

PART I

The Ontology Project

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1. Folk Song at the Beginnings of National History

Essay on *Alte Volkslieder* (1774)

Philip V. Bohlman

Wen sangen die Deutschen? / Whom did the Germans sing?

—JOHANN GOTTFRIED HERDER, *Von Ähnlichkeit*

In the beginning there were folk songs. Starting from the preface to the first of its four books, Johann Gottfried Herder's *Alte Volkslieder* (Ancient Folk Songs) possesses the character of Torah, a set of law-giving principles for hearing a nation's past and present in song. From the beginning, Herder makes the conditions of his search for "old folk songs" clear. Though beginning at least as early as the formative era of a German culture with Charlemagne, the search for songs with German character remains inchoate. It lags behind the histories of song in other peoples, those whose identity largely depends on language and culture, as well as those for whom language provides the basis for a national, political identity. Herder's admiration for the English notwithstanding, the *Alte Volkslieder* is a call to action: the old folk songs of all peoples deserve to be gathered. Together, they should be compared to understand both the distinctive character of individual peoples—and nations—as well as the universal wellspring of culture they have in common. They should be afforded a place in the present so that the character of their origins can be translated and transformed to shape the future. Herder's folk song project, at its own beginnings in 1774, becomes a bold response to this call to action.

With the *Alte Volkslieder* we find ourselves in the midst of Herder's first laboratory. He approaches song as complex empirical material, adapted for experimentation, allowing him to locate folk song in history, hence establishing several levels of narrative meaning. Herder gathers songs as fragments, particularly because of the ways they might be fitted together in different, even unexpected ways, above all at the crossroads between story and history at which identity, especially national identity, itself still inchoate in the waning Enlightenment, is forming.

The tools with which Herder approaches experimentation in *Alte Volkslieder* include the following: 1) an anthology consisting of four volumes

in which folk songs from different peoples coalesce as common historical discourses; 2) the transition from oral to written tradition, with all the theoretical issues that determine that transition (e.g., translation, the core question in the second book, in “Would Shakespeare Be Untranslatable?”); 3) comparisons of texts and historical contexts, the most striking of which reflect Herder’s positions on the relation of language to nation; 4) classification and categorization, which establish genre and social function; 5) translation as critical for integrating songs into the history of Germany; 6) writing with fragments, no less than including songs as fragments, often deliberately retaining their jagged edges.

Like its contents, *Alte Volkslieder* appeared in a publication project that was in many ways fragmentary. Each of the four books begins with a substantial introductory essay, which, however, stands on its own. The introductory essay was to be followed by a modest section of song texts. Herder refers to these as “the planned collection” (JGHW3, 12), and he lists most songs in that collection quite specifically, by song title or genre. There are fifteen songs each for the first two books, twelve and thirteen for the third and fourth books. The songs, which were left in manuscript form, both do and do not illustrate the specific theme of the introductory essay. The songs that would have followed pick up some themes from the introductions—some songs in the third book exemplify the similarity between English and German—but others deliberately expand the theme to broaden the foundations on which Herder’s folk song project is taking shape. The “Nordic songs” of the fourth book, which Herder takes to propose a way of “approaching the songs of foreign peoples,” thus provide a critical framework for a more fully developed theory of music and the nation.

The reasons that the different parts—complete introductory essays, songs left in fragmentary manuscripts—did not appear in a single publication in 1774 or soon thereafter are not entirely clear. Publication in fragments, as in chapter 4 on Ossian in the present book, was not uncommon in the eighteenth century, especially for anthologies of literary and musical works from the past (see also chapter 8 on *El Cid* in the present book). The serial publication of books, too, was widespread in the late eighteenth century, especially for publications meant to reach a broad readership. The folk song volumes of 1778 and 1779 (see chapter 2), for example, appeared serially, and then were gathered as two larger volumes (*Volkslieder* [Folk Songs] in the first edition, and *Stimmen der Völker in Liedern* [Voices of the People in Song] in the 1807 posthumous edition). The fragmentary nature of the sections of *Alte Volkslieder*, it follows, does not itself serve as evidence that Herder left this initial stage of his folk song project

unfinished. Quite the contrary, the themes and songs of the four books coalesce as an increasingly focused discourse, which Herder will sustain through the folk song project of the 1770s, and throughout the writings on music in the course of his life. Both "Edward" and "Die Jüdin," for example, were to appear in the first book, even as both would assume an important position in Herder's later collections (see Bohlman 1992, 2010b).

The question of an anthology as itself providing the cultural and historical gathering point of folk song is particularly important to consider in the discourse that *Alte Volkslieder* sets in motion. There are important Enlightenment issues at work in the collection of linguistic and historical artifacts as an anthology (e.g., Denis Diderot's *Encyclopédie*). Anthology also represents a form of ontology, and this goal of the anthology would guide Herder throughout his life. Critically important for the ways folk song enters the history of ideas, *Alte Volkslieder* provides the first model for collection and anthology, which would thereafter come to underlie the entire history of folk song at one of its most critical moments, the passage from the eighteenth to the nineteenth century. Herder recognized that the anthology was a way of transforming the differences of oral tradition into the commonalities of written tradition. A folk song anthology realizes the nation by affording a presence for national language in a shared repertory. German ballads, given such an important position in book three, for example, emerged as a genre for German literary and folklore scholars, in which the texts were only in High German.

The four books of *Alte Volkslieder* are in most ways independent, each with a distinct theme of its own, but they are also linked in many ways, especially in how they move from the more universal nature of folk song to its national characteristics. Book one has no title as such, but in the "planned contents" for the book Herder refers to it as "English and German." Herder's language describing song and the nation is particularly rich with metaphors in the first book, and he uses this language to lay the groundwork for a historical understanding of folk song that grows from the soil of the past. Book two ("Songs from Shakespeare") is the best known of the four books in *Alte Volkslieder* because the introductory essay ("Wäre Shakespear unübersetzbar?") has found its way into many different areas of Herder studies. From a modern perspective, there is little in the book about folk song, for it largely contains translations of well-known passages from Shakespeare, as often without reference to song and music as with such connections. The focus of the book really is translation, and with that focus Herder locates his own critical work as a translator at the center of his musical, theological, and philosophical work.

With book three (“Englisch und Deutsch”) Herder turns to the specific question of *Ähnlichkeit* (similarity). His point of departure, as evident in the title, is the linguistic similarity between English and German throughout their long histories as European literary languages. To illustrate this similarity he turns to the musical and literary genre of the ballad, signaling the establishment of narrative genres—ballad and epic—as the most broadly historical European folk song practices. Finally, with book four, “Nordische Lieder” (Nordic Songs), Herder trains the focus of *Alte Volkslieder* on music and the nation. The book is both historical and comparative, allowing Herder to move from Greek music and poesy to that of the Nordic peoples, which he claims to be more natural and hence more expressive of their way of life. Herder reaches an important conclusion about the comparison of differences that establish the cultural (and musical) integrity of what he increasingly refers to as the nation.

Herder’s aim in the fourth book of *Alte Volkslieder* is to sketch a method that will allow song to provide a means of understanding cultures that contrast with the culture of enlightened selfness shared by his readers. In the course of the essay, he designates the people inhabiting these cultures with four different terms: *fremd* (literally, foreign), *unpoliticirte* (literally, without political organization), *wild* (primitive), and *Natur-* (literally, living in nature, glossed a century later in comparative musicology as “primitive”). In the most general sense Herder uses these terms interchangeably, intending even to convey a sense of difference and nuance in the cultural otherness that is the subject of the essay. There are instances also in which he incorporates history into his descriptions, recognizing the ways in which language, “ways of thinking,” and songs represent processes of development. Peoples that are primitive (“wild” or “Natur-”) display a cultural distinctiveness endowed by nature; those who have embarked upon paths of historical development (“fremd” or “unpoliticirt”) have shaped their own distinctive traditions, for example, of songs.

Herder also employs several terms for describing the societies or cultures in which other peoples live: *Volk* (literally, people) and *Nation* (literally, nation). At this point in his anthropological thought, however, Herder is not trying to make the distinctions that would increasingly emerge in his later writings and then in the nineteenth century. Already in 1774, Herder recognizes and evokes a distinction between peoples who are not politically organized (“Volk”) and those with a political identity determined by geography and language (“Nation”). The slippage within this distinction begins to give way to a more specific concept of culture and nation already in the fourth book of *Alte Volkslieder*, not least reflecting Herder’s growing assertion that folk song forged a common space between *Volk* and *Nation*.

In 1774 Herder's terminology for otherness, however, remains unspecific and uneven, and my translations do not try to ascribe more accuracy than I believe Herder himself would have understood. It is clear, nonetheless, that Herder's sense of otherness increasingly bears witness to cultural encounter, with its concomitant contrast of self and other. In the fourth book of *Alte Volkslieder* he accounts for the encounters of both missionaries and academics, in both cases describing a goal that privileges sameness rather than tolerates difference. The vocabulary that we witness taking shape in 1774, therefore, reveals the increasingly complex anthropological perspectives that are developing around his writings about folk song.

Throughout the course of the four books Herder considers two different issues about the historical origins of folk song, particularly as these pertain to the nation: 1) Why does early song demonstrate the Germans to be different—indeed, more impoverished in their cultural history? We see here a concern with origins influenced by monogenesis, culture and history arising from a single origin. Herder's response to this question in the early books looks primarily at issues of self—German-ness as a measure of his relation to the reader—albeit in comparison with others (e.g., the question of Shakespeare's translatability). And 2) the question of similarity (*Ähnlichkeit* in book three) reflects an Enlightenment understanding of polygenesis, culture and history arising from multiple origins, and in *Alte Volkslieder* it shifts the discourse on folk song toward difference ("Lieder fremder Völker" [Songs of Foreign Peoples], in book four, translated below). *Alte Volkslieder* closes, therefore, by reflecting on otherness, concluding with an affirmation also of the selfness of each nation and its songs. Therein lies the beginning of the modern study of folk song and world music.

From *Alte Volkslieder* / *Ancient Folk Songs*

JOHANN GOTTFRIED HERDER,
TRANSLATED BY PHILIP V. BOHLMAN

FIRST BOOK

All those whom I need to thank
should still let themselves be known.
The man who is pleased by everything
will never hear my book. . . .
One cannot raise an individual to feeling
whom God has not already ordained,
he would be more useful than am I.

—Preface to *Sachsenspiegel*

Preface

1. There could hardly be a more patriotic wish than to gather the bards that *Charlemagne* had gathered.^a What a treasure for the German language, poetry, customs, thought, and the awareness of the past this could be, if it only would not always remain just a *desire*! There was once a time when the latest news about the presence of these pieces was made so easy, because

a. [JGH] “He had made German songs from the ancient heroes of the Germans, gathering them together in a book, and many of these he set himself so that they would be remembered. Most of these, however, have been lost, so that some of them are no longer authentic, as if they had entered the women’s chamber, where the women used them as they wished to while the time away.” Lindenbrug’s *Chronik Karls*, 1593. [PVB] Herder is most likely referring here to Erpold Lindenbrug, *Scriptores rerum Germanicarum septentrionalium* (Hamburg: C. Liebe, 1706).

they were there for the taking. And now, when they are so much desired, praised, sung, and wanting for models to imitate, where are they?

I think it only right that if enough of these sought-after treasures of the fatherland could be located, they would still hardly provide us with *folk and patriotic songs* in the strictest sense. One need but look at the *Schilter* collection from the late Carolingian era to know that the language at the very least leaves no doubt. Even the grammar of the German language has changed so much over the course of many centuries that it would be all the same if we were reading poems from the old French Romanesque poets or those in German. We are always concerned about the *magical form* of previous eras, *mirrored by the scholars and through the quotations from antiquity*. These are not *folk songs of our own time*! One knows just how much the most curious readers fail to understand in the research, clarity, and artistry in this way. If they could but experience more directly with the senses, they would acquire the potential to *see with the eyes and understand with the heart*. They would know that what *touches the people* is the most important. Just as *Ulphila's evangelists*^b could stir no wonder when only present in the church, so too there remains little from the *bards and their circle*. We are left only to make judgments from whatever hearsay survives, or, more maddening, might we expect something else! . . . Nothing less than an *Ossian*.

"Why not?" The most probable *answer* to this question has no place here. The word itself remains the *crux of the problem*.

2. The fortune, whereby the old can be transformed into something new that ultimately moves us the most, had already been granted to us in the second, bright period of German poetry: the *poets of the Swabian times*. This was not brighter than the source itself, except the tales of the *minnesingers*, who were the first to express *humor*, as well as some other sagas *still around*, retained from the Old German bards. They inherited the poetry as it appeared in the Codex Manesse.^c Who is able, from all times and places, to claim that, in a *single moment* and at *very little expense*, such a *treasure trove* of *language, poetry, delightful customs, morals, and light shed on the*

b. [PVB] Herder is probably referring here to Georg Friedrich Heupel, *Dissertati historico-philologica de Ulphila, seu versione IV. Evangelistarum Gothica* (Wittenberg: G.W. Kirchmajer, 1693).

c. [PVB] The Codex Manesse, completed between ca. 1304 and 1340, contains manuscript sources for the songs of the approximately 135 minnesingers active between the mid-twelfth and early fourteenth centuries. The codex served as one of the most important sources of songs used by Herder for his history of German art and folk song, particularly the confluence of oral and written traditions in the Middle Ages. See also the translations in chapter 3 of the present volume.

fatherland appeared in such *volume* as in the volumes produced by *Schöpflin* and *Bodmer* from the Codex Manesse [see, e.g., Bodmer 1781]? If *Schöpflin* and *Bodmer* had done no other service to Germany, their *creative output* of sources and reprints alone would be reason to rescue them from obscurity.

I am not mistaken that this volume of precious poems for the fatherland was of great fortune for Germany, and it should have been so without great cost. Be that as it may, for those who came from the part of Germany called *Saxony*, the *sound* of the *more recent classical language, poetry, and literature*, for better or worse, found the language of this poetry still to be quite distant. The noble Swiss would require more effort to understand the language of their previous brothers, neighbors, and countrymen than a people more accustomed to it. Even the provincial dialect of the *minnesingers* used in these poems, whose content and sense mirrored a foreign ideal of love, would not sense the same impact of revolution as that in *Swabian poetry*. They did not transform them into living *folk songs*! Nor could they be thus transformed. They remain on the shelves of libraries as a “*collection of old and lovely miniature pieces*” . . . and that is where they *stay*!

3. There remains only one task left for us, as well as protecting those assumed to be of the least value: we must *seek* and *collect* the *remaining folk songs that are still alive* or survive from an earlier time in which they could still be understood and were vital. Perhaps that too would catch a spark from the spirit of the German fatherland, albeit buried in ash and rubble. . . .

What, however, does one really imagine is still possible to find? *The crude songs of a crude people! Barbarian sounds and fairy tales served as the most basic soup of the nation!* What do we expect might still be of *value printed and preserved* to serve the *honor of the nation and the further development of the human spirit*?

To those who would pass judgment as *privileged, educated, and totally satisfied* and who loudly condemn such an effort, I merely respond with an example from all the neighboring countries. Unquestionably the Gallic, English, and even more so the Nordic *peoples* are truly a *people*! A *people* like the German *folk*! Still, the British have every reason to be just as *privileged, educated, and even prouder* than we of the *masterpieces* of their *old and new classical writers*. Despite the strength of the national pride in our most recent literature, the British make the Germans look *more impoverished*. If they had turned away from what they had produced with their noses in the air, even avoiding the title page of what they had not seen or read, their own *Ramsey* and *Percy* would not have appeared in so many editions. Under the same circumstances we privileged and satisfied Germans would not have bothered to *collect* anything. Now let me summon every-

one with feeling toward song as my witness and let me ask if nothing by Ramsey or in Percy's *Reliques of Ancient Poetry*^d is worth *publishing and preserving*. Quite the contrary, these are songs, I am not ashamed to say, that have no *equal* in most recent poesy! There is nothing of the simplicity, the feeling, the stirring of the heart, the accents, and the resonance that would move the most inner soul, not to mention possess the accompanying beauty to uplift the soul! One need but compare recent experiments of this kind by poets like the *Shenstones, Masons, Malletts*, etc., with their simpler, original predecessors, and one will discover an enormous difference. The originals are full of song and sound, simplicity and impact. They will always possess the qualities of *a few isolated verses* that hang framed on the wall, *beautiful and simple*.

When one removes these songs from the paper on which they appear in order to reflect on *their context, their times, and the vital ways they touched real people*, one gains just a bit of the sense of how they might still *resonate*! One gains a sense of what the *ancient bards* meant for the earlier historians, and the impact of the *minstrels* and *Meistersingers* on more recent historians. The greatest singers and the favorites of the muses—whereby I mean *Chaucer and Spenser, Shakespeare and Milton, Philip Sidney and Selden*—all displayed *enthusiasm for the old songs*. It is not hard to find the proof for such a claim, for the *lyrical, mythical, dramatic, and epic* qualities that distinguish English poetry as *national* emerge from what has survived from the early singers and poets. In *Chaucer, Spenser, and Shakespeare* there is no question about the significance of such evidence. Also with *Dryden, Addison, and Pope*, whose works open as the tender sprouts of English poetry, producing a *loveliness* that others might imitate. More recently, the Scots, just like our more recent Germans, sought again to awaken their poetry through *re-sounding* . . . another question in its own right . . . but they did not contradict the *value* and *inner worth* of that poetry. The language, sound, and content of the old songs shape the way a people thinks, thereby leaving its mark on the nation. Those who have few or none of these qualities show they are *incapable of having anything whatsoever*. Those who make fun of them and fail to have feeling for them reveal that they are so inflated by aping the foreignness or by mimicking the cheap tinsel of the superficial that they become incapable of sensing value in the *body of the nation*. They are, thus, the offshoot of the

d. [PVB] Thomas Percy, *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry, Consisting of Old Heroic Ballads, Songs, and Other Pieces of Our Earlier Poets (Chiefly of the Lyric Kind) Together with Some Few of Later Date* (London: J. Dodsley, 1765).

foreign and a leaf that blows in the wind, in other words, *a virtuoso of the latest trends for all times! A thinker!*

The English, whose *national riches* exceed ours in every way, surely also exceed us when it comes to the *shabbiness of the nation* and the *acceptance of earlier times*. What kinds of poor songs was *Percy*, for example, able to include in the second part of the first volume of his *Reliques* [Percy 1765]! These are songs that our educated Germans would never have dared to print, even when the songs, whatever one's individual taste might be, would have *shed so much light on early history!* Even when they would *clarify* so much, even to the point of giving praise to God! *Nothing* of the most modest value appears. It was enough, however, that *Shakespeare knew* such songs, if just a single line, and that he integrated them in such ways that they transformed the affinity of his poetry. In a climate that is so mild, mere sprouts and buds could turn into the forests that nurtured an ancient way of thinking. In the shadow of that forest, poetry could touch those who were foreign or only *distantly related* neighbors, also bringing them joy.

The most recent English collector, of course, is at a great advantage. In part, he already has *collections at his disposal*. English libraries are *endowed* with *gifts* made by many, thus the English collector has *manuscripts* and the like at hand. Even more important, he has a discourse for thinking about the nation, that is, the *national*. The people already make up such a visible part of *the folk*, whose name is no cause for embarrassment; the folk is not something from which one needs to look away. Only the learned would choose to do that, the *learned*, that is, and all the *armchair scholars lacking any knowledge of the folk*; we are speaking here of the pedant and the critic. The English collector can focus on the *nation, the folk*, a single entity that is called the *fatherland!* He has more at his disposal for writing and collecting than we Germans (as much as we may talk, sing, or write) *have* or may ever have available to us. I might, nonetheless, take my comparison to the most impudent and bitter extremes! It is time for me to stop, however, only to say that this modest preface is intended for a *similar attempt* at a *similar collection of folk songs, German folk songs*, like those our brothers and forebears, who are so superior to us, the English, have already *collected*, presenting them so they will be better and more precious.

I make my case in this *impoverished way* so that I might awaken other, more precious citizens, countries, regions, libraries, and provinces! I bring with me but a *handful of water*, which is almost shameful, and I take my place at the table of my neighbor's feast, with its abundance and well-being. Would that I might find my *brothers in arms, Germans, fellow citizens, and friends of this land*, whose envy and anger I might arouse, so that they

would respond, full of anger, revenge, and joy, and they might *surpass me as much as possible!* This is what I wish; this is what I hope for!

A great people with rich abundance! More to the point, the people and wealth of ten great peoples . . . do you have no *folk songs*? You, a people that is so *noble, who so deeply loves virtue, shame, and tradition*, do you have no *songs that are more noble, virtuous, traditional, and full of meaning* than the *Swiss, Swabians, Franconians, Bavarians, Tyroleans, Saxons, Westphalians, Wends, and Bohemians*? Have you nothing more *natural, moving, and meaningful* than these?

I have not a moment's doubt about the answers to such questions because of my love for the nation. However, the songs lie so *deeply buried*, they are so *despised* and *held at a distance*, they stand at the edge of *extinction*. It is precisely for these reasons that I dare to undertake this project, which has the primary goal of urging others *more numerous* and with *better fortune* to take up the cause. But do so with *zeal* and *courage*, and do it *now!* We stand at the very edge of the precipice: in another hundred years it will be too late!

Each one of my readers knows the tragic or happy fate . . . however it is best described . . . that Germany has had since the very beginning. It is the *mother* and *servant to foreign nations*. It is their regent and law giver, deciding their fates, but almost always at the same time becoming their *bleeding slave* and *exhausted wet nurse*, who is paid almost nothing in return. I unroll the pages of history so that every German who feels something for the fatherland will take up the cause. At the same time he would unleash *joy* and *repentance*, honor and even bittersweet *lament*:

. . . truly it is a land
no more! The marches! The island sand,
my Germany! Already so far
beyond its origins! In the dispersion of its people! Flowing
far and wide! . . . Jordan, Po, and Tiber
have so often foamed with the heroic blood
of the Germans! Filled to overflowing
from the courage of popes and apes
And German souls! Finally choked,
O mother, Germany, on the breast
you offer your children! Chaos
roars, as it has so long filled
the storms of dispute, do not prostrate yourself
before the battles in the heavens! My Germany etc.

The German *way of thinking* and its *peaceful nature*, of course, cannot be removed from the eternal conflict, the eternal *exclusion* from foreigners, or

the even more maddening *inclusion of some* foreigners into their own country! If we only truly had a history of the German national spirit . . . but how, where, if only, and whereby? . . . it would receive all the *rubbish* and *weakness* that had accumulated in the sayings of all surrounding peoples. Alas, that would say far more than I am able here to say. If the growth of a tree too quickly spreads into unruly branches that can no longer be nourished *together from a single root*, nor do they desire to be, would not the result be a relentless fate, even in the crown of the tree, truly dominated by the disadvantages of honor and misfortune? *Offshoots, saplings, and uncontrollable brush* would not be weeded out by even the gentlest hand, and the tree would forever *break apart and lose its branches*. As the old fable about “floating above the trees” says, where would the naturally healthy kinds of fruit, nourishment, and sweetness, the strength and growth of *its* roots and *its* trunk, be found? An uncontrollable, wild bush of thorns, which catches fire often, and which weakens the cedars because it tears apart everything within its reach . . . this is not how I want to paint the picture of a German history with many periods shaped ceaselessly by the unforgiving law of fate.

Unfortunately, the mishmash and imitation of foreign voices, lands, and eras plague German folk song even at the origins . . .

The song of the free Germans . . .
 an outcry . . . an echo
 from a hundred fissures! Silent sound
 of the marshes along the Jordan and the Tiber
 and the Thames and the Seine! . . .
 Alas, it can do just that!

Hundreds of years ago, evident virtually at the beginning of *each new moment of advancement* . . . *what* a miracle that the earliest European language at least contained *original content, its own material, developed in its own ways* through the spirit of the Germans over the centuries, *borrowed* from the spirit of others

. . . what other feet have trampled
 should be repeated!

How happy I should be, if I could *again truly account for recovered national fragments!* Even in this case, as it so often and usually is, the *seed*, the sprout, the branch, and the *tree full of fruit* would spring forth from the *most meager beginnings*: that would be *growth from God!*

At this moment! My German brothers, let me call out one more time!
 At this moment, all that survives from the ways the folk think approaches

the edge of the abyss of memory as rapidly as possible! Like cancer the light of so-called culture consumes all that surrounds it! For a half century we have been embarrassed about everything that belongs to the fatherland; we dance French minuets unacceptably as German, and since the *earliest* times we sing the most obscene and crudest love songs, about whose *crude and throwaway speech, narrative, and ballad tones* nothing was known in earlier times.^e As *Lafontaine* so often claimed for our nation:

losing the fidelity of the arts
consumes morality . . .

If I should truly succeed to *try* to bring back these *crude and throwaway speech, narrative, and ballad tones*, that too would be sufficient! The slovenly way of singing employed by German *ballad singers*, their droll way of imitating, without *appropriate materials* and even more so without a *true sense for the stirrings of the heart*, leads only to *mockery*. I should succeed by showing what the difference is between a *true folk song*, a *ballad given life through song*, and the most recent *sweet street songs*, which reach a dead end with outdated rhymes, *mockingly making choking vocal transitions, tragic-comedies, and comic-tragedies* while racing along at the dreadful pace that has recently ruined German poesy and dialect. What I offer here is just some kind of imitation. Why, you ask? Because the *ballad tones* no longer survive in our own age. Still, it is not my goal to cast aspersions on anything (even on the English songs from the translations of my friend [see the discussion of Michael Denis's translations of the Ossian songs in chapter 4]). This would be too easy, according to the most recent standards of our own poetry. The ancient fragment of this bust, if it were only still recognizable, would remain for us as *rust and decay*. If more youthful attempts were made to imitate the *rust and decay*, taking a chisel to it would not reveal what lay hidden, broken and ruined. With the proper tools we would be able to sing of the *conditions that are so natural in our own age*, with the same *noble affect and feeling with which folk songs in their age were sung!*

And now I should undertake a small comparison of the results that arise from an *affective*, but also *simple*, if *firm, brief, powerful way of thinking and meaning for a people*, through which are expressed the *finest examples* of song. In our own *unenlightened time*, this would mean the *ethereal, unfeeling morality*, which but hangs in the air before crashing down upon even the *lowliest populace*. What we know for sure is that the greatest part of our being is the *existence of our senses*. Accordingly, the primary goal of

e. [PVB] Herder uses *Romanze* here for the narrative genre of the ballad.

education for the folk and for children is *dedicated to the senses* and our *strongest sensual powers*. *Abstraction* will always arrive in abundance and *of its own accord*. If only its *foundations* could lie in *true materiality*. It is nothing more than the fine spirit of raw, nutritious materials. If only we could be rid of such materials! The finest art can remove nothing of the spirit; the healthiest nature can remove nothing from that which nourishes us. If only we could employ the *truly fine stories that touch upon the sensibilities of the folk*, possessing only a single moral: *true music* is that which stirs the ear with *simple tones*. If only the human soul, in its formative years, could be the *soul of the folk*, seeing and hearing, not thinking and pondering! If only *all human eyes*, like the *eyes of the blind*, would at first see and taste *everything nearby*, so *abundant in color and impression*, before it turned toward placating beauty and soothing experiences! There is still time enough for such alleviation. Our own lovely, enlightened century, without exciting any *power and meaning, content and deed*, so full of *beautiful words, lovely phrases, well-chosen rhymes, and marvelously artistic music stanzas!* Magnificent century, in which art prevails to transform the soul so that it does not weep, that it is without tears and feeling, rather it becomes a *soul formed from light and rationality!* Have you, O century, gained *substance, strength, and lasting happiness for the after-world?* Or have you lost it?

FOURTH BOOK

Nordic Songs

Never was there a land so directed against foreign lands as are you!

—FRIEDRICH GOTTLIEB KLOPSTOCK, "Ode auf Deutschland"

Approaching the Songs of Foreign Peoples Songs once again? And nothing else but songs? And indeed barbaric or half-barbaric peoples? . . . One should listen before one begins to damn.

It is characteristic of our age that we know more people in the world than did our forebears. How did we come to know them? What have they or we lost in the meantime? Knowledge itself burgeons, and that is good: *the map of humanity has expanded to a remarkable degree*. What was geography at the time of the Greeks and the Romans? And what is it today?

How did these earlier civilizations come to *know* the brothers of our humanity? Entirely *from the outside*, through scratches on the surface and from reports that were the same as etchings. Or *from within*? As humans

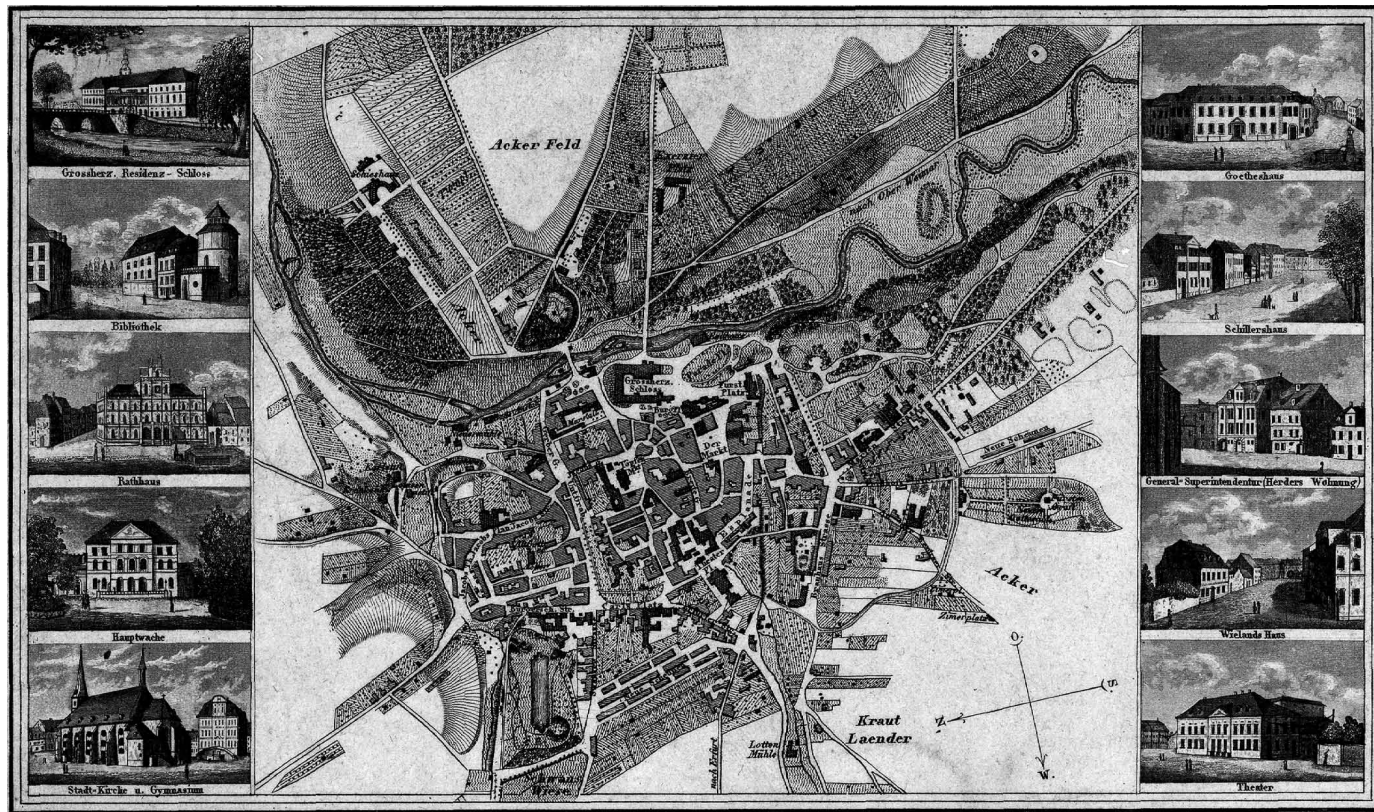


FIGURE 6. Weimar circa 1830. Courtesy the Map Collection, Regenstein Library, University of Chicago.

themselves, who possess language, a soul, and feelings? Our brothers! No one in a century of philosophy, shaped by a humanity that is acquired as it is learned and loved, will deny the *necessity* and *advantages* of such knowledge of others. And note this, my brothers in humanity! For we find ourselves where we wish to be. For we do not have to concern ourselves unduly with the appearance and shape, . . . the external characteristics . . . of the external way of life of those less civilized than we! We do not need to speak about what their countries produce and how they could be better if they were subjugated, used, abused, controlled, and repressed. We do not have to speak about them in negative terms . . . as they are not human beings in the same way as we! Civilized nations!! And Christians!!! . . . rather about *what they really are*? They provide us with a true image of their way of thinking, their sensibilities, what lies in their soul, language. They do this not as if inundated by outside influences, from all the European fools who ravage their lands, but rather in the ways they create their own *traditions* and *practices*. In this way, it follows, we arrive at their *songs*!

All nations that have yet to be organized around political systems are a *singing people*: by whatever means their songs come into being, that is how they *remain*. Songs serve as collections for all their *science*, *religion*, the ways the soul *moves*, the *characteristics* of previous generations, the *joys* and *sorrows* of their lives. Nature had entrusted them with the ability to console the heavy burden of human existence *with the love of freedom*, the *pursuit of leisure* or of *happiness*: and where everything more or less converges, that is where we find *song*. Nature has made humans *free*, *joyful*, singing. Artifice and forcefulness turn humans inward, removing their sense of trust, rendering them *silent*.

In the very few worthwhile travel reports that we possess, the most interesting of all passages for one seeking understanding are those about the ways of thinking and the customs of the nation, about passion and pleasure, about knowledge and speech! And these overwhelmingly also concern themselves with *songs*, and really only with *songs*. Books, the arts, cities, rationally organized societies, all these follow the appearance of song. Where nature has revealed ways of thought, it is the result of what God has granted them: *speech*, *sound*, *movement*, *representation*, *proportion*, *dance*. What ties all these together is one thing alone: *song*. *Warlike* peoples sing of the deeds of their ancestors, which in turn urge them on to deeds of their own. *Gentle* peoples sing *love songs* full of nature and simplicity. Those peoples with *cleverness* and *humor* insert puzzles into their songs and then solve those puzzles, playing with words and simile. A people with a *more creative imagination* possesses songs that contain poems, exaggerating and energiz-

ing life itself. Finally, a people that survives under the *barren, horrible conditions* of nature creates gods . . . horrible gods, gods who are giants . . . with songs that *negotiate* freedom and nobility. Everything from everywhere more or less flows together, expiring and becoming diluted. No image of passion, the soul, language, and thought could be truer, and yet Europeans repress such representations to show them as boring and simple, as unsophisticated superstition, and finally, the most dismissive of all, as *that in all languages, customs, and ways of thinking*, there is a total absence of concepts that recognize and understand *the masterfulness of an "Our Father!"* Remove the priest's wig from this observant individual and measure instead the heads of all tigers, lions, and elephants, and leave such observation aside . . . the great natural history of the entire world! Nothing is comparable to exploring history from the perspectives of *the natural sciences!* Simply to *describe* a people through customs and ways of thought means nothing at all when compared to the possible descriptions *they themselves produce*. One cannot represent or sketch everything that lies on the surface, in other words, what is the loudest of all, or what first strikes the eye; rather, one must seek what *lies at the deepest level*, which encodes the traits with which a people are born and thus *characterizes* them most intimately. Whoever has the capacity to *take on such a task* most fully, to *arrive at the essence* most profoundly, to *describe* it with the greatest ease, to *make things familiar* for all others, that is the person who *knows* and *can represent a people*, and who does not merely *smear colors across a canvas*.

It is not my task here to determine just how quickly one encounters such noble people who are equally spread across the lands of the earth. A very fine and recent *travel enthusiast* has sketched a movable academy, which even as a stretch of imagination did not hold together, much less lend itself to provability.^f Someone who truly knows a people must not simply *move from place to place* and write for *academies of science*, for these are necessarily required also to turn their attention toward conditions that have an *impact that is unusual in some way*, as if these very deserving men are expected in their own field to specialize in only a *single matter*. For my part, then, I am devising a plan that will include the smallest groups of people who live with us and among us.

The coastal areas of the Baltic Sea contain some peoples whose *history* is surely more enlightened than their *natural history*. Their history is the true source of their language and way of thinking. The *Wends, Slavs, Old*

f. [PVB] Herder is probably referring here to the idealized academy he proposes in his *Journal meiner Reise im Jahr 1769* (see the epilogue in the present volume).

Prussians, Lithuanians, Latvians, Estonians, even the *Frisians* . . . these are normally contrasted with the peoples we know better, especially the *Icelanders*: Who would judge them after coming to understand their *way of thinking and language*, rather than simply comparing their epistemology to ours?

There are many scholars whose profession it is to *study the language, thought, ancient prejudices, and customs*! They surely *have studied* many of these. They *speak* about many such cultures in the third person: "They have songs! They have an incredible power of imagination, etc.!" Some scholars make such claims without really investigating *grammar* or employing *experimentation*. It could be one modest goal of the present book to awaken an interest in something more! It could provide us with a *full, accurate natural history* of cultures by fully presenting their own *monuments*! As such, this book would contain the *folk songs, myths, fairy tales, superstitions that have shaped the character of culture so powerfully*. It would not speak about such things, but rather *let them speak* for themselves. Not just ask, What was that good for? Instead, they would appear just as they are, without being made *palatable*. They would not be changed so they are acceptable to the judgment of religion or classical taste, but rather remain *as they are* . . . but with faithfulness, pleasure, and love. Such representation of expressive culture would allow imperfections to be meaningful! One would report these matters and allow them to surpass what they are, just as a harvest produces seed for the future . . . they acquire a *vital and real potential for theory*, a new *field* for linguists, historians, humanists, and philosophers! How *accessible and pleasing* for those engaged with such matters! Perhaps it will be a mere *description*, or the effort required for the *description* of something described long ago. Am I able to wish for this? Might I be hopeful?

I now continue with several examples, which at the very least will shed new light on some old topics.

To this point in history, it has been customary for writers to focus on a single, small part of the world whose *creations, models, masterpieces, and criteria for taste* we have extrapolated and applied to all forms of literature, poetry, and humanism, thereby *excluding all others*. Very well, for these parts of the world really were in the fortunate position of supporting the finest traditions! But also not so good, for we *blindly* accepted authority as rules, the chaff as the wheat, and the most distant similarity as the reason for empirical evidence. This is also not good if one forgets the contradictory character of art and the ways in which nature is imitated, from which every

art takes its model! And if one forgets that the proper form and power of a model is something that we learn and adapt for our own purposes, such that we might slavishly apply the same attribute to a holy *Marian icon* or the *Qur'an*. Finally, a model is not good when it generates all that is *nationalistic*, hence the model for *our own* power and character, which becomes so blurred and damnable that each individual is ashamed to be who she or he is, and furthermore is unable to be something else. It seems to me that for many of us this would mean finding a path untouched by the national, which would lead to powerful medicines for healing and prevention.

The Greeks themselves were nothing more than *half civilized* because they sowed the seeds of their most beautiful plants and blossoms. Those who really read *Homer* with healthy eyes will recognize much less artistry in his writings than his rhapsodists, commentators, and translators claim: noble, blossoming nature . . . just like *Ossian* has recently become as a model, and as *Wood* loudly preached against the encroachment of artificiality.⁸ Do you believe that *Orpheus*, the great *Orpheus* whose service to humankind has been eternal, that this poet lives in the remnants of the entire soul of nature, that he was originally anything more than the noblest *shaman*, who was able to see the *Thracians*, who at that time were also the *Nordic Tatars*? Do you want to become acquainted with the Greek *Tyrtäus*, witnessing there a *celebration of war* and *war song* and *the singing leaders* of the North Americans! See the *ancient Greek comedies* at their earliest stages, which were still entirely, as *Horace* describes, connected through expression and dance to the same satirical games and the mummer celebrations as these uncivilized peoples! Do you want to hear a *hallelujah* sustained by a chorus!? The *Greenlanders* and the *Americans* perform a *hallelujah* in just this way. And there are countless other things just like these.

So profound is the respect that the really incomparable Greeks might earn, suddenly I should wish to be worthy of *earning such respect*, even if I no longer look at it with healthy eyes! We might recognize them as the human beings they were, rather than as the images painted as frescoes on a wall, grimacing about this world and the afterworld. A Greek in my own country, who would see me acting and living this way, who would look me in the eye and call out:

. . . He limps along with a Greek staff and creeps along with a Roman cane and nevertheless . . .

g. [PVB] Robert Wood, *An Essay on the Original Genius of Homer* (London: n.p., 1769). For Herder's own comparison of Homer and Ossian, see chapter 5 in the present volume.

What is it all for, and what good does it do? It seems to me that these are nothing more than copies taken from *other people, independent people*, who really knew nothing about the Greeks and the Romans! *True people of nature!* Could they be *inventive* like the Greeks, and could they *express emotions* like the Greeks, and *paint* and *sing* like the Greeks, albeit not drawing from Greek mythology and using the Greek language? If they can, why can't *we*? Why not, a real German might call out:

To imitate Greek song?
 Whatever pleases me should
 Not be imitated! The Greeks, too, came
 Into this world with a nose on their faces.
 What concerns me about their culture?
 I let the hen and the egg
 Lead me to mother nature!
 Their most abrasive, raw cry
 Touches me more deeply than the finest melody
 And is never absent from the person
 Who created my cousin Ossian . . .

And I believe that all free nations unfettered by civilization are the same in this regard!

Sappho sang beautifully! At any rate she sang beautifully, and even when we do not hear her, he who remains untouched will aspire to something higher, wherever he happens to be. But to imitate *Sappho*? Do we really believe that she has left behind an eternal form or vessel filled forever with her lovely love songs? Would we want to *adapt* ourselves with the affinity for love in nature, so that we would sing in the same way *Sappho* had once sung! Grounded in such beautiful poetry, and with such grace, turns, and gentle disorder in the ode, in the meter, the myths, the measurement of syllables . . . O, those who honor the Greeks and the Romans cover *Sappho* with a skirt and *Horace* with pants: this is how real men find their way to them!

The lovely *Sappho* once sang:
 O, dear mother, she cannot,
 Cannot weave a bit of flax!
 A beautiful boy makes me suffer,
 Evil love makes me suffer!

And she sang another time, reflecting on her beloved:

The moon is beautiful as it rises
 Up into the stars!
 It is past midnight, and poor me,
 I still sleep alone!

And one other time:

O, I suffer from an unfortunate love that undoes me,
 The bird sings a bittersweet song, with
 No defense against the arrow that pierces it: You were
 Once coy with me, beloved Attis! Your heart
 Turned toward Andromeda.

And yet another time:

Blessed youth! You have
 Now had your wedding, and now held
 Your maiden in your arms!

And yet again:

I slept! And how I dreamt
 Of you, O Cypris!

And just how the small, tender, untranslatable remnants continue to sound forth. What, however, do we really have from them, beyond the little remains of the *impromptu* or the *fullness of passion*, in each of which the dear Sappho appears . . . nothing more? And do we not have enough of that?

When they now pour out the most precious treasures of their love songs, themselves beyond translatable, we then have:

PRAYER TO VENUS

Eternal Aphrodite, upon the throne of her kingdom,
 She who gathers her sling, daughter of Zeus, O leave me
 Not in sorrow, O let me not languish desolately
 in the pain of love.

Descend to me! O, if you could ever attend
 Tenderly to my supplication and raise me from it
 As so often before, descend as quickly as you can
 from your father's throne.

The reins for the carriage are prepared: Lovely sparrows
 Will draw the carriage! Their delicate black wings bear
 It rapidly forward, at the heights in the midst
 of the heavenly skies.

Descending . . . O, you then arrived before me
 With that lovely face graced by heaven:
 "What is it you desire, my love! You have
 called out to me.

Speak, what is it that you so desire in that
 Loving heart of yours, dearest? Whom have you

Captured in the net of love? I implore you! Who has
done injury to my Sappho?

Who has fled from you? . . . Who has scorned the gifts
You so willingly offered? . . . Such gifts he should quickly
Have taken away! He does not love you . . . he should no longer
be deserving of you."

Come now also to me! Release my soul
From its heavy sorrow! Under the fatigue that now
Plagues my heart, O, help me! Goddess, come
to my aid in this struggle.

She seeks the *blessing of love* from the friend of her beloved, to whom she
pours out her entire heart:

Blessed! Blessed! O, blessed gods in heaven
Who are with you, who surround you and
See you always, who can hear that charming, sweet
gentle voice.

Who can see you smiling! O, sweet smile, which steals
Heart and soul from me, I saw you! Saw you,
Ah, what am I saying: All sense and sound
had abandoned me.

And my tongue moved silently! A powerful fire
Rose up through my very bones!
Night fell before my eyes! Like a dark and distant sound
in my fading ears.

Sweat poured coldly down my body! My entire body
Was shaking! My lips shook like the most tender
Grasses! Reaching my innermost parts! I appeared
as if I were near death . . .

All in all, this is a hundred times more beautifully stated and translated
than what we see, than the *love of Sappho*: nothing less than the rules of
love, or an ode to love heard in all four corners of the world. The young
Sámi,^h who speaks to his reindeer instead of with Venus and gives them
names that portray their movement through nature, thus, flying as from
sun to sea, to trees, as the crows and the ducks, while his beloved is always
with him. . . . These reindeer herders portray love with strokes seven times
more believable, in other words, they create *more beautiful love songs* as

h. [PVB] Referring to the Sámi of circumpolar northern Europe as Laplanders,
as Herder does here and elsewhere in his original text, was common until the late
twentieth century.

the sweetest follower of Sappho with their artificial rules applied pedantically to poetry. The *Lithuanian maiden*, who takes leave from her entire household and portrays the world of the bride before her eyes and heart, is a far greater poet than the droll creator of a valediction, who remains glued to the very desk upon which he writes it.

If *Leibniz* failed to find the humor and wisdom of human beings more effective than a game, so too will human learning, passion, and the soul's poetic capacity never be more effectively evident and visible than at the point in which *truth* and *delight* meet and become one: And this is in *song*.ⁱ There is more poesy, and there are more poetic sources in *folk belief*, in *fantasy*, *myth*, *tradition*, *language*, *customs*, in the culture of all Indigenous peoples living close to nature, than in the poetics and oration of all time. Who would undertake the practical, rational collection of all kinds of *fantasy*, *the poetry*, *the prejudices*, and *illusions of the mind*? I am certain that it would be of great service to a deeper understanding of humankind than ten collections of the *logic*, *aesthetics*, *ethics*, and *politics* that were not really true to the human spirit.

How pleasant it finally is to see a people in its *naked* simplicity, the happiness with which it *was born*, and all of *nature in its most basic creative potential*. One will understand most fully after one has freed oneself from all the artificiality clinging to the heart and all the false politeness that has come to generate an inhumane sense of bourgeois life, and one finally can breathe freely. One can be free of all the rules and the traditions that bind one in a yoke and place a wall around the human heart. All this requires but a moment of *open revelation*!

i. [PVB] Herder refers here to Leibniz's commentary on play in Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, *Werke*, ed. Deutsche Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Berlin, series 6, vol. 6 (Berlin: Deutsche Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1962), 466.