th and 18th

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10. Abrams 2005. Here, Abrams mentions Herder together with Lessing and Kant, ignoring an important difference in their methodologies of reading that confirms that “translation” is merely a metaphor. For a more general approach to secularization as translation, cf. Sigrid Weigel et al., Beseitigungen, Konversionen, Maskierungen: Zur Dualistik der Sekularisierung um 1800 (forthcoming), esp. the first and second chapters.
centuries. Specifically, allegoric and figural interpretation (i.e., the interpretation of the Old Testament as foreshadowing the New) lost its standing. In Foucault's "episteme of representation," the sign is no longer a mysterious inscription, but a discursive and arbitrary representation of ideas. It is no longer possible to claim that a text has multiple meanings or a hidden significance. Biblical texts lose their symbolic force and become mere stories. Large parts of the Old Testament, especially the detailed codes of ritual law, thus become irrelevant and, in a sense, illegible for a Christian reader. For example, the story of the creation and the fall is not only called into question by natural sciences, but it loses its meaning when Genesis 3:15 (God's prediction that the seed of man will bruise the seed of the serpent) is no longer interpreted as anticipating Christ. When the Wertheimer translation appeared in 1735, the rationalist accommodation of the creation narrative to contemporary physics did not arouse much suspicion, but numerous critics vehemently opposed the omission of references to Christ, for example by translating "seed" (of the serpent) with the more prosaic term "descendants." But even apologists had difficulties explaining the semiotic nature of the prophesies; following contemporary hermeneutics, they tended to read the Bible either as a true account or a moral doctrine. Thus, there was no clear boundary between "apologetic" and "critical" readings. The most effective secularized readings were not accomplished by skeptics and radicals like Wertheimer (in fact, he also had apologetic intentions), but through an affirmation of the Bible's truthfulness that radically transformed its meaning. In any case, the prefiguration of the New Testament in the Old continued to lose its importance. If it was at all considered, it was no longer seen as based on a salvation narrative, but as a kind of secret writing through which Moses, well-versed in Egyptian hieroglyphic technique, expressed his esoteric doctrine.


This entailed a fundamental change in the evaluation of the role of the Jews, who were no longer the chosen people, but an Oriental, primitive one, to which the Old Testament had, unfortunately, been molded to suit. As the abject of Christian theology, their position became more and more fragile. It is telling that Michaelis, the major German critic of the Old Testament, was also a vehement opponent of Jewish emancipation.

The decline of figural interpretation does not concern elements of biblical content, but rather the status of the text as such. It may even be more important than the debate concerning the human authorship of the Bible, which is often overstated in historical hindsight. For as long as the figural framework was intact, one could speak of "the Mosaic author" without endangering the Bible's religious function. At least in Protestantism, the Bible is more than a container of ideas, it is conceived as the source of these ideas and of religious truth in general, as Scripture. Figural interpretation is paradigmatic of one essential feature of Scripture: its ability to "interpret itself." The spiritual force and liturgical performativity of the text are grounded in its self-reference, as are its normative strength and cognitive depth. Each part of the Bible can elucidate any other part, each section has profound meaning because it can be understood in light of the others. This internal signification is most clear in interpretations of the Old Testament in light of the New Testament. Figural interpretation concerns the "scripturnality" of the Scripture, the element that makes the Scripture into more than just a text, into a source of knowledge and a site of the holy. The whole form of this truth, the religious "episteme" changes radically if the function of the Scripture changes.

Herder is a part of this process. He does not reaffirm the old Protestant understanding, nor does he develop a completely different one. Instead, Herder redefines the original Christian meaning within a new context. This is not a simple "translation" of theological concepts into philosophical discourse. Herder's reading tries to represent the content


of the text, but also tries to make it readable and meaningful precisely by its ambiguities. He does not develop a systematic discourse on the Bible, but rather performs a mixed, flexible, even over-determined reading strategy by confronting different contexts from different contexts with the Biblical text. His reading is neither mere hermeneutic “empathy” [Einfühlung] nor application of modern concepts to the text; it is rather a dialectical process of decomposition and recomposition.

III

An examination of the categories which organize Herder’s reading of the Bible is in order. They are: document, song, image, force, and creation. My focus here will be on the text which most captures Herder’s attention, Gen. 1-3. While I refer mainly to The Oldest Document, my aim is to characterize Herder’s reading in general, leaving aside the differences between the earlier sketches and the later works. For even if Herder’s theories about the text change radically, the categories he uses remain the same. Since Herder originally developed many of these concepts in relation to poetics and aesthetics, I will also refer to his early ideas on these subjects.17

From the very beginning Herder sees several documents [Urkunden] in the different parts of the creation story (Gen. 1, 2, and 3). The first and second creation story and the story of the fall are seen as different documents, which Moses later combined. Herder does not question that the beginning of Genesis contains original “announcements of the oldest affairs of mankind,” but to read them as one “coherent story by Moses” would lead to “doubt and misinterpretation,” even to the notion that creation took place twice, once according to Gen. 1 and once according to Gen. 2.18 In view of this, Herder assumes that Moses combined different stories and even supplemented them with commentary in verses like Gen. 2: 24. Interestingly, Herder considers Gen. 1 as the oldest document, since it is more universal and more poetic than the rather prosaic account offered by Gen. 2. Current criticism regards Gen. 2 as the younger version for precisely the same reasons.

Herder’s technique of dividing the creation story into segments is fundamental to all of his readings. Even the enthusiastic reading in The

17. For a more detailed analysis of Herder’s Biblical interpretation, esp. in The Oldest Document, see Christoph Bultmann, Die biblische Urgeschichte in der Aufklärung: Johann Gottfried Herders Interpretation der Genesis als Antwort auf die Religionskritik David Humes (Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 1999).

In this poietological analysis of Gen. 1, Herder relies heavily on Robert Lowth's *Lectures on the Sacred Poetry of the Hebrews* (1753), especially to Lowth's discovery of parallelism. Hebrew poetry, according to Lowth, has no measure, but distinguishes itself through parallelism—a formal or semantic symmetry between the lines of a poem as in David's hymn, "For by thee I have run through a troop: by my God have I leaped over a wall" (2 Sam. 22. 30). According to Herder, however, parallelism is not only a figure of style but has a much broader meaning as a universal and original means of expression. Because primitive language has no precise concepts, its speakers have to repeat themselves until the desired intention can be communicated. Moreover, parallelism is also a natural and necessary tool to memorize the spoken word at a time when writing did not exist.  

In *The Oldest Document*, parallelism even seems to have an ontological status. Commenting on the first verse ("In the beginning, God created heaven and earth"), Herder stresses the juxtaposition of heaven and earth as a first structure of the universe and of knowledge, which remained fundamental for the Hebrews:

> For them, everything is built on this parallelism: natural science and morals, religion and science, teachings on body and spirit, Heaven works on earth, Earth strives for Heaven. The division grounds and stimulates their systems and poetries, their view from Earth to Heaven, from Heaven to Earth!  

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superficial one — which will later become the Romantic distinction between symbol and allegory — is still difficult for Herder to make. Therefore, he refers to the theological figure of incarnation. If there is any secularization of theological thought, it is still in the making.

Moreover, Herder’s concept of the poetic “image” has some traits that do not square with the later, Romantic concept. First, for Herder, not only does the work of each day of creation constitute an image, but the whole sequence of days is also an “image.” Herder urges the reader to envision this unity:

Firstly, my reader, leave out everything unessential: the day’s works, the blessing, naming, the imagination, move the simple naked images, in their succession, closer to each other: What do you see? Nothing more or less than the portrayal of dawn, image of the becoming day. 28

Herder assumes that the sequence of the seven days represents the breaking of dawn, leading from the darkness of the first day via the appearance of differences in the dawning light to the successive awakening of creatures. This “image” does not function like the Romantic symbol of art [Kunstsymbol]. It is not a totality, instantly grasped by vision, but rather a series, which has to be “read” again and again: “The most ancient and brilliant Revelation of God appears to you every morning as a fact, as the great work of God in Nature.” 29 Furthermore, there is a tension between the single images of the days and the ongoing process, since the former fail to represent “the Invisible, who nowhere in creation appears like he is.” 30 Thus, the “image” of creation involves the tension between simultaneous and discursive representation.

Second, the term “image” refers directly to a theological discourse about the creation of man “in the image of God.” The creation of man is not only the last work of creation; it constitutes the unity of creation on a different level, since Man is “the crown, the highest sensual unity of anything visible.” 31 In Man, creation not only reaches its summit, it is contained in a microcosmic form. Man represents the creator in creation, since he is “almost an after-image [Nachbild], a representative of the divinity in a visible form.” 32 Herder even suggests that the form of the human body “resembles” the textual structure he has depicted as the seven-part hieroglyph. As such, man is not only a creature among others, but an over-determined symbol of creation as a whole, of the creator, and of the narrative of creation.

Third, Herder refers to the tradition of moral types. The account of creation is not only an image of nature and the process of creation, but also an “example” [Vorbild] or “archetype” [Urbild] of human culture and human deeds. Following the political theology of the Enlightenment, Herder analyzes religious institutions in terms of their social benefit. It is particularly the sanctification of the Sabbath which Herder regards as the archetype of cultural order. Whereas most Enlightenment thinkers focus on the Mosaic laws, Herder thinks of a better way to institute order: “No word, no order, no advice — but only the silent example, the deed, which however is God’s deed and example, goes from Heaven to Earth, penetrating the whole nature of the World and of man.” 33 We will return to this important point later.

Herder’s critique of representationalist poetics often refers to the category of force. If poetry is not mimetic, but rather an expression, it presupposes an inner force which “expresses itself.” Therefore, criticizing Lessing, Herder stresses that poetry represents neither spatial coexistence (like art) nor succession in time (like music), but succession by force: “By force which accompanies the words, which goes through the ears, but immediately has an effect on the soul.” 34 “Force” is the new principle of a “genetic” poetics, in the dual sense that “genesis” has for Herder, concerning both psychological and historical origins.

Accordingly, the most forceful poetry is, for Herder, the most original. Lowth had already referred to the rhetorical tradition of the sublime to characterize biblical poetry, which is rather odd, compared to the standards of classicist poetics, as essentially “forceful.” However, what for Lowth remains only one category among others, framed in a system of rhetoric figures, becomes fundamental for Herder’s entire poetics, and even for his anthropology. Forceful expression is not only the basis for poetry, but constitutes the poetic nature of all human language. The Bible, and especially its most sublime chapters, e.g., the account of the creation, stand as paradigmatic for all language and signification. In his commentary, as well as in his embedded translations of biblical verses, Herder reproduces this original sublimity, brevity, and

29. Herder, Achteste Urkunde 239.
30. Herder, Achteste Urkunde 244.
33. Herder, Achteste Urkunde 266.
forcefulness with an elliptic, eruptive, and expressive style. Moreover, as in his use of parallelism, "force" is a metaphysical concept for Herder. In his pantheistic philosophy of nature and history, force is the central element that connects everything in the universe: "Movement in nature is force, is soul, is spirit, is acting and living of heaven." Thus, the forceful language parallels the force of creation itself, as is most evident in the parallelism of Gen. 1:3: "And God said, Let there be light: and there was light." If fact, the parallelism of words and events characteristic for the whole account of Gen. I represent both the power of words and the infinite force of an omnipotent will. Everything predicted is brought into existence exactly as it was predicted.

The poetic form does not seem arbitrary to creation, since the performance of creation and the performance of the text intermingle. Creation is a poetic act, poetry is "creative." The category of a poetic "creation" is another important concept through which Herder interprets the text. However, he hardly refers to the well-known tradition of the artist as a second creator who brings forth a world by a decision of his will. For Herder, the artist imitates creation. In The Spirit of Hebrew Poetry, Herder stresses that the origin of poetry is human as well as divine, since God gave man the ability to express himself poetically. This relation is determined to be mimetic:

Man, by naming everything and by sensually arranging everything around himself, becomes the imitator of divinity, the second creator, thereby poet, too. If one has seen the essence of poetry in the imitation of nature, according to this origin one can see it more boldly in the imitation of the creating and naming divinity.

Poetry is neither mimesis of nature, nor sheer invention by a sovereign subject; it is mimesis of the divine act, an imitation of the force of creation by the force of poetry. To create by word is poetic, thus poetry is creative in that it names things. However, since it does not invent names but employs existing language, poetry is creative only in a derivative sense.

The correspondence of poetry and creation is far from abstract. In the context of this equation, Herder mentions the account of creation: "The first poetry was a dictionary of terse names and expressions filled with images and sensations. The first piece that we have of this poetry (Gen. 1) is a great panel of images, a view of universe, arranged by human sensibility." Not only is the act of creation a paradigm for poetry, but also its narration. Gen. 1 is not only poetry about the beginning, but also the beginning of poetry. In a kind of mise-en-abime, Gen. 1 has poetic properties and is also the primal scene of poetry itself. The poetry of creation is the creation of poetry.

Herder's reading of the Bible cannot be understood as a "transformation" of a religious text into a "poetic" one, at least if one is not willing to leave open the meaning of "poetic" in this context. What is at stake here is neither the secularization of the scripture nor the sacralization of poetry, but a re-reading of the Bible in the context of both a developing poetics and a new understanding of scripture. The "poetic" is not a given, imposed upon the Bible from outside; it is constituted in the course of reading. To be sure, Herder's reading is apologetic. However, it goes beyond the horizon of his contemporaries: unlike even historical criticism, he does not try to prove that the text is historically accurate. He cares about the force, the performative moment of the text. This kind of reading produces uncertainties, but it is precisely in them that meaning is found.

If Herder's reading is unstable, it transgresses the bounds of a fixed hermeneutic system. Herder does not merely read with empathy [Einfühlung]. At the very least, empathy has different and more complex meanings here than it does in conventional hermeneutics. Nothing reveals this ambiguity more clearly than the fact that even if Herder permanently urges us to "empathize" with the spirit of the Orient, he leaves open the question of whether we should empathize with the writer or the original reader of the text.

IV

We have already seen that Herder's "human reading" of the Bible implies much more than simply reading the text as if it were written by
human beings. As Herder’s discussion of “image” shows, he not only conceives the biblical text as a poetic image of something, but also as an archetype for something, e.g., human culture. The text speaks of the past or present objects represented, but also of a future that, from the perspective of the reader, is still to come. This predicative as well as normative dimension, in which the text addresses its readers, was indeed dominant in the traditional readings of the Bible as scripture, where the biblical text was applied directly to the present situation.

In Herder’s reading, archetypical meaning opens up another layer of signification, articulated in a series of ideas: pedagogy, inscription, and origin. Compared to the concepts analyzed above, these ideas refer less to poetic discourses than to philosophical or theological ones, suggesting that the “literary” refiguration of the text is insufficient and must be complemented by “stronger” concepts. This strength, however, is accompanied by an even higher degree of ambiguity, which amplifies the already ambiguous tendencies of the “literary” reading. Moreover, these concepts tend to re-enter the biblical text to which they were applied. Rather than remaining abstract schemes to explain what the biblical text does and means, they are at work “inside” the text itself. Thus, the distinction between the two sets of ideas is not a fundamental one.

For Herder, to read the Bible “in the human way” means to read it as a text for humans, as a pedagogical text. Whereas other Enlightenment thinkers speak of divine pedagogy in the context of a general philosophy of history, Herder directly relates it to the text of Gen. 1. In Lessing’s The Education of Mankind, “pedagogy” is a model to rationalize the history of salvation, particularly the idea of revelation. God helped the natural progress of reason by educating the primitive polytheistic humans. For Herder, “pedagogy” is not so much a question of gradual progress, but rather something present at the beginning. According to him, primitive men could not understand the order of nature by themselves; in order “to grasp and to attain the picture of creation, a voice of instruction was added.”

Herder characterizes this divine help in an ambiguous way. On the one hand, he sees a “sensual pedagogy” in the events of creation, especially the creation of dawn. Here, God teaches through images, facts, and events, by a language of light. On the other hand, Herder mentions a

“voice of instruction” that establishes “the fundamentals of human knowledge — The words of God! — in the soul of the child.”

It is unclear if creation is pedagogy by itself, or if it needs a supplementary voice for its completion. “Pedagogy” is not a model for what the text does, but belongs inside the text, inside its poetic world, which Herder’s paraphrase suggests is a scene of God-the-father teaching his children. This interpretation is not an external rationalization, but dwells within the text itself, within its poetic imaginary as well as its performance. It reflects the fact that Gen. I contains divine speech as well as divine deeds. Theologically speaking, we face here the paradox of the “word of God.”

Obviously, Herder tries to refigure this paradox by letting the text speak for itself. Like man (the “image of God”), the “voice” of God has a dual function in Herder’s reading of Genesis. On the one hand, it belongs to the story, as one element among others; on the other hand, it contains the whole story within itself. This has an important function for Herder’s reading. In its ambiguity, it destroys the simple reference of the text and subverts the assumed simplicity of the “human reading.” Moreover, it obscures the relation of the biblical text to its origin, of the written text to the act of its performance. Herder does not decide if Gen. I is only speaking about an act of teaching or if it is teaching itself, i.e., if the biblical text should be read as the story of the events of creation or as a citation of the divine voice of instruction. Kant, for example, decidedly understood Herder in the sense of the latter. For him, Herder considers the first chapter of Genesis,

not as a story of the creation of the world, but as an abstract of the first instruction to the human race. It is a kind of tabular method which God used to create the concepts of humanity by the division of natural objects according to the different days; of which the seventh day is used to contain the whole.

The symmetrical structure of the text is thus a necessary means for

40. Herder, Aesthete Urkunde 246. Even if Herder does not speak of a divine pedagogy in his later works, the pedagogical setting of the Letters Concerning Theology and The Spirit of Hebrew Poetry is obvious: both are fictive instructions for youth.


42. Herder, Aesthete Urkunde 255. This ambiguity is condensed in one all but long sentence, cited above: Herder claims to demonstrate both “that the first revelation of God is nothing but revelation in nature, actually in the most simple, beautiful, comprehensible, orderly, reappearing and impressionable image [i.e. the dawn], and that to grasp and to attain this picture a voice of instruction was added, for which no one else except God was present at the beginning of time” (246).

43. In a similar way, Herder argues at the same time that the religion of original man is a universal feeling without rites and dogmas and that the seventh day is set apart as a special day for worship. See Herder, Aesthete Urkunde 283-288.

44. Letter from Kant to Hamann (6 April 1774), reprinted in Hamann, Briefwechsel, vol. 3 (Wiesbaden: Insel, 1957) 81.
human memory. However, the relation of this structure or tabular method to the actual text of Gen. 1 remains unclear. This problem is articulated by the concept of a hieroglyph.

Herder speaks not only of a divine voice, but also of an inscription. After describing the sensual pedagogy, the instruction by the image of the dawn, Herder suggests that God occupied the human mind in another way as well: “with a toy, with a mechanical image of thought [Denkbild].”45 He claims that Gen. 1 contains a seven-part “hieroglyph,” which is in fact the seven-part diagram of the story depicted above. To speak of hieroglyphs is to evoke a contemporary discourse that is rather complex and a hybrid itself, consisting of older speculations of natural language (or the language of Adam) as well as modern aesthetic theories like Diderot’s philosophy of style and, most important, of Warburton’s history of writing. If we believe, as Foucault does, that in the episteme of representation the paradigm of linear spoken discourse replaces an older one of mysterious inscription, then the hieroglyphic discourse is part of a counter-discourse.46

Herder uses the “hieroglyph” in a manifold and over-determined sense. First, the “hieroglyph of creation” is not a secondary construction, it is “not appended [untergeschoben] to the first holy oracle, but woven into it [eingewebt], founded on nothing else than on the structure of heaven and earth themselves.” Moreover, the hieroglyph is not only an abstract diagram, but has a sensual resemblance to the human body. Exclaiming “Man, image of God! and the visible image and hieroglyph of creation,”48 Herder equates the image, the hieroglyph, and the structure of man’s “inner shape.” Furthermore, the hieroglyph apparently has an independent material existence. Herder stresses that it is an original inscription, a “fact” that will put an end to the hypothetical reflections on the origin of mankind. It does not prove, according to Herder, that Moses had taken his knowledge from Egypt — a thesis quite common to Enlightenment religious history — but just the opposite: that the various ancient traditions are only derivations of the one original hieroglyph of creation. Herder goes one step further: on an anthropological level, the hieroglyph is also the origin of speech, writing, and calculation, as well as the prototype of all human knowledge and memory. It is “the most simple symbol of all teaching of nature, morals, religion, calculation of time” and even “God’s contribution to speech and writing,” his “first attempt of writing for man.”49 Not only is poetry mimesis of the creative act, but language as such is mimesis of a divine inscription.

Herder’s theory of the hieroglyph reinforces the paradoxical qualities of this reading. At least in the case of The Oldest Document, it seems to postulate a beginning before the beginning: before God has spoken to humans and before humans have started to name the animals, the hieroglyph is inscribed in the world as a paradigm for language. This holds true of the textual account in Gen. 1. Before the text actually unfolds, it is inscribed in its origin, condensed in a kind of meta-writing. The text is not identical with the pure act of creation, but there is a pretext of hieroglyphic writing, which exists only in the text. Even if Herder does not maintain this rather strange theory, writing plays a significant role throughout his reading of Genesis. Discourses on primitive signs, hieroglyphs, the “memorial script” of the sanctification of the Sabbath, and even the antiquity of the Hebrew alphabet are omnipresent in his theological as well as in his critical writings on the Bible.50

Is this secularization? On the one hand, Herder refers to the process of writing in its materiality and thereby understands scripture as an artifact. On the other hand, it is precisely this reference that allows him to represent the complex signification of the Bible and to refugue its “scripturality.” As with “pedagogy,” we are faced with a reintroduction of the concept in the text: the hieroglyph is not a model for the text but already “in” it. This complicates the relation of text, reading, and signification. Because hieroglyphs are complex signs, oscillating between iconic and symbolic designation, they can represent the paradoxes of an absolute writing that contains everything. If the archæ- or meta-text of the hieroglyph is the origin of all language and writing, Gen. 1 is both the oldest text ever written and the only text that speaks about the origin

47. Herder, Aelteste Urkunde 269.
48. Herder, Aelteste Urkunde 292-294. In this respect, the hieroglyph is also a figure of Christ.
49. Herder, Aelteste Urkunde 276.
of texts in general, including itself. Because the "poetry of creation" is simultaneously the creation of poetry, the "originary text" of Gen. 1 is a text on origins as well as the origin of texts.

Furthermore, this scriptural moment is a counter-current to Herder's general logocentric conception of language. Whereas elsewhere, Herder stresses the spoken, immediate, and living word, in his reading of the Bible, he postulates an original writing, which includes materiality, deferment, and figurality of the sign. From here, a re-reading of Herder may be possible, by revising the older, "Romantic" preconception of his thought. Unlike the tendency of later Romantics to see only symbols of immediate translucence as true aesthetic objects, aesthetics for Herder is also writing.

A new theory of origin follows from Herder's theory of the hieroglyph. At first glance, Herder's thesis about hieroglyphs seems not only to contradict the program of reading the Bible "in a human way," but also his famous thesis in On the Origin of Language (1770), where he stresses the human origin of language and the primacy of spoken language over writing. In The Oldest Document, Herder explicitly criticizes his former position, stressing that philosophical inquiry merely uncovers the possibility of the origin of language, but it has to remain circular, unless a factual account would give evidence how the origin actually took place in pre-history, unless, in other words, he "discovered" the original hieroglyph of Gen. 1. However, in a famous 1772 letter to Hamann, Herder already denied that the thesis on the origin of language contradicts the divine origin of language. Like the question of authorship of scripture, the question of the origin of language is not an either-or question for Herder.

This ambiguity results from an important tension in Herder's concept of origin, even in his genetic method in general. In his early essays on the history of culture and knowledge, Herder stresses that fluid and changing things are not rooted in rational principles, but in their origin, whose discovery requires historical inquiry and psychological analysis. The evidence needed for this is necessarily belated: "There is, so to speak, generation and birth in every invention; at best, we have reports of the latter, but the inquirer wants to analyze and use the former." 53

"Origin" is not a simple site of presence, rather, it is a double-sided: the hidden "generation" and the manifest "birth." This doubling or split prevents the origin from being represented by a single straightforward argument. Therefore, Herder's own strategy to explore the origin tries at once "to experience it historically, to explain it philosophically, or to suppose it poetically." 54

The problem of a double origin becomes a paradox in the case of the origin of language, where origin and representation coincide. Therefore, Herder's strategy in his thesis On the Origin of Language is not an attempt to solve the paradox, but to unfold it, using the discourses of history, philosophy, and poetry. Philosophically, the origin is a paradox: thought presupposes language and language presupposes thought. This paradox cannot be solved but only eluded to: by equating humanity and the capacity of speech, Herder puts aside the older question of how animals acquired speech. Historical evidence, particularly from the forceful and imaginary language of the Hebrews, shows the simple nature of original language. Poetically, Herder imagines the scene in which language emerges. He replaces the violent scenarios of beasts and brutes in Vico, Rousseau, and Condillac with an idyllic, even pastoral picture of the naming of sheep and a family scene where parents teach their child, a scenario which recalls the pedagogical setting of Herder's interpretation of Genesis. In fact, the idyllic nature of Herder's scenery may be the result of a different exegesis: focusing on Gen. 1, Herder automatically shifts the weight from the traditional emphasis on the fall to creation.

"Origin" is the central principle of Herder's genetic thought and takes the place of the rational "principle." In fact, Herder often uses "origin" and "essence" interchangeably. It is no accident that Genesis 1 plays a decisive role for him. Obviously, the text itself, beginning with "in the beginning," deals with the problem of origin and the possibility of its representation, using a sequence of days to depict an absolute act. Through the parallelism of divine speech and divine deeds, the text constitutes a structure that arranges the world of nature and prefigures the coming history. Reading the story of creation, Herder's thought becomes truly "genetics," even in the biblical sense of genesis. Origin is not a pure beginning. It remains a structured, textualized, and split origin.

51. On this self-critique, see Herder, "Adelbert Urkunde" 277-78.


53. Herder, Vorlesungen über die Geschichte der lyrischen Dichtkunst (Stuttgartische Werke, vol. 32) 90-91. The specific problem with the origin of poetry is that accounts of original poetics presuppose the origin of writing (88). Obviously, for Herder "origin" is paradox, since it is supposed to be spiritual, living, and spoken, and, at the same time, inscribed.

54. Herder, Über die neuere deutsche Literatur 501.

One might say that in Herder, "origin" occupies the place of "creation" in theological doctrine. However, it would be erroneous to say
that the idea of creation is "secularized" to that of origin in Herder's reading. To some extent, it is just the opposite. The concept of "origin," resulting from a radical epistemological reflection, redefines the idea of creation. It is only philosophical reconceptualization that allows one to speak of creation in the wake of criticism rooted in the natural sciences. However, this does not mean that the theological concept of "creation" is replaced by the profane notion of "origin." In general, Herder's reading does not try to save the content of the Bible by rationalizing or replacing the idea of creation. Rather, it makes the biblical text readable and meaningful once again. Like the other terms mentioned above (document, image, force, pedagogy), "origin" allows Herder to reconfigure the textuality of the Bible. In his re-reading, "creation" and "origin" are neither theological dogmas transferred to the profane nor philosophical concepts externally applied to the Bible. Instead, they are reading tools, which organize a transfer from theology to philosophy and vice versa — figures between theological and profane readings.

To speak of "figures" implies two things. First, all "concepts" in question are overdetermined and cannot be reduced to a fixed sense or a single discourse. As an example, the concept of "image" is not intelligible in aesthetic theory alone, but also refers to the traditional theological discourse, to modern epistemology, and to the process of reading in its most material aspect, insofar as the Bible is understood as a gallery of images or even as the single image of a hieroglyph. Similarly, "origin" is not a principle of rational philosophy, nor the step from non-being into being, but rather a site where a plurality of discourses unfolds the paradoxes of the beginning.

Second, the "figures" of reading are not intelligible in themselves but only in constant reference to the text from which they emerge. Herder's reading never emancipates itself entirely from the text he reads, and his theory of origin retains an intertextual relationship to Gen. 1. Unlike Kant, who takes the biblical account only as a pretext for a philosophical anthropology, Herder never clearly departs from it. Whereas Kant allegorizes the text according to the norms of independent reason, Herder's reading represents a more complex process, better described as intertextuality than as translation. In fact, Herder produces a mixed text, which contains different types of texts (translations, paraphrases, commentaries, philosophical interpretation, hermeneutic application, etc.) and allusions to different strata (linguistic, rhetorical, poetic, imaginary etc.) of the biblical hypertext.

Herder restates the symbolic dimension of the hypertext that has disappeared with the decline of figural interpretation. In his reading, the text acquires a multi-layered meaning that makes interpretation no longer an unpleasant job of apologetics, but a challenging task. Moreover, Herder takes into account the performative force and the materiality of the biblical text, which intrinsically belong to the function of the text as scripture. One might even say that Herder's is the last to attempt to establish theology on the basis of such a rich reading of the Bible. For Schleiermacher, whose influence soon surpassed Herder’s, feeling is the inner principle of faith, while reading plays a secondary role.

Nevertheless, Herder’s reading is not a mere restoration of scripture on its own terms. The inner contradictions and ambiguities of scriptural- ity surface and become productive, initiating a complex discourse with new and specific meanings. It is the discourse of literature, yet, neither in the contemporary, neutral sense, nor in the narrow sense of Romantic poetry as an aesthetic enterprise. It is the discourse of literature understood as a dynamic field of signification between emphatic and vulgar writing, between sacred and profane texts.

It is difficult to determine whether the figures of this reading are religious or secular. In fact, both theological and profane means are used for both secular and theological purposes. Secularization in this field should no longer be conceived as the fate of ideas and concepts, but as an intertextual phenomenon. Secularization occurs when texts from the religious tradition interact with modern texts. Secularization in this sense is no longer a category of the quasi-chemical transformation of religious ideas into profane ones, but instead describes the citation of the religious in a more or less profane world. These processes can no longer be understood in the economic metaphors of a "transfer" of meaning or a "substitution" of the secular for the religious, or vice versa, implying a zero-sum situation, where a fixed amount of transcendence is displaced. Instead, secularization suggests an intertextual space, generative of meanings, where figures emerge as "creation" or "origin." As the terms "intertextuality" and "citation" denote, this is a more "literary" concept in that it takes into account the different literary techniques through which secularizing discourses constitute their meanings.

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An Interdisciplinary Journal of German Studies

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Articles appearing in this journal are annotated and indexed in Historical Abstracts and American History and Life.

NEW GERMAN CRITIQUE
Number 94
Winter 2005

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