"They Were All Human Beings—So Much Is Plain": Reflections on Cultural Relativism in the Humanities

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I can never adequately thank you, dear Professor Schöne, for the wholly unexpected and undeserved honour of your invitation to me, a non-Germanist, to give the first plenary lecture at this gathering of specialists in Germanic studies. I shall not even try to do so, for after all we have come together for the purpose of discussing "old and new controversies."

In the fourth section of Goethe's *Zahme Xenien* we find the quatrain from which I have taken the theme of such an old and new controversy, which, as I hope, concerns both Germanic studies and the other humanities:

> "What was it that kept you from us so apart?"
> I always read Plutarch again and again.
> "And what was the lesson he did impart?"
> "They were all human beings—so much is plain."[1]

In the very years when Goethe wrote these lines, that is in the 1820s, Hegel repeatedly gave his lectures on the philosophy of history. Right

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1. 'Was hat dich nun von uns entfernt?'
   Hab immer den Plutarch gelesen.
   'Was hast du denn dabei gelernt?'
   'Sind eben alles Menschen gewesen.'

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Sämtliche Werke. Jubiläums-ausgabe in 40 Bänden* (Stuttgart, 1902–7) 4:73; with commentary.

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at the beginning he formulated the opposite view which I should like briefly to characterize as "cultural relativism."

> Every age has such peculiar circumstances, such individual conditions that it must be interpreted, and can only be interpreted, by reference to itself. . . . Nothing is shallower in this respect than the frequent appeal to Greek and Roman examples which so often occurred among the French at the time of their Revolution. Nothing could be more different than the nature of these peoples and the nature of our own times.[2]

What is at issue here is not, of course, Hegel's assertion that ages and peoples differ from each other. We all know that, and Goethe, the attentive reader and traveller, also knew, for instance, that the Roman carnival differed in its character from the celebrations of the Feast of Saint Rochus at Bingen, both of which he had described so lovingly. What makes the cultural historian into a cultural relativist is only the conclusion which we saw Hegel draw, that cultures and styles of life are not only different but wholly incommensurable, in other words that it is absurd to compare the peoples of a region or an age with human beings of other zones because there is no common denominator that would justify us in doing so.

Friedrich Meinecke, who investigated the roots and the rise of this conviction in his fundamental work, *The Origins of Historism,*[3] realised

2. See Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Geschichte, Werke,* 20 vols. (Frankfurt-am-Main, 1969–79), 12:17.

3. See Friedrich Meinecke, *Die Entstehung des Historismus* (Munich, 1936). I have translated *Historismus* as "historism" to avoid confusion between this belief in the incommensurability of historical periods with the belief in the existence of compelling "laws of history" which Karl R. Popper has called "historicism." Unhappily his optimism proved unfounded when he wrote in *The Poverty of Historicism* (London, 1957), "I have deliberately chosen the somewhat unfamiliar label 'historicism.' By introducing it I hope I shall avoid merely verbal quibbles; for nobody, I hope, will be tempted to question whether any of the arguments here discussed really or properly or essentially belong to historicism, or what the word 'historicism' really or properly or essentially means" (pp. 3–4). On p. 17 of the same book the author warns against the confusion I have wished to avoid.

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that Goethe was somewhat in two minds about this trend, though Meinecke neither mentions the epigram about Plutarch nor the semi-humourous verse which follows it in the *Xenien:*

> To censure others Cato was prone
> Himself he preferred not to sleep alone.[4]

The context makes it quite clear that the old sage of Weimar thought he understood Cato only too well, for after all, he had learned from Plutarch that they were all human beings, men and women of flesh and bone like any of us.

It is of course this naive conviction which the cultural relativists are proud to have left behind because they refused to acknowledge any constants that would enable us to recognise the identical human nature behind all changing appearances.[5] Hegel would probably have pointed out that Cato belonged to an earlier phase of the self-realization of the Absolute than Goethe, Marx would have argued that the economic circumstances of a slave-holding society must have resulted in a different ideological superstructure than that of early capitalist Weimar, the arch-relativist Oswald Spengler would have emphatically denied that a product of the Faustian civilization could have any access to a man of classical antiquity, and a racial theorist, of course, would have pointed out that the psyche of the Mediterranean race differed wholly from that of Nordic Man, even if—as must be feared—Cato may not have had a dash of inferior, that is, of Etruscan blood which would have certainly helped to explain his sensual leanings.

I hope you will forgive me if I do not dwell at length on these theories and pseudo-theories. He who wants to force an open door is likely to fall flat on his face and if he tries to force a bolted door the result may be even more unpleasant. What concerns me is only the situation which arises for the humanities from the extirpation of the notion of man from our vocabulary on the ground that, in contrast to the concepts that occur in the natural sciences, this notion does not describe anything tangible or clearly defined.[6]

Nobody has wrestled more with this problem than Wilhelm Dilthey who contributed so much to the orientation of the humanities, especially in Germany. However much Dilthey referred to psychology for its value

4. Cato wollte wohl andere strafen;
Selbander mocht' er gerne schlafen.

5. For the following see also Maurice H. Mandelbaum, *History, Man, and Reason: A Study in Nineteenth-Century Thought* (Baltimore, 1971), and W. Brückner, "Der Mensch als Kulturwesen," in *Wie erkennt der Mensch die Welt?* ed. M. Lindauer and A. Schöpf (Stuttgart, 1984), pp. 177–95.

6. See Hans Erich Bödecker, "Menschheit," in *Lexikon geschichtlicher Grundbegriffe,* ed. Otto Brunert, Werner Conze, and Reinhart Koselleck (Stuttgart, 1982), pp. 1063–1128.

to the study of human culture he still questioned the justification of basing his research on the nature of man. "The individual"—he wrote for instance—"is merely a nodal point of cultural systems, of organisations which are inextricably intertwined with its existence; how could it then offer a basis for understanding?"[7] In contrast to the natural scientist the humanist must therefore forgo causal explanations, the discovery of valid laws. He is not concerned with explanation but with understanding, with hermeneutics, a branch of knowledge still to be established which should enable us, who are subject to constant change, nevertheless to interpret the changing realities of other forms of human life.[8]

We must certainly be grateful to Dilthey and his followers for having drawn the conclusion from the doctrines of historism that the humanist will always have to be interested in the individual and nonrepeatable fact. Even so, I do not think that we humanists should allow anyone to forbid us occasionally to look up from our detailed research, indeed from turning round and asking in which wider context the problem we have in hand might be seen? How much and how often we do that may be a matter of temperament, but if we are honest with ourselves, we will also realise that even the original choice of our subject for research presupposes an explicit or implicit scientific theory.

I need hardly dwell on the fact that these are questions which have become very topical today in many of the fields of our enquiry. On the one hand ideologies have gained an increasing hold over them, on the other the wish to do without any theoretical framework has landed the humanities in a cul-de-sac. What I have in mind, above all, is the demand that has been raised during the last few decades that not only the search for explanations but even the striving for understanding should be thrown onto the scrap heap. For now Man as such is to be altogether removed from our field of vision, we confront only the text, and whatever sense we may make of it is and remains our own sense and not the one intended by the author.[9] What Goethe found in the text of Plutarch, and what we in our turn find in the verse I have quoted remains in the last analysis our own business. Cultural relativism has led to the jettisoning of the most precious heritage of all scholarly work, the claim of being engaged in a quest for the truth. Since the testimonies of the past must no longer be regarded as testimonies, our concern with them cannot be much more

7. See Wilhelm Dilthey, "Der Aufbau der geschichtlichen Welt in den Geisteswissenschaften," *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Bernhard Groethuysen (Leipzig and Berlin, 1927), 7:251. See also Gerhard Bauer, *'Geschichtlichkeit': Wege und Irrwege eines Begriffs* (Berlin, 1963).

8. See Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode: Grundzüge einer philosophischen Hermeneutik* (Tübingen, 1965).

9. See Harold Bloom, Paul de Man, Jacques Derrida, Geoffrey Hartman, and J. Hillis Miller, *Deconstruction and Criticism* (New York, 1979). For further bibliography and criticism see also M. H. Abrams, *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, 4th ed. (New York, 1981).

than a clever game that does not serve knowledge but simply the display of intellectual acrobatics.

I do not want to enumerate all the tendencies which aim today to cooperate in this enterprise of deconstruction. The catalogue of Greek ships in the *Iliad* is not its most entertaining section and a roll call of the academic warlords who are aiming at dismantling the citadel of our studies would hardly be more amusing. Thus I will limit myself to introducing you to one of the myrmidons because his battle cry suits my books so very well. I am thinking of the valiant warrior Norbert Bolz whose paper "Odds and Ends: From Man to Myth" culminates, after dutiful obeisance to the tribal heroes Heidegger, Lacan, Lévi-Strauss, Adorno, and Richard Wagner, in the sentence "for Man does not exist."[10] Could it not be that the author confused *homo sapiens* with the snark of Lewis Carroll?

Joking apart, I know very well that it may also be due to my age that I can make so little sense of the canonical texts of that movement, but since I am not a relativist I still do not believe that every generation has its own truths. I prefer to rely on my contemporary, that great student of literature, M. H. Abrams, who has concerned himself intensely with this school of thought and has come to the conclusion that it must be considered an ephemeral intellectual fad.[11] It probably appeals to the young because it permits its followers to look down on the poor uninitiated who not only believe in Father Christmas and in the stork but even in Man and in Reason. It adds a lot to one's self-respect if one has learned to see that all this is humbug, a fairy tale for children, which we have long outgrown. It is an opinion—I believe—which sounds doubly convincing because it is undeniable that in our reading of texts we inevitably run the danger of misunderstandings. Whoever is afraid of doing so can now comfortably withdraw into scepticism and dismiss any striving for understanding as naive and obsolete.

Well, the insight "to err is human" is not new, nor do I think that it should make us despair of progress in knowledge. Such despair only arises when we expect too much. The demand of "all or nothing" which may appeal to the young must be countered on the part of the mature humanist by the reminder that we must practise a little humility. You may perhaps discern in this advice the voice of my friend Karl Popper and you would be right.[12] He has convinced me that neither in the sciences nor in the humanities must we aim at total solutions but that

10. See Norbert W. Bolz, " 'Odds and Ends': Vom Menschen zum Mythos," in *Mythos und Moderne: Begriff und Bild einer Rekonstruktion,* ed. Karl Heinz Bohrer (Stuttgart, 1982).

11. See Abrams, "Literary Criticism in America: Some New Directions," in *Theories of Criticism,* ed. Abrams and Jessie Ackerman, Occasional Papers of the Council of Scholars of the Library of Congress, no. 2 (Washington, D.C., 1984).

12. See Popper, *Conjectures and Refutations: The Growth of Scientific Knowledge* (London, 1963), *Objective Knowledge: An Evolutionary Approach* (Oxford, 1972), and *Unended Quest: An*

we still have the right to go on asking and searching, because we can learn from our mistakes. I believe that this also applies to our efforts at understanding other peoples, other civilizations, and other ages. No doubt it is fallacious to conclude from the fact that they were all human beings that they must also have thought and felt as we do. Ethnology has long confirmed that some institutions and ideas of remote tribes are harder to understand than others. Here the influence of cultural relativism must certainly be welcomed, that is where it restrains us in applying our own cultural standards to other societies. And yet even here exaggerations must be avoided, for the negation of all standards can only lead *ad absurdum*. I am thinking of the much discussed argument which denies us the right of attributing any influence on reality to widespread magical practises, since our notion of reality is rooted in our language and our culture and therefore not applicable beyond these narrow confines.[13] One is tempted to ask whether these arguments are more than examples of modish gamesmanship. In any case in ethnology there are certain correctives which prevent relativism from dominating the entire field. After all, travellers have seen their foreign fellow-humans laugh and weep, play and quarrel; anyone who has been lucky enough to see films and snapshots of the life and behaviour of totally isolated tribes, such as those Irenäus Eibl-Eibesfeldt has brought home and used to illustrate his recent book *The Biology of Human Behaviour,* can no longer doubt that certain human reactions are indeed universal.[14]

The historian frequently lacks these controls. He must essentially rely on the testimonies of the past which tradition and coincidence have preserved for us, documents of legal practice, of literature, art, and religious cults. Small wonder that the encounter with these testimonies of a vanished style of life have focused attention particularly on the variability of Man. Nature abhors a vacuum and the same applies to the human mind. Where testimonies are absent, the imagination takes over to fill the void and thus we come to fashion the image of people in past ages on the impression which we derive from their art. Hearing or reading of Man in classical antiquity or of "Gothic Man" (particularly in German writings) we automatically visualize a typical figure we remember from the art of these ages.

Intellectual Autobiography (London, 1976). For the problem area of this essay see *The Poverty of Historicism*. For bibliographies, see *The Philosophy of Karl Popper,* ed. P. A. Schilpp (La Salle, Ill., 1974) and *A Pocket Popper,* ed. David Miller (London, 1983).

13. See Peter Winch, "Understanding a Primitive Society," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 1 (1964): 307–24; reprinted in *Rationality,* ed. B. R. Wilson (Oxford, 1970), where other contributions to this debate can be found. See also *Rationality and Relativism,* ed. Martin Hollis and Steven Lukes (Oxford, 1982)

14. See Irenäus Eibl-Eibesfeldt, *Die Biologie des Menschlichen Verhaltens: Grundriss der Humanethologie* (Munich, 1984).

Great humanists such as Johan Huizinga and Ernst Robert Curtius have warned us against this type of mental short-cut which I have described as "the physiognomic fallacy."[15] I must admit that my own field of study, the history of art, has been responsible for many such misunderstandings whenever it claimed that the style of every period can and must be interpreted as a symptom or—as the saying goes—as the expression of the spirit of the particular age or nation. Thus the champion of expressionism in art history, Wilhelm Worringer, declared seventy-five years ago in his book *Der Geist der Gotik* (The Gothic Spirit) quite consistently: "For art history Man as such can exist as little as can Art as such. These are ideological prejudices which condemn the psychology of mankind to sterility." And thus the decoration and drapery style of medieval works of art suggested to him the surprising conclusion: "Nordic Man is a stranger to rest and tranquility; his whole creative power is concentrated on the idea of unbridled and unchecked movement."[16] He obviously never asked himself whether the notion of a whole population of "Fidgety Phils" can be confirmed from other types of evidence, indeed whether his diagnosis is not refuted by the art of the Van Eycks, Vermeer, or Caspar David Friedrich who, after all, were presumably also "Nordic Men." What has been called the hermeneutic circle, the search for the confirmation of the initial intuition, degenerates simply into a circular argument if only allegedly supporting evidence is admitted. Thus the rendering of space in a certain style is being explained by reference to the way the world was "seen" in that period which, in its turn, is supposed to account for the peculiarities of representation—and nobody asked whether people who did not know our kind of perspective were also incapable (as a psychologist once asked wittily) of hiding behind a column if they did not want to be seen,[17] or whether the Chinese whose painting gets along without the contrast between light and shade are really not in the position of seeking refuge under a shady tree on a hot summer's day.

I believe the fallacies which tempted art history to adopt cultural relativism also occur in other fields of the humanities; I mean the inference *ex silentio,* the idea that the life and thought of the past can only have exhibited those features which are also known to us from artistic manifestation. A classical philologist once notoriously suggested that the ancient Greeks must have been colour-blind since they had so few words for colours. Admittedly one would then have to conclude that we are also colour-blind since our languages have infinitely fewer names than hues

15. See my "Art and Scholarship," *"Meditations on a Hobby Horse" and Other Essays on the Theory of Art* (London, 1963).

16. See Wilhelm Worringer, *Der Geist der Gotik* (Munich, 1910), pp. 10, 50.

17. It was M. H. Pirenne, the author of *Optics, Painting, and Photography* (Cambridge, 1970). See also my *Art and Illusion: A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation* (New York, 1960).

we can perceive. The conclusion of course is based on a misunderstanding of the nature of language, because language must be selective if it is to serve the function of communication. To be sure this varied selectivity of language poses enormous difficulties to the translator, and yet I must again agree with Popper who has warned us in this connection not to confuse a difficulty with an impossibility. However hard it may often be to render the meaning of a sentence in another language, and however much we may have to resort to glosses and roundabout explanations, the sense can be made accessible even though it may entail a loss in neatness and elegance.[18]

I need hardly explain that works of great literature from other periods and civilizations confront us with similar difficulties. The concepts, the human relationships, the institutions of which they speak stand constantly in need of laborious explanations. But the effort that we expend on these tasks should not tempt us to equate the world which we encounter in the poetry and prose of foreign civilizations with the everyday reality from which they sprang. What applies to language, after all, applies even more to the means of these art forms: the *topoi,* the types we encounter in these texts never reflect the infinite variety of experience but rather the autonomous traditions of literary genres. A book such as Auerbach's *Mimesis* has shown us to what extent new means of expression become receptive to new experiences, but even where they do not enter into literature we have no right to assume that these experiences never occurred in everyday life.[19] Admittedly we cannot know this for certain. It is clear that the text of Plutarch is also dependent on the traditions and conventions of the ancient world and leaves many questions unanswered which might perhaps have interested a modern psychoanalyst. Goethe's remark "They were all human beings" does not formulate an ultimate truth so much as a hypothesis. We might describe it as a working hypothesis or perhaps as a heuristic principle,[20] because I believe it is always worthwhile to make the initial assumption that even in foreign countries and in distant ages we have to do with people who are not all that different from ourselves—even though this assumption may occasionally fail to stand a further test.

Perhaps I may here insert a little anecdote which should illustrate my conviction more clearly than lengthy methodological reflections. I am thinking of a discussion about the intellectual history of the Renaissance in which I was provoked to the remark that one should not treat "Renaissance Man" as a separate species, and was tempted to say that I was

18. See Popper, "The Myth of the Framework," in *The Abdication of Philosophy and the Public Good: Essays in Honour of P. A. Schilpp,* ed. Eugene Freeman (La Salle, Ill., 1976).

19. See Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: Dargestellte Wirklichkeit in der abendländische Literatur* (Bern, 1970); in English, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature,* trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton, N.J., 1953).

20. See E. D. Hirsch, Jr., *The Aims of Interpretation* (Chicago, 1976), esp. p. 32.

sure that these people too liked to stay in bed in the morning. It was a risky assertion but I was undeservedly lucky, for I was able to tell my opponent at the next occasion that Leonardo da Vinci describes symbolic carvings on Tuscan bedsteads which are intended to warn lazy sleepers not to waste too much time there, "particularly in the morning when one is rested and sober and should be ready for fresh exertions."[21]

What I am driving at is the simple insight that in speaking of Man one must not lose sight of Old Adam, that Old Adam who insists on the satisfaction of those drives which all people have in common. True, the way in which various cultures try to cope with the insistent clamour of our natural instincts is subject to countless variations,[22] but whatever particular solution may have been adopted, no style of life is conceivable in which the tension between the urge for satisfaction and the pressures of cultural demands fails to find expression. Literature, above all, has frequently concerned itself with these tensions. Think of the contrasting figures of Don Quixote and Sancho Panza, the one whose head has been turned by the ideals of his culture, the other who has remained enough of a peasant to know what he wants, exactly like Tamino and Papageno in Mozart's *Magic Flute*. The ancient Indian drama also knows of a similar contrast between the noble hero who speaks Sanskrit and a comic figure by name of Vidushaka who, despite belonging to the Brahmin caste, speaks the popular language of Prakrit and is always out to indulge his stomach.

When speaking of the difficulties that exist in understanding foreign cultures and their values we must not omit therefore to take account of important differences in this respect. As children of nature we are all much more alike than in the spheres of the highest refinement. It is not for nothing that Mephistopheles says to Faust: "The worst company will make you feel that you are a man among men," and since it is the devil who speaks we may understand him to say: "Precisely the worst company." Indeed we then hear him remark in Auerbach's tavern, "Just watch and see how splendidly bestiality will reveal itself." Beneath the all-too-human there is the layer of animality:

> We feel so barbarously well
> As fifty thousand swine.[23]

21. See *The Literary Works of Leonardo da Vinci*, ed. J. P. Richter, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1939), 1:385.

22. See Heinz Hartmann, Ernst Kris, and Rudolph M. Loewenstein, "Some Psychoanalytic Comments on 'Culture and Personality,'" *Psychological Issues* 4, no. 2 (1964): 86–116.

23. Uns ist ganz kannibalisch wohl
Als wie fünfhundert Säuen.

This and the preceding quotations come from Goethe's *Faust I, Sämtliche Werke*, 13:66, 94.

We need not forget, however, that the opportunity for this kind of regression is also specific to a given civilization. Some civilizations forbid the consumption of alcohol and they know of no open carousals of this kind. For Goethe and his contemporaries, on the other hand, there were also more noble ways to achieve freedom from the normal constraints of culture:

> And big and small shout with delight
> To be a man here is my right.[24]

"Here" is of course in the freedom of nature outside the city, and this feeling of liberation is again specific to a given culture. Maybe it did not exist before Rousseau, though the tradition of the idyll reminds us that the life of the shepherd, close to nature, had long before been idealised by the town-dweller who longed for a form of existence remote from the pressures and cares of civilization. We others, if we may believe Schiller, can only throw off this burden in privileged moments. I am of course thinking of his "Ode to Joy":

> With your spell you can restore
> What strict fashion now divides
> Men are brothers as before
> Where your gentle wing abides.[25]

Where Schiller here speaks of "fashion" (*Mode*) he refers to convention, in other words what the Greeks called *thesis* in contradistinction to *physis,* nature: Free from the constraints of convention, the poet says, all human beings are alike.

Maybe the Age of Reason has rightly been accused of oversimplifying this contrast, but it is to this sublime simplification that we owe the concepts of the Rights of Man and *Humanität.* On the other hand this simplification also explains in its turn the reaction of "historism" which did not have to wait for Hegel.

Today, after two hundred years, it should be obvious that the polarity of convention versus nature is certainly insufficient to do justice to the infinite variety of cultural life. Our biological inheritance consists less of overt traits than of dispositions which can be developed or atrophied in the life of the community. Neither among animals nor among humans

24. Zufrieden jauchzet gross und klein
Hier bin ich Mensch, hier darf ich's sein.

Goethe, "Vor dem Thor," *Faust I, Sämtliche Werke,* 13:40.

25. Deine Zauber binden wieder,
Was die Mode streng geteilt,
Alle Menschen werden Brüder,
Wo dein sanfter Flügel weilt.

are all these developments reversible. Some behaviour patterns really become second nature and create certain human types with their own mentalities and their own possibilities and limitations. The humanist who is interested in these complex processes will have to turn to psychology, for however many schools and problem areas there may exist in that science, they are all governed by Alexander Pope's dictum: "The proper study of mankind is Man." True, since psychology aims at being a science it must not submit to any dogma, not even to the dogma of the unity of mankind, yet I for one side with those of my contemporaries who oppose relativism.[26] I believe with them that we must start from the hypothesis that there are indeed constants in the psyche of Man with which the humanist can reckon. Naturally we must not expect too much. It may sound trivial to say that the enjoyment of rhythmical movement is common to all normal human beings, but without this basic disposition we would not have the various types of dance, or those refined forms of rhythm which have so marvellously blossomed forth in Western and in Indian music, and have also led to ever-fresh miracles in the poetry of all nations.[27]

I am convinced that the visual arts also rest in a similar way on biological foundations. Like the disposition for rhythmical orders which here manifests itself in the decorative art of all peoples, so the pleasure in light and splendour is common to us all. Man is a phototropic creature; if he were photophobic, like the termites he would always have shunned the light. Thus radiant splendour, sparkle, and glitter have always been seen as the prerogative of secular and religious power out to impress and to overawe. Admittedly it would be wholly misleading to try to explain the origins of art exclusively with reference to these inborn positive reactions. Only the interaction between fulfilment and denial, between the delay of satisfaction and the surpassing of expectation leads to what we call art, and for this to happen it needs a developed tradition and a universal admiration of masters who can control such psychological effects. But however varied these structures and these sequences may be which result from such an interplay of elements, they all operate within fields of tensions which derive their energy from the original polarity of universal human reactions. In any social community every colour, every sound, and naturally also every word has a feeling tone which determines its exact position within this system. It goes without saying that these various systems will not be accessible to the outsider without an effort of empathy and yet there is much evidence to suggest that they all share a sufficient number of features to justify us in making the attempt. Quite generally it can be said that every one of the so-called sense modalities tends to evoke resonances in other senses and that this type of correspondence facilitates understanding. The universal capacity of language to resort

26. See Justin Stagl, *Kulturanthropologie und Gesellschaft* (Munich, 1974), p. 120.
27. See my *The Sense of Order: Studies in the Psychology of Decorative Art* (Oxford, 1979).

to synaesthetic metaphors must be due to this inborn disposition.[28] In German we say "helle Freude," the English speak of "a bright hope," and Eibl-Eibesfeldt reports that among the Eipos of New Guinea there is an expression for joy, "the sun shines on my breast." If the termites had a language they would have to speak of "dark joy," of a "gloomy hope," and of "night descending on their antennae," for they shun the light. The inhabitants of tropical climates naturally prefer coolness to warmth, and so Indians would rather be coolly than warmly received, but even so the Gita likens the Divine to the light of a thousand suns.

Far be it from me to want to send the practitioners of Germanic studies on a hunting expedition after psychological literature on the metaphor, a literature which may still have to be written.[29] For as I discovered to my surprise and admiration, these insights have long since been laid down in the canonical text of their studies to which I can refer you—I mean the German Dictionary founded by Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm. It was a fortunate accident that prompted me to search this book for examples of synaesthetic metaphors which I wanted to use to illustrate my belief in the universal validity of certain psychological reactions. I had not expected the wealth of treasures which lies hidden there for the psychologist of expression.

I must recommend to you to read up the term *süss* (sweet) in that dictionary, though you may have to take a day off for the purpose. The entry with its derivations runs to at least seventy-eight columns. But right at the beginning we are presented with an important insight. We learn that the word *süss* did not originally signify a taste which was subsequently applied to other sensory modalities such as a sweet smile, sweet harmonies, or sweet rest; on the contrary, the word appears originally to have been synonymous with soft to the touch, mild or pleasurable, that is, it refers to that positive pole of our sensations of which I spoke, and it is for this reason that it also signifies the taste which is biologically pleasing. However, this narrower meaning only became fixed in contrast to other tastes, that is, to bitter and sour, which in their turn point to further ranges of feeling. But the dictionary also throws much light on the reaction of surfeit, which is of such psychological and aesthetic importance. Here it is the derivative *süsslich* (roughly corresponding to the English "syrupy") which received a pejorative connotation, most of all since the eighteenth century when the term begins to express revulsion. It thus anticipates

28. For these problems see also my articles "Visual Metaphors of Value in Art," "Expression and Communication," and "The Cartoonist's Armoury" in *"Meditations on a Hobby Horse"* as well as "Verbal Wit as a Paradigm of Art: The Aesthetic Theories of Sigmund Freud (1856–1939)," in *Tributes: Interpreters of Our Cultural Tradition* (Oxford, 1984), pp. 93–115.

29. See L. E. Marks, *The Unity of the Senses: Interrelations among the Modalities* (London, 1978), and C. E. Osgood, "The Cross-Cultural Generality of Visual-Verbal Synaesthetic Tendencies," *Behavioral Science* 5 (1960).

the meaning of *kitschig* (roughly "chocolate-boxy" or "cloying") which, in its turn, has reacted back on the overtones of the word "sweet." We no longer much like to use it as a term of aesthetic approval. After all we live in an age in which the dread of being *kitschig* has assumed endemic proportions, while it especially welcomes artistic creations which go, as it were, against the grain.

It would be much to be welcomed if the study of comparative literature could be extended to embrace a comparative study of expression in which the meaning of metaphors might offer a bridge into the wide and fascinating field of synaesthetics for which psychology is competent. But that is music of the future. Rather than losing myself even further I propose to resort to an example which might help me to sum up what was and is my essential point.

The first two stanzas of a poem by Simon Dach dating from the year 1638 will, I hope, not be unwelcome in this context since they will bring us back to Germanic studies. Its title runs "The Bridegroom to His Dearly Beloved Bride on Her First Visit to His House":

Welcome, welcome, you my treasure
You, the solace of my heart.
Oh what sunshine and what pleasure
Does your presence here impart.
Splendours blaze across this house
Which your golden rays arouse.

Everything will bid you greeting
There is not a brick or tile
Which delighted at this meeting
Will not hail you with a smile,
Where the walls which you behold
You will soon turn into gold.[30]

No doubt the trained student of German literature will be able first to explain to us how this poem relates to the tradition of the epithalamia

30. Seid mir tausendmal willkommen,
Ihr mein Trost und Sonnenschein!
Ach, was Segen, Heil und Frommen
Kömmt mit euch, mein Licht, herein!
Welch ein Glanz bricht durch mein Haus
Jetzt mit güldnen Strahlen aus!

Alles beut euch dar die Hände,
Nichts bei mir ist so erstarrt,
Das nicht lächle; ja die Wände
Merken eure Gegenwart,
Eure, die ihr sie in Gold
Bald hernach verkehren sollt.

Simon Dach, *Gedichte*, ed. Walther Ziesemer, 4 vols. (Halle, 1936–38), vol. 1, no. 49; with commentary. I have here modernised the spelling.

and which position it occupies within the work of Dach. He will also be able to tell us that the poet put these words into the mouth of a wealthy contemporary who had commissioned him to write them. We can therefore agree with those of our colleagues who insist that it is always the text that matters and not the alleged sentiment of the author to which we really have no access. But this does not mean that the text is fair game and that we must grant it to deconstructionists that the line "Splendours blaze across this house" might also be interpreted as alluding to a conflagration, which might possibly impress a fanatical Freudian as a symptom of anxiety that the bride might destroy the bachelor's cosy mode of life—nor that we should allow an orthodox Marxist to discern an indication that she might want to sell the house—since we read that she "will soon turn" the walls "into gold."

Speaking seriously, we need not permit anyone to deprive us of our conviction that we can enjoy and understand these fine lines as they were intended to be understood, quite irrespective of the fact that the middle-class culture of the so-called Baroque Age differed so widely from our own style of life. For what use would be our imagination if it could not close such a gap?[31]

The cultural relativist is still welcome to remind us that the situation from which this poem springs would be even harder to understand in a society where the abduction or the purchase of brides is the norm and where nobody lives in houses. For if these barriers were really quite insurmountable in principle we would have to take leave forever of Goethe's dream of a "world literature." He could never have coined this beautiful term if his reading of Homer and of Shakespeare, of Hāfez, Kalidasa, and finally of Plutarch, had not convinced him "They were all human beings—so much is plain."

31. On the legitimate role of the imagination in the humanities, see also my address to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, "Focus on the Arts and Humanities," *Tributes* (Oxford, 1984), pp. 11–27.