



# Literature Between Medicine and Religion: Herder's Aesthetics of Touch and the Emerging Field of Medical Humanities

Michael Mack

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## **Literature between Medicine and Religion: Herder's aesthetics of touch and the emerging field of Medical Humanities\***

**Abstract:** This article uses a reading of Herder's early essay *Sculpture* to locate Herder's place within the complex genealogies of thought regarding the mind-body problem. It analyses how Herder discusses sculpture and touch by combining an idealist with a materialist position. Herder theorizes sculpture in order to close the gap between mind and body as well as that between art and life. According to Danto, this non-dualist approach shapes much of the contemporary art scene.

### **1 Herder's intellectual journey from medicine to theology and philosophy**

This article discusses the pertinence of Johann Gottfried Herder (1744-1803) thought about art and religion for the conception of the emerging field of Medical Humanities. Medical Humanities is a discipline that is quite akin to Herder's interdisciplinary work in anthropology, medicine/health, theology, literary-and art criticism (see Evans and Macnaughton). As will be discussed in the following paragraphs, his work on sculpture, history, poetry and prose is intricately related to his theological thought. Part of the appeal of Herder's writing is that his theology is non-dogmatic and almost invisible: it is obscure, relying on the limited and dark sense of touch rather than on the all-compassing visions yielded by sight. Instead of touting creeds and other fideistic statement, Herder's theology almost unnoticeably emerges from his discussion of mundane and secular topics. His work on sculpture is thus informed by what one could call a "non-assertive theology" (as differentiated from dogmatic theology). In other words, it might be worth speaking of a "theological sensibility" rather than a systematic theology in the writing and thought of this Enlightenment, art and literary critic, poet, philologist, anthropologist, historian, philosopher and theologian.

By rejecting dogma and creed Herder offended the theological and also philosophical, medical-scientific orthodoxies of his time. In order to introduce this

exciting eighteenth century thinker to the reader, the following section will trace the young Herder's intellectual itinerary from medicine to theology and philosophy.

Herder was unorthodox because he denied the divine authorship of the Bible, believed that revelation was not a prerequisite of the Christian faith but was rather scattered throughout all religions. He moreover did not propound a systematic theology which advanced a Christology or offered a dogmatic conception of sin. As Clark has succinctly put it, "the simple truth is that Herder's religion at this time [i.e. ca. 1764] lacked two important doctrines common to most Christian creeds: (1) a systematic doctrine of the nature of sin, and (2) the doctrine of the vicarious sacrifice of Jesus Christ" (Clark, p. 211). Clark goes on to make clear that this state of affairs is by no means restricted to the year 1764: "although Herder was at no time an atheist or agnostic, he was likewise at no time after 1764 a believer in the majority of the doctrines of his church or any other" (Clark, p. 211). This unorthodoxy would certainly have found strong support in the Socinianism which informs Spinoza's writings on Jesus' political and social impact rather than on the doctrinal core of Christian instruction—be that original sin or redemption through crucifixion (see Clark, p. 211). Like Spinoza, Herder focuses on Jesus' humanity, on his *justitia* and on his *caritas*.<sup>i</sup>

Indeed when Herder gave Goethe a copy of Spinoza's *Ethics* he draws a parallel between Spinoza's and Jesus's respective teaching (see Bell, p. 98). Herder's theological work was scandalous, because it was radically non-dogmatic. The theologian Friedrich Wilhelm Kantzenbach has rightly emphasized Herder's heterodoxy. According to Kantzenbach Herder promotes the personal religion of Jesus which is quite different from the organized religion of Jesus Christ the redeemer (Kantzenbach, p. 104).

This is not to deny that Herder was a theologian and part of the Lutheran clergy. His understanding of humanity and its history diverges, however, from Christian dogmatic teaching. In order to better understand Herder's theological position, it is worth referring to David Jasper's distinction between Christendom and the heterodox or radical theology of the early Christianity of the desert fathers: "Only with the radical dissolution of Christendom and its aftermath in the West can the radical theology that has always been the theology of the desert begin to be articulated again in a language whose end is always silent" (Jasper, p. 162). Herder's theology finds its end in being silent and this nowhere more so than in his work as literary and art critic. The silent or non-assertive presence of religion within Herder's writing on art and literature is part of its potential appeal to contemporary theologians like Jasper who are sensitive to the presence of religion in what is apparently non-religious.

This article analyzes how Spinoza's medical conception of the mind as the idea of the body informs Herder's silent theology of embodied works of art (like sculpture). Spinoza is important because he relates the cerebral or spiritual (the mind) to the corporeal. Spinoza's view establishes an isomorphism between the two entities while at the same time not questioning their distinct identities. As the idea of the body, the mind is responsible for actions performed within the external and material world of embodiment. The mind does, however, also depend on the medicine-based well being of the body. According to Spinoza there is therefore not a hierarchical relation in which one commands the other. Rather the mind has to take care of the body and the body has to take care of the mind in order to ensure the preservation of the self (*conatus*). Spinoza did not only align the life of the mind with that of the body. He also established an invariable link between the equilibrium of the individual and that of the society to which he or she belongs. As Genevieve Lloyd has put it:

“The mind is the idea of a body which is what it is, and does what it does, by virtue of being part of wider wholes reaching up to the totality of the material world” (Lloyd, p. 96). The connection between the biological and the epistemological on the individual scale thus prepares the ground for the larger sphere of inter-subjective relations that connect the preservation of the self to the survival of the other.

In a highly idiosyncratic way Herder revised and, to an orthodox reader undermined, modern Christian thought along Spinozist lines. This non-dogmatic approach also informs the relationship between philosophy, medicine and theology in Herder’s thought. As Clark has pointed out, Herder’s theology is quite liberal compared to Kant’s theological focus on original sin and the old Adam: “Herder, the protestant theologian and church official, defends in his *Ideas* the idea that man is fundamentally good, spoiled only by over-refinement and specialization (which is a function of reason), while Kant, the liberal philosopher, defends the Protestant, Christian, orthodox view that man because of his lower impulses, is fundamentally evil and has to be saved by an outside agency from the misdirection of his powers”(Clark, p. 320). May there be a connection between Herder’s non-dogmatic theology and his critique of his former mentor, the idealist Kant? In his important book *Kant, Herder and the Birth of Anthropology* John H. Zammito has shown how Herder was in many ways much more open-minded than the critical Kant. Could Herder’s Spinozism have caused his intellectual clash with Kant? David Bell, for one, has argued that Herder’s critique of Kant derives from his Spinozism: “Herder’s sense of divine immanence and his naturalistic monism are diametrically opposed to Kant’s rigid dualism” (Bell, p. 143). Herder conceives of God and the world along Spinozist lines and in doing so he delineates the outlines of what I will later call an *immanent*

*alterity*. Here we find the extraordinary in the ordinary (as in the embodied appreciation of our surroundings via sculpture).

This Spinozist approach, however, was certain to offend Christian orthodoxy. Why did Herder risk causing offense? He was after all trained as a theologian and was thus aware of the scandalous nature of his theological arguments. So why did Herder consciously and conscientiously offend the religious establishment of his time? This question brings us to the reasons that motivated him to study theology in the first place. In contrast to other eighteenth century German thinkers with a protestant background —Friedrich Hölderlin is a famous example of an adolescent intellectual who was obliged to study theology with a view of earning a living as a pastor, (which he finally refused to become)— theological studies were not forced upon the young Herder.

In fact Herder began his University studies by reading medicine. It was his discomfort with his medical training that opened up his interest in theology. What precisely made Herder turn away from his initial scholarly pursuit? Medicine has a strong practical component and it might well have been this balance between practice and theory that attracted Herder in the first place. What alienated him from the desired practical pursuits of a medical doctor was the confrontation with death. In 1762, during the dissection undertaken by a Russian field doctor at the University of Königsberg, Herder passed out in horror. As Simon Richter has put it:

The sight of the dissected body was a painful *Reiz* for Herder; spontaneous contraction (*Zurückziehung*) occurred in the form of passing out. He became all body as his consciousness fled. Returning to consciousness, his repulsion for the body decided him once and for all for the study of theology and philosophy. Days later he began attending the lectures and seminars of Immanuel Kant (Richter, p. 106).

The dissection of the body lays bare its veiled but inherent decomposition. Becoming body uncannily instantiates a near death experience: the loss of consciousness seems to introduce the reign of corporeal life, which turns out to be death. On this view, Herder appears to subscribe to Descartes' mind-body divide. Rather than being the idea of the body, the mind escapes from the body's material entrapment in disease and decay: "What Herder is afraid of is the unavoidable presence of death in the material body. Once again confronted with the body, Herder passes out, and parts company altogether from the body, even as his own body slumps to the ground" (Richter, p. 127). Richter thus offers an intriguing account of Herder's confrontation with the medical body.

This is, however, only one part of his educational itinerary. True, confronted with the decayed body, as so forcefully presented in the dissection theatre, Herder abandoned his medical training and took up the study of theology and philosophy under Kant's generous mentorship. What attracted him immensely to the pre-critical Kant was independence of thought as well as the all-inclusive quest for truth. Even after having taken issue with Kantian transcendental philosophy, the mature Herder of the *Letters toward the Advancement of Humanity* praised Kant as an inspiring teacher: "no intrigue, no sect, no advantage, no nomenclatural ambition (*Namen-Ehrgeiz*) ever held out for him the least attraction (*Reiz*) compared to the expansion and enlightenment of truth. He encouraged and pleasantly extorted *independent thinking* (*Selbstdenken*); despotism was not part of his personality (*Gemüt*)" (Herder, 1991, p. 424). When Herder took issue with what he perceived to be the dogmatism of Kant's transcendental philosophy, he might well have believed himself to act according to the teachings of his former mentor. His critique of the post-1769 Kant thus enacted

the instructions of the pre-1769 Kant: namely, independent thinking and the non-exclusive quest for enlightenment.

Yet this enthusiastic search for truth opens up an abyss of lifelessness which in a perturbing way resembles Herder's traumatic experience in the dissection theatre. In 1764 Herder finished his theological and philosophical studies in Königsberg and left for the Baltic city Riga where he worked as a writer, priest and teacher. From this far off and rather marginal place Herder established himself as an outstanding German literary critic. Herder, the son of a lower class family, became a prominent public figure by dint of his work as a writer. Neither his lowly origins nor the marginality of the place in which he wrote dampens the appeal of his literary output. Here he is clearly the pupil of Kant: diffidence about his economic and class background does not deter him from gaining recognition of his intellectual achievements.

Why does Herder nevertheless feel uncomfortable as a writer? He enters a space that seems to be free of domination. Jürgen Habermas has famously called this space the "public sphere". Here different arguments compete for prominence on purely rational grounds, regardless of the social and economic status of its participants: "The 'domination' of the public, according to its own idea, was an order in which domination itself was dissolved; *veritas non auctoritas facit legem*" (Habermas, p. 82). On this view, the emerging eighteenth century public sphere subjects domination to the powers of reason. This explains why Herder could achieve public prominence through his *Fragments about New German Literature*. It does, however, not account for the widespread appeal of his work as a literary critic.

The fact that Herder developed his popular philosophy as a critic of art and literature seems to substantiate Habermas' thesis according to which the public sphere originates in the literary world and then expands into a wider political realm. A



Cartesian mind-body divide underlines, however, Habermas' evolutionary understanding of rationality. Jonathan M. Hess has recently questioned this opposition between the literary-representational body politic (which belongs to the age of absolutism) and the purely rational discourse of the fully developed bourgeois public sphere. Hess counters Habermas' argumentation by pointing out that the seventeenth and eighteenth century absolutism of the French and German monarchies "claimed its own form of political rationality" and that therefore the Habermasian separation between the rational, on the one hand, and, the body politic, on the other, was not historically water tight (Hess, p. 145).

Hess' critique of Habermas' understanding of the eighteenth century public sphere helps explain Herder's ambiguous attitude toward literature and art as self-enclosed entities set apart from embodiment—Herder is of course drawn to sculpture because it is a presentation rather than merely representation of the body. Due to his fascination with presentation, Herder was concerned that the world of letters, in particular, and of representation, in general, falls prey to paralysis. He feared that the world of letters would deaden rather than enliven its participants. In order to avoid the potentially paralyzing effect of artistic production and consumption Herder attempted to link the work of intellectual inquiry to the sphere of medicine and the body. In his work as art critic he attempted to connect the apparently irrational realm of the corporeal with the workings of the mind.

## **2. Touch or the outdoing of dualisms**

In *Sculpture*, in particular, Herder develops an aesthetics that differentiates itself from high levels of ideation. In some strands within the idealist tradition a gulf opens which separates both the body from the mind and ordinary inclinations from the sublime sphere of duty and reason (see Mack 2003). By abolishing these hierarchical

divides Herder's aesthetics is close to Arthur C. Danto's contemporary philosophy of art. From a historical perspective one could establish the link between Herder and Danto via Hegel. Herder was a major influence on Hegel. Danto's aesthetics, in turn, owes much to Hegel. Here I am not, however, concerned with historical itineraries but, instead, want to focus on the ways in which Herder shares with Danto's aesthetics the endeavor to "overcome two boundaries—the boundary between high art and popular art, on the one hand; and the boundary between objects that were works of art and ordinary objects that were parts of daily culture but had not, until then, ordinarily been thought in terms of art" (Danto, 2005, p. x). This is not to say that Herder is a pop art theorist. He of course contemplates not the installations of twentieth century artists but classical Greek sculpture. He approaches, however, classical Greek sculpture in a popular, non-high art way. Here sculpture is not the subject of art criticism but an opening toward a novel and more holistic understanding of human embodiment. His view of humanity is decisively egalitarian: he does not distinguish between artists and ordinary people; nor does he erect boundaries between children and grown ups: indeed as we will see soon, one of the starting points for his argument about touch and sculpture is the very ordinary setting of a nursery.

Clearly Herder theorizes sculpture via the common sense of touch and the common organ of the hand in order to close the gap between mind and body as well as that between art and life. As Danto has pointed out this non-dualistic approach shapes much of the contemporary art scene. Referring to Robert Rauschenberg's famous 1961 expression that the gap between art and life was to be overcome, Danto writes: " 'Overcoming the gap between art and life' had at once the ring of a metaphysical battle cry—like closing the gap between body and mind—and a political

slogan promising to abolish privilege.” (Danto, 2005, p. x. ) Herder was indeed one of the most radical of early democrats.<sup>ii</sup>

Sculpture seems to be a democratic art form: not only is it frequently dedicated to public places but it also tends to display what we all have in common: the body. Both Danto and Herder focus on embodiment and this appreciation of an embodied form of art leads them to an appraisal of sculpture as the most intriguing artistic genre. In this context it is important to point out that neither Herder nor Danto are materialists, at least not in a narrow sense in which Hobbes or Descartes could be labeled materialists. Herder certainly does not espouse a reduction of every form of life to material mechanisms (as found in Descartes’ mechanistic understanding of the body). On the contrary Herder allows for an idealism of sorts, one that is, like his philosophy and theology, non-assertive insofar as it does not privilege dogma, absolute truth, or spiritual existence over and above the fluidity and contingency of everyday, embodied life. Herder is to some extent an idealist because he is fascinated by the transformative power of ideas but the transformation in question here is not superimposed on the material sphere but rather emerges out of it. In the same way Herder’s theological sensibility is not opposed to the secular but rather grows out of an engagement with the mundane. Like Danto’s aesthetics, Herder’s aesthetics is concerned with both content/meaning and its embodiment. “An artwork must have content, that is, it must possess *aboutness*; and it must *embody* that content,” (Danto, 2001, p. 8) and it is this fusion of content and embodiment that Herder has in mind when he pleads for combining sight (focused on aboutness) and touch (focused on the body).

Most importantly, Herder erases the difference between the aesthetic and the ordinary, when he writes that each child learns by precisely fusing touching with

seeing. On the first few pages of *Sculpture*'s second section, Herder combines his interpretation of art with the advice to his readers to go into an everyday nursery:

Go into a nursery and see how the young child who is constantly gathering experience reaches out, grasping, lifting, weighing, touching, and measuring things with both hand and foot, thereby acquiring securely and confidently the most difficult but also the most primary and necessary concepts, such as body, shape, size, space, and distance. These concepts cannot be acquired by teaching or explanation, but only through experience, through exploring and trying things out for oneself. In a few moments the child learns more, and learns it more vividly, more truly and more powerfully, than ten thousand years of mere gaping and verbal explanations could provide. By continually combining his sense of sight with his sense of touch, allowing each to test, extend, enhance, and strengthen the other, he forms his first *judgments* (Herder, 2002, p.37).

The intellectual task of forming a judgment does not begin in the lofty settings of museums, lecture theatres or laboratories. Instead it originates in a basic nursery. Significantly the nursery has strong associations with nourishment and primary care. As such it is related to the corporeal sphere. Herder in fact focuses on the body in his discussion of sculpture. He celebrates sculpture as the most embodied art form. Art that is closest to Descartes' notion of extension (as opposed to Descartes' notion of thought) requires the most embodied aesthetic reception: that of touch.

We may perhaps better grasp Herder's theory of touch via Jean-Luc Nancy's recent discussion of body and thought. At first glance the notion 'theory' does not seem to be appropriate in this context, because Herder's thought is seemingly non-theoretical: he appears to distance himself from detached forms of contemplation and observation. Like Nancy, Herder attempts to immerse writing and thinking into what is embodied: "Writing is thinking addressed, thinking sent to the body, sent, that is, to the thing that displaces, estranges it" (Nancy, p. 19). Herder's idiosyncratic form of theory or writing retrieves, however, the ancient Greek term *thigēin* for touching. Apropos Gilles Deleuze's conception of contemplation without knowledge, Giorgio

Agamben has argued that “this contemplation without knowledge” at times recalls “the Greek conception of theory as not knowledge but touching (*thigēin*)” (Agamben, p. 233-234). Touch sends thought back to the body. This fusion of the thoughtful with what is embodied enables what I call an *immanent alterity*. My notion of *immanent alterity* is based on David Jasper’s theological understanding of a *coincidentia oppositorum* between the immanent and the transcendent, where both are independent while at same time forming a relationship of interdependence. As Jasper has put it: “It is a perfect coincidence of opposites—the transcendent utterly immanent, and the immanent perfectly transcendent” (Jasper, p. 148). This theological interaction between the immanent and the transcendent informs Herder’s aesthetics. The isomorphism of thought and touch characterizes Herder’s non-dogmatic approach towards both philosophy and theology. Thought as touch and touch as thought discovers the extraordinary at the heart of our ordinary immanent existence. This fusion of the thoughtful with the embodied is neither radically materialist nor radically idealist. Rather it resides within the gap dividing these two extremes and keeps crisscrossing their respective boundaries.

Agamben has called “absolute immanence” the tradition of which Deleuze’s philosophy partakes. Agamben distinguishes between the philosophical trajectory of immanence, which starts with Spinoza and then finds its culmination via Nietzsche in Deleuze and Foucault, and that of transcendence which encompasses Kant, Husserl, Levinas, Derrida. I would argue that Herder’s thought may be a beginning of a third philosophical tradition that touches upon the transcendent within the immanent without confusing or conflating one with the other. This tradition may well include Heidegger whom Agamben situates as the only exception to the rule between the two opposed camps of either transcendence or immanence. As has been intimated above,

Herder's philosophy of touch and immanent alterity could be read as a creative re-conception of Spinoza's ethical thought.

Coming back to Herder choosing not an art collection but a nursery as the starting point for his discussion of sculpture, it is significant that Spinoza's central notion of the *conatus* (self-preservation) has strong nursery-like or nutritive aspects. As Spinoza makes clear in his *Ethics* that the *conatus* (i.e. self-preservation) depends on "those things" which "are most useful to us" and "which can feed and maintain" us (Spinoza, p. 159). Thought that begins with the nursery and the nutritive enmeshes the ontological within the ethical; rather than opposing one with the other. Agamben has argued that "the most essential character of nutritive life is not simply growth but above all self-preservation;" and Agamben goes on to distinguish this Spinozist theory, which "brings the paradigm of the soul back to the lower scheme of nutritive life," from "the medico-philosophical", which "seeks carefully to distinguish the various faculties of the soul and to regulate human life according to the high canon of the life of the mind." (Agamben, p. 236). According to Herder we need to return to the nursery in order to retrieve a modern sense of classical sculpture. We need to grasp how we have come to be able to reflect upon ourselves and our habitat.

The artistic genre for such education is sculpture, because it is through sculpture that we come to perceive the world in an engaged manner (in a manner that is touching, as it were). Here sight and touch are truly combined. Herder clearly believes that classical sculpture is the 'nursery' of humanity. Herder does not, however, plead for a return to antiquity. According to Herder, the Greeks privileged the sense of touch, whereas moderns privilege sight. Herder argues for a 'modernist' combination of the two senses which would bring about true Enlightenment. Greek sculpture seems to be a nursery that is too one-sided, too much focused on touch:

touch, also requires modern sight. The Greek past is incomplete and so is the modern exclusion of the classical sense of touch. The following will discuss how Herder's historicism is part and parcel of his plea for a combination of both two seemingly opposed senses and two apparently self-exclusive epochs (that of Greek sculpture and that of modern philosophical sight)

### **3. The question of classicism and the importance of history**

Herder's historical consciousness makes him avoid a naïve belief in a possible retrieval of a classical past. He advocates not venerating the past but learning from its mistakes. Crucially, historiography compensates for humanity's instinctual shortcomings. The empirical data that the study of history provides bear an intriguing resemblance to the sensual complexities which are the subject matter of medical inquiry. Herder's philosophy of the factual does not, however, turn positivistic. The assembly of historical documents is not enough. Rather humanity has to learn from its mistakes in both the present and the past. What the animal does via sensual instinct, the human needs to perform via the reflective activity of cultural critique. Yet reflection does not operate in an ethereal realm. Rather its work relies on empirical data: on sculpture; sight and touch. This is why Herder calls reflection *Besonnenheit*.

The term *Besonnenheit* describes the mind's dependence on the senses. Herder deliberately uses this term, because it combines the bodily with the rational and the sensuous with the intellectual. When we encounter sculptures we are *besonnen*, because we combine the embodied (touch) with the rational (sight). Sight is the quick, detached, rational sense and touch is the more obscure, slow, incomplete and bodily sense. Herder's notion *Besonnenheit* indicates that thinking depends on the senses. This is exactly the overriding topic of *Sculpture*. Here Herder sets out to "transform his sight into touch, to make his *seeing* into a form of *touching*", so that we come to

realize that “*sight is but an abbreviated form of touch*” (Herder, 2002, p. 41). As he makes clear in the quote about the nursery (see above), this slow and incomplete form of seeing is also more truthful than a disembodied type of sight (that of a vision that is disconnected from touch and thus from bodily experience) even though it remains stuck in features of human imperfection: namely incompleteness and obscurity as the lack of a full or complete vision.

Related to his attempt in *Sculpture* to combine the rational with the embodied, the semantic field of Herder’s favorite notion *Besonnenheit* creates the stage for an immanent alterity where “oppositions cancel each other out” (Herder, 1991, p. 719). Herder’s notion *Besonnenheit* is Spinozist rather than merely a translation of Locke’s term “reflection”, because it depicts the workings of the mind as idea of the body: the corporal and the bodily lose their respective demarcations and as such they traverse back and forth between their respective centers of gravity. Herder’s term “*Besonnenheit*” certainly refers to Locke’s notion of reflection. Locke’s term does not, however, incorporate a reference to the senses and the body as does Herder’s *Besonnenheit*. Beiser sees *Besonnenheit* as merely a borrowing from Locke: “Borrowing a term from Locke, Herder sometimes calls reason ‘reflection’ (*Besonnenheit*). He chooses this term to refer to man’s characteristic self-consciousness” (Beiser, 1987, p. 134). Like his notion of ‘touch’ in his discussion of *Sculpture*, Herder’s term *Besonnenheit* is not merely cerebral. Herein consists *Besonnenheit*’s Spinozist slant: it is a word that does not exclude the senses but rather incorporates them.

Already in his *Journal of my Voyage in the Year 1769* Herder focuses on Spinoza’s understanding of the mind as the idea of the body. As with Spinoza, Herder stresses the interdependence of reflection and action. Extending and developing



Spinoza's critique of a Cartesian mind body dualism (see Mack, 2010), Herder advances a philosophy of the senses. He does so not only by taking issue with the predominance of the cerebral (sight) over the corporeal (touch) but also by excoriating a hierarchy of sensual perception. The mind interacts with the body in a way similar in which the senses interact amongst themselves:

Moreover we have to make use of all our senses. The sense of touch, for example is dormant in our time, and the eye takes its place, though often only very inadequately. [...] In general there is no axiom more noteworthy, and almost more often forgotten, than this: without the body, our mind will not function; if the senses are crippled, the mind is crippled too; if the senses are used vigorously and in proper measure, the mind, too, is invigorated (Herder, 1969, p. 83).<sup>iii</sup>

The parallelism of the expression "in action" or "in use" (*im Gebrauch*) gets lost in English translation. The mind cannot act without a body. Likewise corporal action (*Gebrauch*) invigorates cerebral activity. Herder thus emphasizes the interdependence of various bodily and mental performances (such as the interdependence of sight and touch). Without the sense of touch, human perception becomes impoverished. Here Herder implicitly introduces an historical aspect into Spinoza's critique of the mind/body dualism.

How does history enter into this philosophical topic? Through his historical approach Herder naturalizes human creations: they are not eternal; instead they participate in a natural process of decay. This is Herder's genetic approach (an approach which J. G. Fichte transforms into his science of knowing.): it de-eternalizes human achievements and it removes contemporary preferences and predilections from the central position they might otherwise occupy in the formation of judgments on the aesthetic value and moral accomplishment of a given product or character. In this context Beiser rightly emphasizes the naturalising approach of Herder's historical or

genetic method: “To understand human creations, Herder argues, we must resist the temptation to see them as eternal or anatural. Rather, we must regard them as products of human history” (Beiser, 1987, p. 142).

Around the time at which Herder embarked on his journey of 1769, he started work on his treatise *Sculpture*. Here he also develops his genetic approach when he discusses how the antique sense of touch made room for the philosophical sense of sight within modernity. As with poetry, sculpture belongs to a past that cannot replace the present. Herder argues that our relationship to Greek sculpture should be one of friendship rather than one of idolatry. As moderns we must be wary of submitting to an idolatrous and thus mindless worship of the past which would destroy our distinctive particularity: “We should treat them [i.e. Greek sculptures] as friends, not idols. Instead of subjugating ourselves to them, we should treat them, as the name suggests, as *exemplars* that present to us in bodily form the truth of ancient times, making us aware of the proximity and distance between their form of life and our own” (Herder, 2002, p. 61). The study of what has been forgotten establishes both proximity and distance. The sense of touch as understood by the Greeks belongs to a distant age. In the excerpt quoted above, Herder appreciates the cognitive value of this neglected sense. He does not, however, advocate an imitation of its classical connotation. Neither does he plead for a repetition of Greek sculpture within modernity. Instead he modernizes our understanding of touch so that it incorporates—rather opposes or excludes—the more modern rational sense of sight.

The tactile sense has been marginalized due to the progression made by the non-tactile rational sciences (philosophy is a case in point). Herder, however, argues that the senses are not distinct from reason. Following Spinoza, he perceives of the mind as the idea of the body and this is why reason reasons about the senses.

Reflection is this form of reasoning: it is precisely what Herder's notion *Besonnenheit* denotes. As Howard Caygill has pointed out, Herder develops an all-inclusive notion of reflection, one that embraces the lowly faculty of touch: "In place of discrete faculties or capacities for thinking, willing, and language, Herder proposes a totality of human powers which structures itself through 'reflection'" (Caygill, p. 177). In order to present an accurate account of reflection, Herder has to attend to the intellectual powers of a haptic perception. From the inception of the age of philosophical inquiry onwards, which according to Herder is one-sidedly based on the sense of sight, the capacity of touch has been marginalized and almost completely forgotten. By retrieving this lost sense, Herder in fact revolutionizes the emerging 'modern' discipline of aesthetics: "Instead of reducing aesthetics to taste (*Geschmack*) by legislating judgement, Herder emphasizes the productive discrimination of *tasten*. He points to an alignment of beauty, production, and autonomy in the production of proportion which synthesized a view of beauty as embodiment with a notion of culture as the self-cultivation of freedom through reflective judgement. With this position, the epoch of beauty and the police-state is theoretically superseded" (Caygill, p. 183). In this quote Caygill delineates the groundbreaking effect of Herder's fascination with an almost forgotten relic of the past: with the sense of touch which modern society has deemed insignificant. Caygill clearly shows how this transformation of aesthetics has important political ramifications: by dissolving the divide between the cerebral and the corporal, Herder also undermines the hierarchical societal structure that has been advocated by German political theorists of the police state from Samuel Pufendorf (1632-94) to Christian Wolff (1679-1754).

In this way the retrieval of the lost sense of touch has the capacity to revolutionize modern aesthetics as well as politics. Herder's historical imagination is

therefore not of antiquarian interest only. By dint of the historical imagination, the distant past can be rendered relevant for an accurate understanding of contemporary concerns. As long as this proximity does not destroy an awareness of the present the so conceived closeness of the past still remains distant. Herder establishes a fine balance between the ancients and the moderns as well as between the corporeal and the cerebral. He thus does not play off touch against eyesight. Rather, he argues for a combination of both senses (as well as for the non-exclusion of the moderns by the ancients and vice versa), which in turn would enhance rather diminish the life of the mind. Like Greek antiquity the sense of touch belongs to a pre-modern age that is analogous to the ontogenetic stage of childhood. A return to antiquity is thus a return to the nursery. The difference between child and adulthood might indicate the construction of a hierarchy in which one is inferior to the other. This is, however, not Herder's point. Rather he wants to bring about the anamnesis of that which has been forgotten and repressed (Inka Mülder-Bach, p.360). In a way similar to which the divergence between body and mind establishes their mutual interdependence, the present cannot properly function without being cognizant of the past.

Herder neither devalues natural or historical data that constitute the empirical body of knowledge. In his *Journal of my Voyage in the Year 1769*, however, he dismisses as romantic any belief in the immediacy of the past:

In every age—though in each in a different way—the human race has had happiness as its objective; we in our own times are misled if, like Rousseau, we extol ages which no longer, exist and never did exist, if we make ourselves miserable by painting romantic pictures of these ages to the disparagement of our own, instead of finding enjoyment in the present. Seek then even in biblical times only that religion and virtue, those examples, those forms of happiness, which are appropriate to us: become a preacher of virtue *of your age!* (Herder, 1969, p. 89)

Herder anticipates Nietzsche's critique of historicism in the essay "The Uses and Abuses of History" that is part of the book *Untimely Observations* (1873-76). Crucially, Herder advances this analysis while questioning Rousseau's one-sided depiction of the 'noble savage'. This assessment of premodern culture constructs a radical divide between past and present. While acknowledging the difference between the bygone and the contemporary, Herder attempts to save what has passed from being forgotten and dead. He does not advocate an uncritical study of history. Rather, he tries to focus on those elements which are relevant for problem solving in the present. In this way the study of history (Greek sculpture that privileges touch) always already requires the mediation of the present (the modern dominance of sight over touch). Contrary to the common perception of Herder as a romantic, he in fact clearly articulates that humanity cannot find enjoyment in an immediate manner. The senses depend on the reflection of the mind (sight or philosophy) in the same way as the reflection of the mind depends on the work of the senses (touch and embodiment). Sustainable enjoyment can only be attained through the interaction between these two disparate faculties.

The study of both natural and human history thus enables survival of the senses within the here and now. In his *Essay on the Origin of Language* Herder dialectically affirms that the present incorporates the non-presence of the past. In the same way as it cannot immediately live in the sensory realm of the body alone, humanity equally cannot do without the reflection on its history, if it wants to survive within the present. Like Spinoza, Herder is concerned not with ideals but with the immanence and the physicality of the *conatus*. Here, however, life's ongoing self-preservation (*conatus*) pertains not only to the materiality of nature but also to the

remnants of the human past (Greek Sculpture). The past represents a cynosure by which humanity can orient itself on its journey into the future.

#### **4 Thinking as Touching**

What is crucial here is that Herder not only attempts to excavate a rather neglected sense (touch) but that he argues that without this rather marginalized faculty we would be unable to mature intellectually. In a highly ironic and brilliant move Herder argues that without touch we would not be able to see. Herder reverses Denis Diderot's question (in his *Letter on the Blind*) "What can the blind perceive without the use of touch" by asking "What could the sighted perceive without the use of touch?" (Gaiger, p. 15). His reply is quite clear: the sighted are blinder than the blind when they too much trust their eyes. The exclusive reliance on eyesight is not to be trusted, because our sense of sight depends on light. This becomes amply clear in the dark when we have to rely on touching things in order to orient ourselves. Sight, Herder argues, only provides us with the shadow or contours of things, whereas touch uncovers the obscure but solid truth of our embodied world.

By interpreting light and sight not so much as agents of Enlightenment but, on the contrary, by associating the sunlight and what it enables, namely eyesight, with shadows of the truth, Herder implicitly reverses Plato's famous parable where the inhabitants of the cave are separated from the real sunlight by the walls of the cave and thus only see darkly shadows rather than the truth itself. Herder not only reverses Denis Diderot (as has been pointed out by Jason Gaiger in the quote above), and Plato but also the godfather of modern scientific reason, Descartes. Qualifying Descartes's privileging of the mind over and above the body, Herder advances a novel account of humanity's uniqueness. Humanity distinguishes itself from other animals not only through its rational capacity but equally through a physiological one: that of touching

the embodied world with its hands (later on, namely in the *Ideas*, Herder defines humanity's uniqueness as not only based in its mental capacities but also in its physiology when he says that what is singular about humans is not its reasoning as such but its upright position). Countering the strong ideational tendencies in Plato and Descartes, Herder argues that we are only capable of conceiving ideas because we are capable of touching bodies with our hands:

The light that strikes my eye can no more give me access to concepts such as solidity, hardness, softness, smoothness, form, shape, or volume than my mind can generate embodied, living concepts of independent thinking. Birds, horses, and fish do not possess these concepts. Only human beings have them, because alongside reason we possess a hand that can feel and grasp. If we did not have this, if we had no means by which we could confirm the existence of a body for ourselves through our own bodily feeling, we could only infer and guess and dream and fabricate, and we could know nothing for certain. (Herder, 2002, p. 36)

The mind as self-enclosed entity is liable to fall prey to a world of dreams and fabrications that distort rather than grasp the world (this is of course the very subject matter of the pre-critical Kant's brilliant *Dreams of a Ghost Seer* of 1766—roughly the time during which Herder composed *Sculpture*). In order to form concepts by which we can orient ourselves in the world we need to traverse back and forth between the cerebral and the bodily. The certainty for which Cartesian rationalism strives can ironically only be attained by abandoning Descartes's mind-body divide. Sculpture is the genre which helps coordinate our cerebral capacities with the tangible sphere of touch and embodiment. According to Herder sculpture demands of us an endless journey from mind to body and vice versa.

This mobility characterizes sculpture's modernity. Unlike a more pre-modern, exclusive reliance on touch, Herder's philosophy of touch does not diminish or belittle the importance of rational detachment. As we have seen, Herder advocates a fusion of both sight and touch. This interdependence of the senses—which his

analysis of sculpture illuminates—runs parallel to his dialogical approach toward historical and cultural diversity. The incomplete state of our capacities as well as their diversity requires a mobility that traverses fields of strengths which seem to be disconnected from each other. According to Herder, we—being constituted by diverse mental and bodily abilities—are, however, all interconnected in so far as we share one common creator—however different our conceptions of this creator-God are (be it Muslim, Jew, Christian, Hindu etc.). By interconnecting sight and touch, medicine and the humanities as well as the ancient and the modern, sculpture outdoes various dualities and thus holds out the promise of not only a co-existence but, more importantly, a mutual preservation of what is diverse.

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\* This article is related to but separate from the discussion about the hidden Enlightenment of diversity as advanced in my forthcoming book *Spinoza and the Specters of Modernity: the hidden Enlightenment of Diversity from Spinoza to Freud*, (New York: Continuum, 2010).

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<sup>i</sup> I am grateful to Jonathan Israel for an illuminating conversation about Spinoza's fascination with Jesus's *justitia* and *caritas*.

<sup>ii</sup> For a discussion of this point see Beiser, 1992, pp. 189-221.

<sup>iii</sup> "Zweitens. Alle seine Sinne zu gebrauchen. Das Gefühl z E. schläft bei uns ein, und das Auge vertritt, obgleich manchmal nur sehr unrecht, seine Stelle.[...] Ueberhaupt ist kein Satz merkwürdiger und fast vergessener, als: ohne Körper ist unsere Seele im Gebrauch nichts: mit gelähmten Sinnen ist sie selbst gelähmt: mit muntern proportionierten Gebrauch aller Sinne ist sie selbst munter und lebendig "(Herder, 1983, p. 143).