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‘A FRIEND TO RATIONAL PIETY’: THE EARLY RECEPTION OF HERDER BY
PROTESTANT DISSENTERS IN BRITAIN

Catherine Angerson

ABSTRACT

Johann Gottfried Herder (1744–1803) already had an attentive British readership in 1800, when the first translation of his *Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit* (1784–91) was published in London. This curious episode in Anglo-German literary relations and the reasons why there was a market for this German philosophical book at the turn of the nineteenth century have not been analysed in detail before. The article examines how Herder was first received in Britain as an intellectual ally of liberal Presbyterians and ‘rational’ Dissenters and later attacked and rejected on political grounds by the conservative Anglican establishment. An overview of the earliest reviews of Herder’s *Abhandlung über den Ursprung der Sprache* (1772) in the *Monthly Review* in 1775 and 1784 is followed by an analysis of how Herder’s theology, Biblical studies and philosophy of history were first received in journal reviews, usually in small fragments and often prior to the availability of English translations. By the time Thomas Churchill’s translation of the *Ideen* appeared in 1800, Herder and some of his ideas were already the subject of intense discussion in intellectual Presbyterian and Unitarian circles in the politically heated aftermath of the French Revolution.

Ein Kuriosum der englisch-deutschen Literaturbeziehungen ist, dass Johann Gottfried Herder (1744–1803) schon um 1800 — als die erste englische Übersetzung seiner *Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit* (1784–91) in London erschien — eine sehr aufmerksame englische Leserschaft hatte. Die spezifischen Gründe, weshalb es

einen Markt für diese deutsche philosophische Abhandlung gab, wurden noch nicht hinreichend analysiert. Der Aufsatz untersucht, wie Herder erst als intellektueller Verbündeter liberaler Presbyterianer und ‘rationaler’ Nonkonformisten positiv aufgenommen und später vom entgegengesetzten Lager des konservativen, anglikanischen Establishments politisch abgelehnt und heftig bekämpft wurde. Nach einem Überblick über die von der Forschung vernachlässigten frühesten Rezensionen von der *Abhandlung über den Ursprung der Sprache* (1772) im *Monthly Review* (1775 und 1784) wird die Rezeption von Herders Theologie, Bibelauslegung und Philosophie der Geschichte in den 1790er Jahren in Zeitschriftenartikeln analysiert: gewöhnlich handelte es sich um kleine Fragmente, die oft vor den englischen Übersetzungen erschienen. Herder und einige seiner Ideen waren schon vor der Erscheinung von Thomas Churchills Übersetzung der *Ideen* in intellektuellen presbyterianischen und unitarischen Kreisen in der aufgeheizten politischen Atmosphäre nach der Französischen Revolution Gegenstand heftiger Diskussionen.

Catherine Angerson, January 2016

‘A FRIEND TO RATIONAL PIETY’: THE EARLY RECEPTION OF
HERDER BY PROTESTANT DISSENTERS IN BRITAIN

CATHERINE ANGERSON

This German philosopher has already been introduced to the English reader as a gentleman possessing much critical acumen; as a friend to rational piety; and as an elegant writer.

Monthly Review, April 1792 (Thomas Cogan)¹

The impact of English literature and the Scottish Enlightenment on eighteenth-century German literature and thought has long been recognised and widely, though by no means exhaustively, investigated. Johann Gottfried Herder (1744–1803) had a very keen interest in and vast knowledge of Scottish, English and Irish philosophy including Berkeley, Shaftesbury, Hume, Smith, Robertson and Ferguson. Less well known is the fact that towards the end of the eighteenth century the British began to be informed about German literature and ideas on a smaller scale and the name of Herder became associated in the minds of journal readers with unorthodox theology and free thought. The tendency to ignore, downplay or to separate Herder’s theology from the rest of his thought has been one of the characteristics of the English-language reception of Herder in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries and many of his philosophical and theological writings have still not been translated into English.² The earliest British readers of Herder in the eighteenth century, on the other hand, were particularly interested in his theology, Biblical studies and philosophy of history. Some of Herder’s later writings of the 1790s were reviewed in literary journals within a year or so of their publication in

Germany, while his earlier and now more famous essays on literature and aesthetics were not appreciated until later in the nineteenth century.³ Previous research on the reception of German literature and ideas in late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Britain has focused on literary forms such as poetry and drama, or on the philosophy of Kant.⁴ In a recent study on Coleridge's reception of Kantian ideas, Monika Class contextualised the reception of Kant in the 1790s within the radical and Dissenting milieu in London and Bristol.⁵ The reception of Herder and other German philosophical writers in relation to the intellectual culture of Protestant Dissent has, however, not yet been investigated. By examining the earliest encounters with Herder's ideas, we can gain a new perspective on the important place of his thought in the history of Anglo-German literary relations.

Herder's philosophy and theology appealed to English Dissenters, particularly Unitarians and liberal Presbyterians, who began to look to the Continent for intellectual allies in the face of increasingly repressive measures against Protestant Dissenters from the Church of England by the government at home. The English 'rational' Dissenters considered themselves to be on the side of political and religious reform, freedom of speech and free intellectual enquiry. They believed that Herder was on their side. Scottish Presbyterians did not experience the same social and professional restrictions as English Dissenters, but some Scottish intellectuals and ministers in the Church of Scotland shared an interest in aspects of Herder's philosophy and theology.

A close examination of the earliest reviews in British literary journals until 1804, the year after the author's death, will show how and why Herder was adopted as a 'friend to rational piety' and how he was later rejected on political grounds by the Anglican establishment. By the time an English translation of the *Ideen zur Philosophie*

der Geschichte der Menschheit was published in 1800, readers of the *Monthly Review* had already been informed about Herder's work and ideas for over twenty years by way of announcements and reviews of the German publications which preceded the availability of English translations.⁶ The eighteenth-century journals had an encyclopaedic mission and they were not intended to entertain before being discarded, but to contribute to the accumulation of knowledge and the dissemination of new ideas. They are a good gauge of interest in German literature and philosophy at this time. I shall demonstrate how Herder's work was first received, usually in small fragments, sometimes manipulated by editorial misrepresentation, but often with an understanding of the symbiotic relationship between Herder's philosophical, political and religious thought that is missing from many later Anglophone accounts. Herder was engaged in European debates about the origin of language, cultural imperialism, slavery, religious toleration and the place of God in the modern world. These subjects also captured the attention of many Dissenters in Britain as they campaigned for their own rights in the heated aftermath of the French Revolution.

THE ORIGIN OF LANGUAGE AND THE MONTHLY REVIEW

Karl Guthke has highlighted the pioneering role of William Taylor of Norwich in introducing Herder to the British reader by way of four lengthy reviews in the *Monthly Review* between 1796 and 1798.⁷ By the time Taylor's first review of Herder's work appeared in 1796, however, readers of the *Monthly Review* would already have been acquainted with the name of Herder and some of his most important ideas thanks to the efforts of three other pioneers: Archibald Maclaine, Benjamin Sowden and Thomas Cogan, Taylor's predecessors at the *Monthly*. All three reviewers were or had been

ministers at the English Presbyterian Church in the Hague, where they had readier access to the Dutch and German publications that they were tasked with reviewing.⁸ They sent their reviews from the Netherlands to the editor Ralph Griffiths in London. The reviews in the *Monthly* were published anonymously and so readers would not have known the identity of the authors. According to Nangle's *Index of Contributions and Articles to the Monthly Review*, Archibald Maclaine wrote nearly all of the reviews of foreign literature that were published in the Appendix between 1775 and 1788, so there is good reason to surmise that the reviews of Herder's *Abhandlung über den Ursprung der Sprache*, which appeared in 1775 and 1784, were written by him.⁹ Maclaine was born in Ireland and studied at the University of Glasgow, where he attended Francis Hutcheson's lectures in the 1740s. Maclaine's English translation of Johann Lorenz von Mosheim's *Institutiones historiae ecclesiasticae antiquae et recentioris*, published in London in 1765, preceded and even inspired translations of Mosheim's important book on church history into German, French and Dutch.

The first discussion of Herder in the *Monthly Review* is a one-page summary of an account of Herder's prize-winning essay by the Historian of the Prussian Royal Academy included in the *Nouveaux mémoires de l'Académie royale des sciences et belles-lettres* for the year 1771, which was published in Berlin in 1773.¹⁰ The opening sentence takes the reader directly to the core of Herder's thesis about the human origin of language:

This learned man, after refuting the notion of those who consider the primitive language as the effect of a divine infusion, accounts for the origin of language by a mechanism merely animal, or, in other words, by combining the organical

structure of the body with the faculties of the mind that inhabits it, and the circumstances in which the being is placed, in whom this organization and these faculties are united.

Herder rejects the idea of a divine origin of language proposed by Süssmilch and the mind-body dualism of Descartes, and proposes instead the unity of ‘the organical structure of the body’ and all the ‘faculties of the mind’. The review explains how according to Herder the ‘first expressions of human passions, feelings and wants were made by inarticulate sounds (like those of animals).’ The author cites some of Herder’s examples of where humans and animals communicate with one another using ‘this primitive language’. The review does not explain how Herder differentiates this inarticulate language shared with animals from human language that is both the prerequisite for and a consequence of conscious reflection [*Besonnenheit*] or thought.¹¹

The question about the origin of language and the closely related question about the difference between humans and beasts were widely debated throughout Europe at this time and Herder’s contribution should be appreciated in this context. The Scottish philosopher and evolutionary theorist Lord Monboddo (1714–1799) was an important contributor to the international debate, and Herder, in fact, wrote an introduction to the German translation of Monboddo’s *Of the Origin and Progress of Language* (1774) in 1784.¹² The reviewer seizes the opportunity to mock Monboddo, ‘the Scotch philosopher, who is so fond of affinity and consanguinity with Ourang-Outangs’, alluding to his controversial views on human evolution. The review concludes with the assessment that Herder has ‘avoided forming any hypothesis of his own.’

Nine years later a more enthusiastic review appeared in the *Monthly Review*,

again probably from the pen of Maclaine.¹³ This time the author unreservedly recommends Herder's work and a new analysis in French of the *Abhandlung über den Ursprung der Sprache* by the Swiss philosopher Johann Bernhard Merian¹⁴:

This Analysis will be a valuable present to persons whose unacquaintance with the German language has prevented their perusing the masterly performance of the ingenious M. HERDER; and it must be as agreeable to M. HERDER, as it is lucky for the Public, that it has been undertaken by such an able and excellent hand. (499-500)

It was common at the end of the eighteenth century for German thought and literature to enter the consciousness of the British public via French. The first English translation of Goethe's *Werther*, for example, was made from a French translation.¹⁵ After reminding the reader of the 'weighty and most difficult problem' of the origin of language and the earlier review of 1775, the author continues:

We shall only observe, that the sketch of *Man*, exhibited in this Dissertation, is truly a Philosophical Master-piece. When M. Herder proves in the First Part, that man was formed with power, and impelled by necessity, to invent a language, his arguments in behalf of this opinion, drawn from our internal organization, as also from the analogy of languages in their elements, their contexture and their respective improvements, are ingenious, conclusive, and open, uncommon and interesting views of the powers and the operations of human nature. (500)

The author praises Herder's reasoned argument, empiricism and understanding of human nature. He explains that according to Herder, 'man is a thinking, active and free being, whose powers are developed progressively' and that 'the inevitable division of mankind into separate communities' has resulted in the development of different national languages. The author, sticking closely to Merian's account, is slightly disappointed that Herder did not explain in enough detail how this internal human language developed into 'an external language, i.e. to articulate sounds.' Despite an effusion of adjectives, it is a balanced account of Herder's achievement.

It is uncertain how many readers followed Maclaine's recommendation and obtained a copy of the *Mémoires* in order to acquaint themselves with the philosophy of Herder. The *Monthly Review* itself was the leading journal of the day and, although it was published in London, it was distributed to all corners of the country. The Universities of Glasgow, Edinburgh, St Andrews and Aberdeen, for example, all received copies, as did the English Dissenting academies and various provincial reading clubs and lending libraries.¹⁶ Extracts from the correspondence of James Macdonald published by Alexander Gillies show that Herder was read and discussed by members of the Scottish Presbyterian clergy and the Edinburgh literati such as Hugh Blair during the final decade of the eighteenth century, but further research is required in order to determine the real extent of reciprocity between Herder and the Scottish writers and thinkers that he admired.¹⁷ Insufficient knowledge of the German language and the absence of translations were certainly the greatest barriers to the reception of Herder.¹⁸ The availability of English reviews and French summaries, on the other hand, meant that interested British readers could discover some of Herder's ideas and something of the German dimension to the European debates of the age.

ON THE SPIRIT OF HEBREW POETRY AND ENGLISH DISSENT

In an article entitled 'Herder and America', M. D. Learned commented in 1904 on the awakening of interest in the writings of Herder in England at the end of the eighteenth century: 'Their spirit appealed more particularly to the advanced teachers of England, for it was stimulated alike by the whole rationalistic awakening of Germany in the eighteenth century, and by the free thought of England.'¹⁹ Rational Dissenters in particular endorsed the fearless questioning of religious dogmas and doctrines through the scientific analysis of the Bible. Herder's approach may not have been as scientific or as systematic as they would have liked, but he reached conclusions about the origin of miracles in imaginative human responses to real events, for example, that supported their own endeavour to separate the essence of religious truth from superstition and unnecessary rituals. One of Herder's most popular texts between 1789 and 1803 was *Vom Geist der ebräischen Poesie*. The book was introduced to the British reading public in 1789 by a lengthy nine-page review of the second German edition (Leipzig, 1787) by Benjamin Sowden in the *Monthly Review*.²⁰ An English translation of the second volume was published with the title *Oriental Dialogues* over a decade later.²¹ The author of the review recognises and succinctly summarises Herder's aim:

he frequently reminds his readers of the injustice, as well as the absurdity, of estimating the merits of Hebrew poetry, by a comparison with that of Greece and Rome; and of forcing it into a conformity with the regular productions of nations, and ages, more refined. To judge rightly concerning the Books of the Old Testament, we must go back to the age of the writers of them; we must

suppose ourselves in their circumstances; we must adopt their ideas; and view men and things in the light in which they surveyed them. This, our author observes, is the only way to catch the spirit of their poetry, and to comprehend the true meaning of their expressions. (642)

This historical approach combined with an imaginative leap into the minds of people of earlier ages is characteristic of all of Herder's literary criticism. It has also led critics such as Isaiah Berlin to position Herder as an opponent of the Enlightenment, whose proponents tended to judge other cultures and ages by contemporary European standards and tastes.²² It is certainly true that Herder opposed this dominant method of assessing literature against classical ideals, but he was also working within a tradition of Biblical scholarship already known in England and practised, for example, by Johann David Michaelis at Göttingen and Robert Lowth in Oxford. Herder moved beyond the dry academic approach of Robert Lowth in an attempt to recover the feelings, vision and imagination of the Ancient Hebrews. The British responded to Herder's Biblical scholarship with an awareness of and an interest in this wider trend.²³

Sowden warns the reader that 'in judging of the work before us, we must consider its writer, not as a *theological*, but as a *poetical* and *philosophical* critic', and that 'in a few instances, his explanations are founded rather on plausible conjectures, than on solid argument.' Nevertheless the author singles out Herder's treatment of the Book of Job for particular praise:

The exquisite taste, with which the author enters into the spirit of this admirable poem, the judicious and striking light, in which he considers and illustrates its

numerous beauties, his excellent observations on its design and tendency, the warm and liberal piety with which he seems inspired, together with his animated and pleasing style of composition, entitle him to a very high rank as a good critic, and an elegant writer. (644)

He explains how Herder believes that Job was an *Emir* and that the poem was composed ‘by some bard among his subjects, or perhaps one of his family, with a view to communicate instruction to mankind, by celebrating the virtues of his prince.’ Satan is introduced as a ‘minister of judgment’ rather than an ‘evil principle’, permitted by God to inflict suffering on Job in order ‘to convince him of the power and excellence of piety in beings inferior to himself.’ Piety and the adjective ‘pious’ are used again and again by the early British reviewers to describe the character of Herder himself. The author seems to value Herder’s personal ‘warm and liberal piety’ much more than the ‘manner’ in which he explains his ideas, which is not always ‘deemed very satisfactory’ (645). Sowden is particularly moved by Herder’s treatment of the friendship of David and Jonathan and this is one of the few passages which he translates and quotes directly from Herder:

But (adds he) when Jonathan died, and left the throne to David, what return did he make for all this disinterested friendship? –An elegy on his grave! An elegy, in which, however beautiful it may be, Saul and Jonathan are equally commemorated, as if they had equal claim on his heart. I know that this elegy was written for the people; but I wish it had been intended solely for Jonathan and for David, and not for Saul and for the people. (648)

The emphasis on personal relationships and heartfelt friendship in the Old Testament offers a key to understanding the ‘piety’ which Sowden so admired. This might be understood within the context of a move away from Calvinist doctrines towards a more liberal theology by English Presbyterians during the second half of the eighteenth century. Herder’s unorthodox interpretation of the Fall, for example, recounted by Sowden cautiously but approvingly, completely rules out the doctrine of original sin and the need for spiritual regeneration (645). Liberal English Presbyterians, many of whom became Unitarians towards the end of the century, put a greater emphasis on ‘practical religion’ and the pursuit of happiness in this life than their Puritan forebears. Herder was celebrated by British travellers to Weimar as a practical preacher and above all as a good husband, father and friend. The concept of piety was therefore not quite the same thing as introspective devotion. It meant something more like a practical application of religious feeling to instruct and to inspire benevolent deeds.²⁴ It was accompanied by a belief in a loving and benevolent Creator and this belief was shared by Herder.

DIALOGUES CONCERNING GOD

The theme of God was taken up by Thomas Cogan in 1792 in a review of Herder’s *Gott. Einige Gespräche* in the *Monthly Review*: ‘M. HERDER has ventured, in the treatise before us, to employ these eminent talents on the most sublime and the most incomprehensible of all subjects, *the nature of the Supreme Being!*’²⁵ By paying Herder the unusual compliment of ‘a friend to rational piety’, Cogan cleverly and indirectly associates Herder’s defence of Spinoza against charges of atheism with the cause of the English rational Dissenters, who like Spinoza in the seventeenth century

were also being accused of being materialists or atheists by some of the orthodox clergy:

He was deemed a *Pantheist*, a *Materialist*, and an *Atheist*; which terms, in those days, were considered as synonymous; and torrents of invective were poured out against him, both from the pulpit and the press, until the name of *Spinoza* excited the idea of a monster, whenever it was repeated. (548)

Herder's social standing in his own country was not comparable with that of Spinoza in seventeenth-century Holland or English Protestant Dissenters in his own age, who, although they were able to practise their religion in a limited fashion since the 1689 Act of Toleration, were not permitted to attend English universities, hold public offices or profess anti-Trinitarian beliefs. Herder was after all a Lutheran pastor and Court preacher with responsibility for organising the Protestant Church in Sachsen-Weimar. He was, however, feared by some as a liberal theologian and he had not been considered orthodox enough to be appointed Professor of Theology at the University of Göttingen in 1775-76. He was also very unhappy with the political state of affairs in Germany, which at this time was a series of feudal states which offered little opportunity for political participation, and he had, like some English Dissenters, initially welcomed the French Revolution.²⁶

Gott. Einige Gespräche (1787) has to be understood in the context of the 'pantheism controversy', sparked by Jacobi's charging the recently deceased Lessing with Spinozism and atheism. Following Mendelssohn, Herder came to the defence of Lessing in his own way, by exonerating Spinoza of the charge of atheism. The editors of

the *Monthly Review* must have thought that the British public would be interested in this controversy and it is interesting to think that they might have come to know something of it through this review, which stretched to eight long pages. Paraphrasing Herder, Cogan explains how ‘*Spinoza* has been judged and condemned, by numbers who have never applied to his original works.’ He then recounts how one of the characters in Herder’s dialogue, Theophron, explaining the circumstances of Spinoza’s life and his ideas to his friend Philolaus, ‘removes these vulgar prejudices’ (549). Particular attention is paid to the personal character of Spinoza:

This author has borne the most honourable testimony to the excellency of Spinoza’s private character, representing him as exemplary in every part of his conduct, and as uniting, to a mild disposition, the greatest firmness and probity in very tempting and critical situations.

Finally, the author explains the difficult task facing the reviewer of a complex philosophical work:

In abstruse and complicated speculations of a metaphysical nature, it is peculiarly difficult, if not impossible to do justice to an author, or to give competent ideas of his labours. These small rivulets, while they point out the tract to the source, may, however, afford a temporary refreshment. We must confess that we feel peculiar satisfaction in reviewing the work before us, from the discovery that an apparently formidable enemy to the cause of virtue and religion, was, in reality, their warmest friend: that instead of being a *reprobate*,

as ignorance and enthusiasm had depicted him, he was, in fact, a *chosen vessel*; and we trust that, in other theological inquiries, we shall become more cautious not to be hurried away by our prejudices, nor suffer ourselves to be deceived by empty names, which those, who *cannot* reason, give to those who *can*. (554)

Cogan places Herder, with Spinoza, on the side of reason and in opposition to ‘ignorance and enthusiasm’. The ignorant were the ‘Christian clergy’, whom Spinoza had treated ‘with too little ceremony’ (548) and ‘enthusiasm’ might also allude to the evangelical enthusiasts of Cogan’s own day.

Jonathan Israel has gone as far as to position Herder within the ‘radical Enlightenment’ which has its intellectual roots in Spinoza and the seventeenth-century Dutch Republic and also includes the English rational Dissenters Priestley, Price and Paine, and the German Lessing.²⁷ According to Israel, this ‘radical Enlightenment’ was in opposition to the dominant ‘moderate Enlightenment’, which was politically conservative and anti-reformist. It is tempting to see Cogan’s review of Herder’s account of Spinoza as a piece of evidence in support of Israel’s thesis. Israel’s thesis, however, is based on a materialist, anti-theological interpretation of Spinoza, which does not sit well with Herder’s view of Spinoza as a deeply religious thinker. Furthermore, regardless of his respect for other religions, his pluralism and his dislike of missionary work and unquestioned doctrines, Herder’s morality cannot be separated from his Christian faith.

Thomas Cogan was exposed to heterodox views at an early age at John Aikin’s school at Kibworth and he later studied and practised medicine in the Netherlands and in England. He was one of the founders of the Royal Humane Society, a society

originally established to promote resuscitation techniques in cases of near drowning. Although he closely identified with Unitarianism, Cogan was best known for his rejection of all doctrines and his uninhibited personal search for truth.²⁸ Herder too thought that everyone should be free to practise their own religion, follow their own conscience and search for their own truth. Cogan's review was published in the same year as the failure of the Unitarian Petition for the repeal of the Test and Corporation Acts in 1792.²⁹ In 1792 Unitarians appealed for the first time for universal toleration (including Catholics). Joseph Priestley, one of the intellectual leaders of English Unitarianism, had previously made a plea in 1768 for equal rights for all:

Whatever be the particular views of the numerous tribes of searchers after truth, under whatever denomination we may be ranked; whether we be called, or call ourselves christians, papists, protestants, dissenters, heretics, or even deists (for all are equal here, all are actuated by the same spirit, and all are engaged in the same cause) we stand in need of the same liberty of thinking, debating and publishing.³⁰

The English Unitarians, who held either Socinian or Arian beliefs (Socinians believe that Christ was merely a man, while Arians believe that he was less divine than God), might have found in Herder and Spinoza arguments for a universal toleration that went beyond the limited toleration granted by the 1689 Act of Toleration. Within this historical context, the enthusiastic reception of Herder's liberal defence of Spinoza's heterodoxy makes perfect sense, and it is particularly appropriate that his ideas were conveyed to England by way of the Netherlands.

WILLIAM TAYLOR OF NORWICH AND HERDER'S *HUMANITÄTSBRIEFE*

Sowden and Cogan ceased writing for the *Monthly Review* following the French occupation of the Netherlands in 1793, and responsibility for reviewing German literature passed to William Taylor of Norwich.³¹ Taylor was a prominent member of a Unitarian intellectual circle in Norwich and he had a good knowledge of the German language, gained from an extended stay in Germany during an educational tour of Europe in 1781–82. By 1793 Taylor had already translated Lessing's *Nathan der Weise* and Goethe's *Iphigenie auf Tauris* into English.³² In a late nineteenth-century study of William Taylor, Herzfeld proposes that Taylor chose to translate *Nathan der Weise* and *Iphigenie* because he was attracted by their philosophical content:

Deutlich zeigt es sich hier, wie fruchtbar der Aufenthalt in Deutschland für ihn geworden, wie völlig er den Grundgedanken der deutschen Kultur, das Prinzip des reinen Menschentums, der Duldung und Humanität in sich aufgenommen hatte.³³

It is therefore not surprising that Taylor would also be attracted to Herder's *Briefe zur Beförderung der Humanität*.³⁴ Taylor was the author of four substantial reviews of Herder's *Zerstreute Blätter* and *Briefe zur Beförderung der Humanität* which were published in the *Monthly Review* between 1796 and 1798.³⁵ Guthke has pointed out that Herder did not appeal at all to Taylor's 'klassizistisch-rationalistischen Geschmack'.³⁶ It is certainly clear that he was frustrated with some of the extravagances of Herder's style, yet he found much that interested him within both works. The rhapsodic and

fragmentary nature of Herder's writings, in fact, made them a particularly appropriate subject for treatment by the late-eighteenth-century reviewer, whose primary task was not to critique, but to give the reader a 'taste' as well as an overview of the work under consideration. Taylor interspersed his own criticism with a summary of the contents and passages translated from the German, which were carefully selected because he thought they would be of interest to the public.

Taylor's review of the *Humanitätsbriefe*, which extends to three issues of the *Monthly Review*, begins thus:

The LETTERS TO PROMOTE HUMANIZATION begin by noticing the luxurious sympathy, with which men of disinterested benevolence contemplate the improvement of individuals and societies in the power or disposition to be reciprocally useful; and by narrating the institution of a local society to forward such improvement, by collecting and diffusing all information favourable to the interests of human kind.³⁷

This is followed by a quotation from the book: 'It ought not to be our object to *angelize*, nor to *brutalize*, but to *humanize* man,' and this Taylor recognises as the recurring theme of Herder's correspondence. The review consists of a transcription of Herder's table of contents, interspersed with translated extracts and followed by a page and a half of criticism. It is therefore easy to see which 'letters' Taylor picked out for special attention and which he left out. The letter about Uriel Acosta is picked out. The author includes a lengthy extract from Herder's text recounting the circumstances of the persecuted philosopher's life, who was 'scornfully stripped in the public synagogue,

scourged, spit on, trodden under foot, and, unable to bear the pangs of an ignominious excommunication, finally gave to himself a voluntary death'. This is followed by a translation of Herder's heartfelt plea for universal religious toleration:

From my childhood, I have abhorred nothing so much as the persecution or personal insult of a man on account of his religion. Whom can that concern but himself and God? Who knows not of how difficult definition is the word Religion, when applied to internal persuasions and convictions? To one this phrase, to another that phrase, is internally painful. One cannot unlearn an early, another cannot learn a late impression. Yet on this varying something hang perhaps all our moral notions, all the more elastic springs of our actions, our very idea of perfect conduct. One sees doubt where another sees certainty: the black insect in his telescope eclipses the sun. How cruel then, how irrational, how useless, how inhuman, when a man, a legislature, a synagogue, assumes the province of issuing the sentence of persecution or damnation against the religion of another, were he negro or Hindoo! (522)

By highlighting the letter about Uriel Acosta and skipping over those on Franklin and the Philadelphia club, the author is perhaps showing his sympathy with the cause of religious toleration rather than political radicalism. Taylor had been a member of the short-lived Norwich 'Revolution Society', one of many revolutionary societies that were set up or revived in England in the immediate aftermath of the French Revolution. After the revolution turned to terror in 1792, however, many Dissenters tried to distance themselves from political radicalism because they felt that an association with

revolutionary ideas would turn the general public against their campaign for moderate political reform.

The author explains how Herder uses ‘*the word and idea, Humanity* [...] in a sense less akin to tenderness, and more allied to benevolence, than is customary with us.’ Benevolence was considered by some Unitarians such as Harriet Martineau to be the positive and socially useful outcome of personal piety. Benevolence would lead to kind actions and the betterment of human lives. In his equation of *Humanität* with benevolence, however, Taylor has not captured the full meaning of Herder’s concept. Herder’s concept of *Humanität* is notoriously difficult to define and Hans Adler notes that ‘scholars have conflated the concepts of philanthropy and *Humanität* – an equation that Herder explicitly was *not* aiming at.’³⁸ Philanthropy presupposes inequality and is not the same thing as benevolence of course, but the two do soon become connected in the nineteenth century, for example, with charities and ‘benevolent funds’.

Taylor does not attempt analyse Herder’s philosophical programme or intention, but this sort of analysis would not have been expected by eighteenth-century journal readers, whose anticipation was a guided tour of the work, which would allow them to judge it for themselves. In the conclusion of this first review, which takes the reader to the end of the sixth volume, Taylor expresses his reservations about Herder’s style, which he judges as unsuitable for philosophical inquiry:

In these miscellanies, M. HERDER displays a benevolent temper, considerable erudition, and much imagination. He thinks like a poet, vividly, and in metaphor; seldom like a philosopher, calmly and abstractly; he excels, therefore in decoration rather than in inquiry; and even his eloquence borders on excess. It

is studiously gorgeous, rarely neat, – the style of an energumen, not of a sage.
(523)

This is damning praise indeed. The reviewer judges Herder against a philosophy of abstract reasoning and inevitably finds him wanting.

In a continuation of the review of the *Humanitätsbriefe* in 1798, however, Taylor responded more favourably to Herder's tenth and final volume, which had been published in Germany in the intervening year:

It begins with an inquiry into the reciprocal influence of nations, and observes that hitherto they have rather injured than benefited each other; and that, if each nation had grown up in complete insulation, the progress of its culture would probably have been more rapid, and the phaenomena of its characteristics more peculiar and interesting.

Negro-Idyls next occur. Not the smooth painless incidents of Arcadian life adorn these affecting poems. The real miseries, which every year's slave-trade repeats on the African and American shores, are here written with the tear-dipt pen of humanity.³⁹

Taylor highlights Herder's humane opposition to slavery. Like many Dissenters, Taylor was concerned with the injustice of the slave trade abroad as well as political and religious injustices at home. Many Unitarians were actively involved in the British abolitionist movement, which was being led in the House of Commons by William Wilberforce. Presbyterians and Unitarians used their considerable influence in the

literary and publishing world to try to sway public opinion in favour of outlawing slavery. Taylor's friend and literary mentor, Anna Letitia Barbauld, for example, was the author of a poem, entitled, *Epistle to William Wilberforce on the Rejection of the Bill for Abolishing the Slave Trade*, which was published as a pamphlet by the Unitarian Joseph Johnson in 1791.⁴⁰ Like Herder, Barbauld denounced the cruelty of ripping human beings from their native land and forcing them to live in servitude in a country where they did not have cultural roots. Herder's 'Neger-Idyllen', which focused on the plight of black slaves in North America, must have reminded Taylor of his former teacher's distressed poetic response to the failure of the British parliamentary campaign.⁴¹ Herder introduced a note of hope into his poems, by acknowledging the humaneness of some white American opponents of slavery, in particular the Pennsylvanian Quakers. It is interesting to note that Taylor later argued that to abolish slavery immediately would be dangerous.⁴² Herder, although vehemently opposed to slavery, also thought that oppressed people would eventually rise up against their oppressors in violent acts of vengeance. It is probable that Herder's opinions about slavery contained in the *Humanitätsbriefe* and the *Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit* contributed to discussions about the topic in liberal Dissenting circles at the turn of the century.

Taylor concludes his review of the *Humanitätsbriefe* with the letters on the humanising potential of Christianity, of which he approves:

The two concluding letters discuss the merits of Christianity, and justly characterize it as deserving, above all others, the name of the humanizing religion. The innate maxim of the brutal or savage man is the selfish iniquitous

adage: “Every one for himself; nature for us all.” That of the humanized and the civilized, and in an especial manner the doctrine of Christianity is, “No one for himself: but each for all.” (497)

Taylor slightly misrepresents Herder’s conception of an uncorrupted form of Christianity. Herder strongly disapproved of cultural imperialism and of western Europeans trying to ‘civilise’ other peoples. He thought that some European imperialist countries were more barbaric and less humane than ‘uncivilised’ man. On the other hand, Herder’s privileging of the Christian religion over other religions is one of the apparent contradictions in his thought and one that scholars still grapple with today. William Taylor of Norwich recognised above all the potential humanising influence of literature and, by translating and reviewing Lessing, Goethe and Herder, he rearticulated for a British readership these German authors’ appeal for universal tolerance and compassion.

CHURCHILL’S TRANSLATION AND THE CONSERVATIVE BACKLASH

One of Herder’s most important philosophical and historical works, the *Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit*, was translated into English and published in London in 1800, allowing British readers, who had been informed about Herder by the *Monthly Review* for over twenty years, to finally access and assess his ideas for themselves. The *Ideen*, which were originally published in German in four volumes between 1784 and 1791, were published together in one large book, so English readers received Herder’s complete philosophy of the history of man at once. The work was translated by Thomas Churchill with the assistance of Johann Heinrich Füssli (Henry

Fuseli) and published by Joseph Johnson, a liberal Unitarian, who had also published the works of Joseph Priestley, Mary Wollstonecraft and many other well-known political, theological and scientific writers.⁴³ In the preface dated 15 November 1799, the translator gives a moving account of the physical and mental toil involved in translating Herder's 'words that burn' into English: 'many moments of bodily pain and mental anxiety has it sweetly beguiled; and while it has made my breast glow with the fervour of virtuous sentiment, I have almost felt myself the inhabitant of another world.'⁴⁴ The translator has evidently adopted Herder's own historical method of 'feeling one's way into' (sich einföhlen) other ages and cultures and applied this to Herder's own idiosyncratic mind and the resulting translation retains much of the spirit and liveliness of the original.

The availability of Herder's philosophical treatise in English translation must have worried the Anglican establishment, and its positive reception by journals closely associated with Dissenters triggered a fascinating literary conflict between the liberal and the conservative periodical press. This began with a largely favourable review in the *Critical Review* in September and October 1800.⁴⁵ The author of this review held some unusual views about the role of the translator, whom he criticises for not correcting some of Herder's errors, abridging the text in parts and including notes of 'discoveries made since the period of publication' (175). This demonstrates how unusual Churchill's unabridged translation was for the time and we would not be judging it so favourably today if the translator had met the expectations of this demanding reviewer. The reviewer responded to the *Ideen* as a work of religious inquiry:

The purest religion and the warmest benevolence breathe in every page; the best-informed mind will, in this work, add to its knowledge, and the most religious inquirer may, by the perusal, extend his views. Yet, in the philosophical part, we meet with many errors; and, as usual in assigning final causes, the author seems to us to have injured that of religion, which he wishes so sincerely to promote.

(3)

Anticipating an objection to the work on theological grounds, the author notes that some ‘rigid believers of verbal inspiration’ may be offended by Herder’s interpretation of the history of the Cainites and Sethites ‘as appellatives of shepherds and cultivators’, but ‘rational piety cannot object, and we will defy the most exact scrutiny to draw an atom of infidelity from the present work’(6). The reviewer discerns some differences between his own views and those of Herder, although both believe in the benevolence of a ‘superintending Providence’ (10). While Herder shows how ‘vice and wickedness triumph’ in the conflicts between ancient civilisations and looks forward to a future state of ‘civilisation and happiness’, when ‘destructive powers’ give way to ‘maintaining powers’, the reviewer believes that ‘virtue and religion’ are ‘really promoted in the struggle’. In an attempt to engage the attention of readers who may think that there are more immediate concerns in the present age than the study of the philosophy of the history of mankind, the author connects Herder’s history of peoples and cultures to contemporary political developments. He transcribes a long extract from Herder’s history of the Lombards, for example, because ‘their country will now perhaps assume a new and more permanent form under the name of the Cisalpine Republic’ (171) and Ancient Egypt is included because ‘Egypt has of late engaged much of our

attention' (8). There is perhaps a hint of republican sympathy in the speculation on the future of the French satellite republic in northern Italy.

A very negative review appeared in the conservative *British Critic* in February 1803. The author of this review maintains that Herder is 'not quite so obscure or so extravagant as Kant, yet he is sufficiently so, abundantly to disgust an English reader'.⁴⁶ The *British Critic* was one of two journals to become hostile towards German philosophy at the turn of the century and this can be accounted for by a fear of radicalism and republicanism in the aftermath of the French Revolution. The philosophy of Kant was considered to be particularly dangerous and this was usually interpreted as being more politically radical than it actually was.⁴⁷ From about 1798 there was a vicious press campaign by the British government against English Dissent and German philosophy alike and a new journal, the *Anti-Jacobin Review*, was set up in 1798 specifically to counter the Whig domination of the British periodical press, which had become a greater concern for the government since the beginning of the war with France. The *Anti-Jacobin Review* was determined to prove that there was a direct connection between religious Dissent, philosophical inquiry and political radicalism. Most Protestant Dissenters wanted to dissociate themselves from the political ideas which had inspired the French Revolution, but there was suspicion that their displays of patriotism were only a front and that foreign literature and philosophy, in particular 'the metaphysics of Germany', were fuelling a Unitarian attack on the established religion and threatening national security. The government and more conservative members of the Anglican clergy believed that Dissenters should be giving up their own demands for reform in favour of patriotic support of the British war effort.

A remarkable series of reviews of Churchill's translation appeared in the *Anti-Jacobin Review* in 1804, in response to a review in the *Monthly Review* from the previous August.⁴⁸ The author's purpose appears to have been to prove Herder's atheism and reveal his hatred for hereditary monarchy and organised government, thus exposing him as a Jacobin and an enemy of the British state. The *Monthly* reviewers, who neglected to expose the 'impiety' of Herder's thought in their article, are the joint subject of this written attack. In contrast to the reviews in the *Critical Review* and the *Monthly*, the author does not include very long extracts followed by a general appraisal, but intersperses short extracts from Churchill's translation with his own criticism and the result is more readable and entertaining than some of the more positive reviews. The author demonstrates a good knowledge of the subject and has clearly read the book in some detail in order to criticise it and expose some of Herder's factual errors and highlight contradictions in his argument. This is cleverly done and these reviews merit attention because they show how seriously the literary organs of the Anglican establishment considered the threat of German literature and ideas. In the first part of the review, the author directly associates the philosophy of Herder with that of Kant and the English Unitarian theologian, philosopher and scientist Joseph Priestley. The author is puzzled by Herder's 'arguments for the immortality of the human soul', which are 'completely enveloped in the *sublime* language of KANT':

He expressly declares that he agrees with "Priestley and others who have objected to the spiritualists, that no such thing as pure spirit is known in the universe; and that we by no means see far enough into the nature of matter, to

deny it the faculty of thinking, or other spiritual qualities.” Yet he repeatedly affirms that he is no materialist.⁴⁹

After ridiculing Herder’s idea of *Kräfte* or ‘organic powers’, which ‘had formerly animated inferior animals, and even vegetables,’ and castigating the *Monthly Review* for neglecting to comment on Herder’s ‘natural history’ as well as his ‘civil history’, the author concludes that ‘Herder’s system, as far as it is intelligible, is nothing else than the ancient PANTHEISM’.⁵⁰

Oriental Dialogues, an abridged and reordered English version of the first volume of *Vom Geist der ebräischen Poesie*, was published in 1801 and this received a similar amount of negative attention from the *Anti-Jacobin*, which went as far as to accuse the *Monthly Review* of engineering an ‘insidious attack on the religion of the British empire’ by giving the book a favourable review.⁵¹ It is hard to believe that the extensive reviews of Herder’s two English translations, which appeared in the *Anti-Jacobin Review* over a period of many months from 1802 to 1804, did not increase rather than diminish curiosity about Herder. The author offers the following explanation as to why he has devoted ‘so much time and labour’ to ‘the wild ravings of a disordered mind’:

We answer – because those ravings are combined with the greatest impiety; because they have been studiously kept out of sight by other journalists; and because the work which contains them has been so zealously pushed forward as to have already undergone two impressions. The reflection suggested by this circumstance is far from pleasing. Are the taste, the spirit, and the principles of

our countrymen so very depraved, as to admire whatever is imported from Germany, as to prefer the dull and impious absurdities of Herder to all that has been written in England on the philosophy of the history of man? ⁵²

To the Anglican establishment Herder was not so much a ‘friend to rational piety’ as an impious enemy. Unlike the rational Dissenters, they did not associate piety with fearless metaphysical inquiry, but with loyalty to the ‘religion of the British Empire’.⁵³

CONCLUSION

Reading Herder through the eyes of his eighteenth-century British reviewers offers us new perspectives on the unique place of his thought within European intellectual history. It also tells us much about the social and political context in which his ideas were received. Further research is required in order to determine the extent and nature of the influence of Herder’s ideas on theological, philosophical or political writers in Britain. The length of the reviews and the vehemence of the counterattack by the *Anti-Jacobin Review* suggest a significant impact, but it has been traditionally thought that the conservative backlash was so successful that the British lost interest in German literature and philosophy for a decade until the publication of Madame de Staël’s *De l’Allemagne* in 1813. It is time this opinion was challenged. A second edition of Thomas Churchill’s translation of the *Ideen* was published in 1803, suggesting that there was still a market for German philosophical books at the beginning of the new century. All of the principal late works including *Christliche Schriften*, *Metakritik*, *Kalligone* and *Adrastea* were reviewed by British journals. Herder also gained a new readership in North America after 1800 and some attention has been given to his

influence on the religious transformation that took place in the north-eastern United States in the 1820s.⁵⁴

I have described how Herder was first received by the British periodical press, which until about 1798 was dominated by liberal-leaning literary journals, which were generally open to literature and ideas from continental Europe. Herder was received most favourably by reviewers who identified with his unorthodox theology and liberal principles of universal toleration, humanitarianism and compassion. His proponents celebrated what they considered to be his personal qualities of ‘benevolence’ and ‘rational piety’. This meant the determination to apply only to one’s own conscience in matters of religion and this was seen by many Dissenters as a right that they had still to win in the eyes of the law. Herder’s philosophy offered intellectual arguments in support of the repeal of the Test and Corporation Acts, which prevented nonconformists from fully participating in public life. His unorthodox interpretations of the Old Testament coincided remarkably with a move towards rejecting Calvinist doctrines by English Presbyterians and Unitarians. The appreciation of his personal character by Unitarian Dissenters can only be understood within the context of a transformation of religious thought and the evolution of Unitarian worship from a concern with personal faith towards a more utilitarian view of the individual’s role within society. More sceptical reviewers such as William Taylor of Norwich thought that the impact of Herder’s philosophical ideas was diminished by his poetic style, excessive use of metaphor and frequent digression. Others celebrated his vivid, imaginative and novel interpretations of the Hebrew Scriptures, heralding a new way of engaging intuitively with ancient texts and cultures.

The qualities that made Herder's philosophy and theology so appealing to rational Dissenters were the same as those which made them distasteful to the Anglican establishment. The British government perceived a worrying connection between religious Dissent, political radicalism and the influence of German philosophy. It believed that political stability and an established Church were required at a time when Britain was engaged in an extended conflict with republican France and fighting to protect its African colonies. The *Anti-Jacobin* reviewers, usually representing the views of the government, feared and attacked Herder's liberal theology and spirit of free intellectual inquiry because it was seen to undermine the very principles upon which the union of Church and State was founded.

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Catherine Angerson, January 2016

1 Review of Herder's *Gott. Einige Gespräche*, *Monthly Review*, 7 (1792), 547-554 (547).

2 See, for example, Isaiah Berlin, 'Herder and the Enlightenment', in I. Berlin, *Vico and Herder: Two Studies in the History of Ideas*, London 1980, pp. 145-216.

3 V. Stockley, *German Literature as Known in England 1750-1830*, London 1929, p. 107.

4 René Wellek, *Immanuel Kant in England 1793-1838*, Princeton 1931; Giuseppe Micheli, *The Early Reception of Kant's Thought in England 1785-1805*, London 1999. There is no equivalent monograph on the reception of Herder, but a detailed summary of the early periodical reviews is included in Henri Tronchon's *Le Jeune Edgar Quinet*, Paris 1927. The first French translation of Herder's *Ideen* by Edgard Quinet (1827) was made from the English translation by Churchill (1800).

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- 23 John David Michaelis, *Introductory Lectures on the Sacred Books of the New Testament*, London 1761; Learned, p. 534.
- 24 See R. K. Webb, 'Rational Piety', *Enlightenment and Religion: Rational Dissent in eighteenth-century Britain*, ed. Knud Haakonssen, Cambridge 1996, pp. 287-311 (p. 308).
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