A little more than one hundred years ago, Julian Schmidt, a prominent literary historian of the time, announced the appearance of the first critical edition of Johann Gottfried Herder’s collected works with a notable mixture of hortatory optimism and muted admonition. “No one of our classical writers,” Schmidt wrote, “so thoroughly needs a historical and critical revision, no one would reward it to such an eminent degree, and for no one has to this day so little been done.” There is not a single word of this remark, including the reference to the potential rewards of such a revision, that would not hold true today as well, a century of scholarship later. Compared with the sheer number of studies that continue to be devoted to Herder’s other “classical” contemporaries, above all to the works of Lessing, Schiller, and Goethe, the amount of attention Herder has so far received seems strangely incompatible with his acknowledged historical status within German letters. Herder, who lived from 1744 to 1803, is generally regarded as having been one of the most important thinkers of the eighteenth century in Germany, and his contributions to the philosophy of both history and language are still considered to have been seminal for the modern developments of these disciplines. Yet, even though there has been a marked increase of interest in Herder in recent years, the process of reevaluating his historical position, as well as of reexamining the sub-
stance of his thought itself, has not always led to the equally necessary questioning of the assumptions that long governed our understanding of Herder and his role in German, and hence European, culture.

This book offers an account of Herder’s aesthetic philosophy as he expressed it during the first period of his intellectual activity, from 1763 to 1778. To speak of Herder’s “aesthetic philosophy” as if it were a unified, systematic exposition already implies, however, a particular interpretation. Herder was not a systematic writer in any normally accepted meaning of the word. As even the titles of the works in which he presented his ideas on aesthetics almost defiantly announce, he never produced a comprehensive statement of his theory of aesthetics, but only “fragments,” “torsos,” “collections,” and “essays.” But this theory did exist, imbedded in the interstices of the works I discuss here, and supported by the often unspoken intellectual environment in which Herder wrote. By attending to this environment, the European Enlightenment, and the ways in which Herder responded to its inspiration and challenge, I have tried to extract the outline of a coherent philosophy.

I have thus intended this book to be a contribution toward the sort of historical-critical revision that Julian Schmidt had already recognized as necessary at the end of the previous century. My main purpose has been to show through analyses of the works Herder wrote during the first fifteen years of his career that he explicitly attempted to develop a theoretically unified philosophy of aesthetics. Moreover, I show that this philosophy can be properly understood only when it is seen as participating in a constant, constructive dialogue with the Enlightenment Herder was long thought to repudiate. In order to define the terms of this dialogue, I have also examined those eighteenth-century English, French, and German philosophies of psychology, history, and language that had the greatest formative effect on Herder’s thought. At the same time, I have tried to demonstrate how Herder transformed these ideas with the express intent of creating a flexible and yet accurate tool for the investigation of all artistic phenomena.

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