

After Enlightenment

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John R. Betz

After Enlightenment:

The Post-Secular Vision of J. G. Hamann

John R. Betz

Nothing was shining through to them except a dreadful, self-kindled fire.

Wisdom 17: 6

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For Laura

He was not the light, but came to bear witness to the light. The true light that enlightens every man was coming into the world.

John 1: 8–9

And we have the prophetic word made more sure. You will do well to pay attention to this as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts.

2 Peter 1: 19

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Preface

The purpose of this book is twofold. On the one hand, it seeks to illuminate the life and writings of a notoriously obscure figure, Johann Georg Hamann (1730–88), who was widely influential in his own day – even revered as the “Magus of the North” – but tends to be known today, if it all, only indirectly by way of association with his protégé Johann Gottfried Herder (1744–1803), the Counter-Enlightenment, and the literary movement known as the *Sturm und Drang*. In short, it seeks to recover an important but neglected figure – also in the hope of correcting a common misconception of Hamann, namely, that he was an “irrationalist,” or even (as some have misleadingly suggested) the founder of modern irrationalism. On the other hand, more constructively, it seeks to draw out the implications of Hamann’s engagement with his friends and contemporaries, who included some of the leading lights of the German Enlightenment, such as Kant, Lessing, and Mendelssohn. Specifically, it seeks to show the ways in which Hamann’s prescient arguments against the Enlighteners – the *Aufklärer* – have, in fact, prevailed. Moreover, inasmuch as Hamann prophesied the end of the Enlightenment, foreseeing what Frederick Beiser has called the “fate of reason,” this book presents him as a kind of postmodern prophet, i.e., as someone who was already, however anachronistically, in conversation with postmodernity. And herein especially, it is argued, lies his uncanny, prophetic relevance beyond his time to our own.

To the extent that this book places Hamann in conversation with postmodernity (which shares Hamann’s lack of confidence in the power of autonomous reason, or reason alone, to determine any ultimate meaning or even the nature of reason itself), it in some respects represents a continuation of the author’s dissertation. Aside from this thematic similarity, however, the present book is an entirely new and different work. It was conceived out of a sense that what was needed, and that what the dissertation failed to provide, was a comprehensive introduction to Hamann’s life and writings – without which his various sayings and gnomic utterances, taken out of context, are often so obscure as to be unintelligible. By the same token, it was conceived out of the recognition that the methodology employed in the dissertation, which sought to arrange Hamann’s insights according to a set of topics (and thus in many cases out of context), was inadequate; and that no work on Hamann that would hope to make him comprehensible in his own terms – or provide anything more than a loose collection of quotations and aphorisms – can dispense with a sustained treatment of his writings and the particular circumstances that occasioned them.

Therefore, in an attempt to present, as far as possible, the whole of Hamann – both the man and his work – the author has taken an approach similar to that of Gwen Griffith-Dickson’s groundbreaking translation-commentary, *Hamann’s Relational Metacriticism* (1995), which provides detailed exposition and insightful analysis of some of Hamann’s most important writings. The main difference between this study and that of Griffith-Dickson, however, aside from the post-secular theme and having more explicitly theological concerns, is that the present book is more

comprehensive (including treatment of additional, hitherto untranslated texts, chiefly from Hamann's London Writings and his so-called Mystery Writings), but also, necessarily, more selective with regard to the passages that are translated and the level of commentary it provides. In any event, the author owes much to Griffith-Dickson's work, which remains an invaluable resource for Hamann studies. It should by all means be consulted for what is lacking in the present volume – as should the very good and richly annotated translations by Kenneth Haynes, which have appeared more recently under the title *Hamann: Writings on Philosophy and Language* (2007).

As for the main title of the book, perhaps a few remarks are in order. For titles of this sort are by now, of course, something of a cliché, recalling titles of other books, most notably, Alasdair MacIntyre's *After Virtue* (1981), and, more recently, Catherine Pickstock's *After Writing* (1998). With *After Virtue* the present book shares the conviction that the effort of the Enlightenment to ground morality in reason alone has failed, and that the only way forward is in some way to get "over" and beyond the Enlightenment, i.e., over and beyond the cherished illusion that reason alone is able to provide a sufficient basis for morality or culture. In *After Virtue* it was also proposed as a way forward that we look again to tradition (which the Enlighteners for the most part spurned as a source of wisdom), specifically to the example of St Benedict – whose example, among others, stands as a reminder that through Christ, if not through secular reason, holiness of life is possible.

In the present book, following Hamann, who prophesied the nihilistic destiny of the Enlightenment in its heyday more than two centuries ago, a similar but explicitly "metacritical" argument is made: namely, that any notion of *secular* reason that would claim to be pure of tradition is an illusion, since reason itself is a product of tradition; and that, given this dependence, reasonable persons would do well to attend, specifically, to the *inspired* tradition of the prophetic word (and to the Word to which it points), which comes to the aid of reason like a "light shining in the darkness," and is *more sure* (2 Pet. 1: 19) and, in the end, *more fruitful* (Isa. 55: 11) than the principles and (in Hamann's view) "dead works" of reason alone. So, too, given the enormous importance Hamann attached to language (as the "mother" of reason, and, as such, the focal point of his debate with the Enlighteners), the present book shares with Pickstock's *After Writing* the desire to get beyond uninspired, modern instrumental and postmodern deconstructive conceptions of it – ultimately to a renewed conception of language, including the text of creation, as prophecy (which, following Hamann, one might define as "a speech to the creature through the creature"). If, then, these two texts – *After Virtue* and *After Writing* – are not explicitly treated in what follows, it is owing to an implicit agreement with what they contend.

At the same time, the title of the present work may evoke comparisons with John Gray's *Enlightenment's Wake* (1995) – with this all-important difference: that in the conclusion, after a brief rapprochement with the "postmodern triumvirate," the present book steers a decidedly *post-secular* course (and thus an implicitly eschatological course) away from postmodernity (since it represents little more than the logical, nihilistic conclusion of secular modernity) toward Christ. Incidentally, for what is at stake here, and for an excellent overview of the Counter-Enlightenment in general, the reader is referred to the work of Graeme Garrard, *Counter-Enlightenments, From the Eighteenth Century to the Present* (2006). But wherein, one might still ask, lies the legitimacy of using so bold a title, and of making such strong claims, in conjunction with so obscure and seemingly unimportant a figure? The case for doing so will be made, at least implicitly, in the rest of this book.

Inasmuch as the present book seeks to retrieve Hamann from relative obscurity, to push him to the forefront of relevance, and to place him in conversation with contemporary issues and concerns, it also, rather necessarily, bears certain limitations. For it is designed as a comprehensive introduction to Hamann and his writings (with particular attention to his post-secular relevance), and not to the substantial body of secondary literature on him. What is cited in passing from other Hamann scholars, generally for the purpose of illuminating a difficult text, should therefore in no way be taken as an exhaustive representation of the scholarship on Hamann that has been done in the past century, beginning more or less with Rudolf Unger's two-volume work, *Hamann und die Aufklärung* (1911). The author has learned from many more than can be acknowledged here. For further study of the relevant scholarship the reader is therefore referred to the online bibliography of Hamann literature at <http://members.aol.com/agrudolph/bib.html>.

As for the text itself, it should be noted that Chapter 2 is a revised version of an article that originally appeared in *Pro Ecclesia* 14 (Spring 2005). As for the translations included in this volume, they are always based upon the best available critical edition – the standard edition of Hamann's works, which is cited throughout, being that of Josef Nadler, 6 vols. (1949–57); the standard edition of Hamann's correspondence being that of Walther Ziesemer and Arthur Henkel (1955–75). While the translations of O'Flaherty, Griffith-Dickson, and Haynes were occasionally consulted, unless otherwise indicated all translations are my own. As for Hamann's prolific and somewhat idiosyncratic use of dashes, which bear some analogy to other literature from this period, e.g., Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*, they have been retained as in the original texts. Given the highly rhetorical, passionate, and energetic nature of Hamann's style, they tend to be used either for elocutionary value, as pauses or breaks, or to communicate intensity of feeling or sublimity of content. Other unusual emphases, such as the use of capitals or italic (e.g., GOd for GOtt, or GOD for GOTT), have also been retained.

And one last note, a disclaimer: It is possible that I have done Hamann a disservice by writing this book, for I have done what he explicitly asked not be done: I have written what, in some respects, could be considered a hagiography. As he says in one of his last works, in typical humility, "Do not worry about adding an ell to me or my stature. The measure of my 'greatness' is neither that of a giant nor an angel, no hand broader than that of a common human ell. Please do not paint any moustaches on my life, unless I can still laugh with you, so that the world is not forced to invest and transfigure a rotten sinner with the nimbus of a 'saint.'" So, too, in his first publication, the *Socratic Memorabilia*, he says that he is merely a "signpost" and "too wooden to accompany his readers in the course of their reflections" – an authorial decision that he rigorously carried out to the end of his *pseudonymous* authorship, strictly adhering to the words of the Baptist: *Illum oportet crescere, me autem minui* (John 3: 30). But signposts – especially in a time of great intellectual and moral confusion, when the age of reason, having proudly refused the gift of the *light* of faith, has run its inevitable course into nihilism – deserve to be seen. And it is ultimately to this end, as a sign for the times, that this book is proposed.

July, 2008

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Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are used in the notes for frequently cited works:

- G-D Gwen Griffith-Dickson, *Hamann's Relational Metacriticism* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1995).
- HH *Johann Georg Hamanns Hauptschriften Erklärt* (Gütersloh: Bertelsmann, 1956–63), vol. II, ed. F. Blanke and L. Schreiner; vol. V, ed. E. J. Schoonhoven and M. Seils; vol. VII, ed. L. Schreiner
- HMK Oswald Bayer, *Verunft ist Sprache. Hamanns Metakritik Kants* (Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: Frommann-Holzboog, 2002).
- JGH James C. O'Flaherty, *Johann Georg Hamann* (Boston: Twayne, 1970).
- JP Søren Kierkegaard, *Journals and Papers*, 7 vols., ed. and tr. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1967–78).
- KSA Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche, *Kritische Studien Ausgabe*, ed. G. Coli and M. Montinari (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1988).
- LS Johann Georg Hamann, *Londoner Schriften*, ed. Oswald Bayer and Bernd Weissenborn (Munich: C. H. Beck, 1993).
- N Johann Georg Hamann, *Sämtliche Werke*, 6 vols., ed. Josef Nadler, Historical-critical edn. (Vienna: Herder, 1949–57).
- NB Josef Nadler, *Johann Georg Hamann 1730–1788: Der Zeuge des Corpus mysticum* (Salzburg: Otto Müller Verlag, 1949).
- SM James C. O'Flaherty (ed.) *Hamann's Socratic Memorabilia: A Translation and Commentary* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1967).
- ZH Johann Georg Hamann, *Briefwechsel*, 6 vols., ed. Walther Ziesemer and Arthur Henkel (Wiesbaden: Insel, 1955–75).

Introduction

... Hamann – born, as it were, with an eternity – anticipated every time ...

Jean Paul¹

With the confusion caused by Kantianism we have wasted years that will never return ... This immensely wise and profound thinker, this seer, we did not recognize and heed.

Friedrich Schlegel²

... Hamann lives on, indeed, has greater prominence than before. He is one of the most profound Christians and defenders of Christianity in our century.

Wilhelm Dilthey³

The German author and critic, Johann Georg Hamann (1730–88), revered by contemporaries as the *Magus in Norden* or “wise man of the North,” tends to be known today, if at all, either for his importance to the so-called Counter-Enlightenment, or for his influence upon the proto-Romantic literary movement known as the *Sturm und Drang*, or for his influence upon Johann Gottfried Herder, who in turn influenced the development of post-Kantian philosophy. In short, he tends to be known today more by association than for anything he himself said or wrote. For many reasons, however, this circumstance must be considered unfortunate – given that Hamann’s fascinating pseudonymous writings, which abound in hermetic allusions and learned wit, are utterly unique in all of German literature; given his equally fascinating personality, which Kierkegaard admiringly described as “the *hyperbole* of all life”;⁴ given, furthermore, the richness of his theological aesthetics, and – herein lies the timeliness of his thought today – the profundity of his insights as a critic of secular reason.

But if Hamann has not received the attention he perhaps deserves, on at least one occasion, on November 18, 1993, he broke through to a wider audience when the *New York Review of Books* featured a debate between two distinguished scholars: the well-known historian of ideas, Isaiah Berlin (more of a fox than a hedgehog), and James C. O’Flaherty, the dean of American Hamann studies (more of a hedgehog than a fox). The proximate cause of their debate was the publication earlier that year of Berlin’s provocative monograph on Hamann, based upon an early study, titled *The Magus of the North: J. G. Hamann and the Origins of Modern Irrationalism*.⁵

¹ Jean Paul, *Vorschule der Ästhetik*, ed. Wolfhart Henckmann (Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 1990), p. 379.

² Friedrich Schlegel, *Deutsches Museum* III, p. 51, in *Kritische Neuausgabe*, vol. 6, ed. Hans Eichner (München: Verlag Ferdinand Schöningh, 1961), p. 628: “Mit der Kantischen Verwirrung haben wir Jahre, die für Deutschland unwieder-bringlich wichtig waren, verschwendet. Diesen großen *weisen* Tiefdenker, den Hellsiehenden haben wir nicht gekannt und beachtet.”

³ Wilhelm Dilthey, *Gesammelte Schriften* (Leipzig and Berlin: B. G. Teubner, 1936), vol. 17, p. 102.

⁴ JP II 1543 (n.d., 1837), (*Pap.* II A 623).

⁵ Isaiah Berlin, *The Magus of the North: J. G. Hamann and the Origins of Modern Irrationalism*, ed. Henry Hardy (New York: Farrar, Straus, & Giroux, 1993); repr. in Isaiah Berlin, *Three Critics of the Enlightenment: Vico, Hamann, Herder* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000).

While Berlin draws attention to Hamann as one of “the few wholly original critics of modern times,” it should be noted that he is an intellectual heir of Hamann’s opponents and reads him accordingly.⁶ Thus, in Berlin’s estimation, Hamann is not only an “irrationalist,” but “the pioneer of anti-rationalism in every sphere.”⁷ Indeed, according to his own genealogy of modernity Hamann appears as an anti-modern obscurantist whom the advance of secular reason has perhaps rightly left behind.

While one must admire Berlin for the breadth of his erudition, in this particular matter one must regret that he does not plumb the depths of Hamann’s concerns or take into account nearly fifty years of scholarship, which has come to very different conclusions. For, rather than seeing Hamann as an irrationalist or as simply a reactionary thinker, modern Hamann scholarship has come to see that he was, in some sense, radically progressive—in fact, as Oswald Bayer has put it, a “radical Enlightener.”⁸ Aside from reintroducing a neglected figure the present work is therefore dedicated to showing some of the ways in which Hamann was ahead of his time—specifically, how he saw through and past the Enlightenment’s claims regarding the nature and scope of autonomous reason to its problematic philosophical, religious, political, cultural, and aesthetic consequences.

It is rare, of course, that a prophet receives widespread recognition in his own time, except perhaps by a small coterie of followers; and, in keeping with the gospel axiom (Mark 6: 4), as far as we know, no one from Hamann’s home town of Königsberg regarded him as one—though Kant, a personal friend, and most nearly Hamann’s polar opposite, had great respect for him. What no one assessing Hamann’s significance can overlook, however, is that his admirers included some of Germany’s most prominent poets and philosophers, who even today are household names in the history of ideas. Nor can one ignore the extraordinary degree of importance they attached to him. To Goethe, Germany’s most famous poet, who was an avid collector of his writings, he was someone unique (*cette tête unique*),⁹ but “the brightest mind of his day” (*der hellste Kopf seiner Zeit*),¹⁰ indeed nothing less than the “literary father” of the German people.¹¹ To Herder and Jacobi, his closest disciples, he was a revered mentor and friend. To Friedrich Schlegel, Jean Paul, and F. W. J. Schelling, he stood above his age as a prophet and seer. To Hegel, who wrote the first review of his collected writings in 1828, he possessed a “penetrating genius.”¹² And then there is Kierkegaard, his last great admirer, who not only “rejoices” in Hamann, but suggests that Hamann, together with Socrates was one of the “perhaps

⁶ Berlin, *Three Critics*, p. 257.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Oswald Bayer, *Zeitgenosse im Widerspruch: Johann Georg Hamann als radikaler Aufklärer* (Munich: Piper Verlag, 1988).

⁹ As Goethe puts it in French to Charlotte von Stein, September 17, 1784, in *Werke*, vol. 4 (Weimar, 1890), sect. 6, pp. 359f.: “J’ai toujours aimé beaucoup les feuilles Sybillines [*sic*] de ce mage moderne et cette nouvelle production ... Il y a des bons mots impaïables, et des tournures très sérieuses qui m’ont fait rire presque à chaque page ... Je me trouve très heureux d’avoir le sens qu’il faut pour entendre jusqu’à un certain point les idées de cette tête unique, car on peut bien affirmer le paradoxe qu’on ne l’entend pas par l’entendement.” Quoted in *HH I*, p. 20.

¹⁰ Kanzler Friedrich von Müller, *Unterhaltungen mit Goethe*, ed. R. Grumach (Weimar, 1982), p. 109 (from December 18, 1823). See also the collection titled, *Johann Georg Hamann: “Der hellste Kopf seiner Zeit,”* ed. Oswald Bayer (Tübingen: Attempto Verlag, 1998).

¹¹ As Goethe put it upon discovering the writings of Vico, “It is truly a beautiful thing if a people can claim such a literary father; one day Hamann will become a similar codex for the Germans.” See *Italianische Reise* (Weimar, 1890) (letter from Naples, March 5, 1787), sect. 1, p. 31.

¹² G. W. F. Hegel, “Hamanns Schriften,” *Jahrbücher für wissenschaftliche Kritik* (1828); reprinted in *Berliner Schriften, 1818–1831*, vol. XI of *Werke*, ed. E. Moldenhauer and K. M. Michel (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1986), p. 325.

most brilliant minds of all time.”¹³ In sum, to judge from their testimony, it would seem that it was ironically Hamann, by all accounts the *darkest* author in the history of German letters, who was truly *enlightened*. How preposterous, then, that today so few, even in the modern academy, have heard of him. As Kierkegaard poignantly put it regarding Hamann’s fate:

the originality of his genius is there in his brief statements, and the pithiness of form corresponds completely to the desultory hurling forth of a thought. With heart and soul, down to his last drop of blood, he is concentrated in a single word, a highly gifted genius’s passionate protest against a system of existence. Poor Hamann, you have been reduced to a subsection by Michelet. Whether your grave has ever been marked, I do not know; but I do know that by hook or by crook you have been stuck into the subsection uniform and thrust into the ranks.¹⁴

But if this fate has been unjust, the recovery of Hamann’s thought is timely. For it is only now, one could argue, after the ideals of the Enlightenment have run their course for more than two hundred years and the theoretical and moral foundations of secular humanism have collapsed in ways that Hamann predicted, that the full range and prophetic importance of his post-secular vision can begin to be appreciated. This is especially true of his devastating “metacritique” of Kant and the Enlightenment’s *faith* in reason, which makes him in many ways a Christian precursor of postmodern philosophy – ultimately, I argue, to the point of forcing a choice between secular postmodernity and a “post-secular” theology. In order to get to this point, however, one must first get past the “Enlightenment” itself – a term that is taken in the present context, notwithstanding the diversity of its proponents’ views, to describe a period of thought characterized by “a consistently rational approach to the great questions of religion and ethics, of theology and philosophy.”¹⁵ Specifically, it will require engaging the thought of such well-known *Aufklärer* as Kant (arguably the Enlightenment’s most important philosopher), J. D. Michaelis (the father of modern biblical criticism), Lessing (the German Enlightenment’s most important dramatist and critic), and Mendelssohn (arguably its most important theorist concerning the relationship between Church and state). What distinguishes the present work from other critical assessments of the Enlightenment, however, is that it engages the Enlightenment not from a remote perspective, but from the perspective of an extremely cultured contemporary, who, in the case of Kant and Mendelssohn, was also a personal friend.

Of course, given how thoroughly the principles of the Enlightenment continue to animate public discourse, to the point of being virtually unquestioned at the level of popular culture, getting past the Enlightenment cannot be taken for granted. Indeed, as Charles Taylor has suggested, it involves engaging nothing less than a fortress of established ideas that he calls the “citadel of secular reason,”¹⁶ which dominates

¹³ Søren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety*, ed. and tr. with introduction and notes by Reidar Thomte (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980), pp. 178, 198; *JP* II 1555 (n.d., 1844), (*Pap.* V B 45); (n.d., 1844), (*Pap.* V B 55:14).

¹⁴ Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, trans. Howard Hong and Edna Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980), p. 224. The reference is to Karl Ludwig Michelet, a Hegelian who wrote an entry on Hamann in his *Geschichte der letzten Systeme der Philosophie in Deutschland* (1837).

¹⁵ *JGH*, p. 150.

¹⁶ See the postscript by Charles Taylor, in Paul J. Griffiths and Reinhard Hüter (eds.) *Reason and the Reasons of Faith* (New York and London: T. & T. Clark, 2005), p. 23. See also Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2007).

from a seemingly impregnable position the entire landscape of modern society, for which the imperative to “question authority,” especially that of religious tradition (and to replace it with the authority of one’s own opinion as an infallible guide, regardless of one’s moral formation), is a matter of uncritical acceptance. All of which is given its philosophical mandate in Kant’s revolutionary essay from 1784, which hails the Enlightenment as an unprecedented advance in the history of the human race: the advance of reason beyond ignorance, superstition, uncritical deference to authority, and the immaturity of “self-incurred guardianship.”¹⁷ And so it was marketed, as successfully as any ideology ever has been: rational persons (and who would not want to be numbered among them?) no longer need to be guided by the heteronomy of faith and tradition, but can be guided by – and place their trust in – reason alone.

One can hardly dispute the success of these doctrines, which so readily appeal to human pride (recalling the first temptation), and whose trans-national expansion has been so swift and wide-reaching as to rival that of any universalistic religion.¹⁸ Indeed, they form the touchstone of modern western civilization, informing everything from a widespread distrust of “organized religion” to a radical “separation of Church and state,” deriving from a tendentious reading of the “establishment clause” of the United States Constitution (namely, as implying a mandated inadmissibility of any form of natural law or natural theology, i.e., atheism as the *de facto* state religion, which would have been as unthinkable and unadvisable to the ancients as to the vast majority of the *Aufklärer* themselves). All of which derives from the Enlightenment’s radical doctrine, formulated in light of the so-called “wars of religion,”¹⁹ the dark background against which the Enlightenment is ever proposed, that religion should be a private affair, restricted to the interiority of the believing individual, and without political expression – against which, out of devotion to the *purity* of secular space (where secular opinions alone are welcome and allowed to hold sway), one must ever be on guard.

Of course, few serious critics, not even Hamann, would reject the principles of the Enlightenment *tout court* – say, the principles of popular representation or freedom of religion. Inasmuch, however, as the Enlightenment proposed a doctrine of reason that required no faith, a vision of society that required no tradition, and a politics that required no God (the source of all light and being), in Hamann’s view the “Enlightenment” was a misnomer, resting upon principles that were not only

¹⁷ See Kant, “What is Enlightenment?” in James Schmidt (ed.) *What is Enlightenment?: Eighteenth-Century Answers and Twentieth-Century Questions* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), pp. 58–64.

¹⁸ In this regard the ideology of the Enlightenment – to the degree that its doctrine of freedom has gradually devolved into purely subjective voluntarism and is no longer bound to universal standards of rationality (as was still the case with Kant) – represents the modern antithesis of Islam: whereas the latter promotes universal submission at the expense of individual freedom, the former propagates itself by flattering the freedom of the individual and his or her “right to choose” as the highest imaginable authority, *id quo maius cogitari nequit*. The one is driven at root by a doctrine of imperial freedom *from above* (namely, that of the infinitely determining power of the divine will); the other, by a doctrine, ultimately, of anarchic, chthonic freedom *from below* (namely, the infinite plasticity of the human will). In short, the one is a doctrine of divine voluntarism, the other, its inversion, a human voluntarism; while the one gives all the glory to God, arguably at the expense of the creative dignity and freedom of the *imago Dei*, the other gives all the glory to man at the expense of God. Such is the fateful dialectic of our times, with no redemption in sight as long as one fails to see in Christ the glory of God in the glory of the perfection of man (2 Cor. 4: 6).

¹⁹ For an account of the so-called “wars of religion” as, in fact, wars of modern nation-states, see William Cavanaugh, “‘A fire strong enough to consume the house’: the wars of religion and the rise of the state,” *Modern Theology* 11/4 (October 1995), pp. 397–420.

historically but ontologically and noetically defective. In short, to him it represented not the dawning of a bright new age, but a deceptive “northern light,” which would bring about a new age of spiritual darkness. To be sure, the *Aufklärer* thought of themselves as guides, “guardians” to the “dependents” who had not yet been liberated from the ignorance of superstition and the heteronomy of tradition. In Hamann’s view, however, they were nothing of the kind: they were not messianic saviors to a world lying in darkness, in a secular parody of religious expectation, but hypocritical demagogues masquerading as angels of light (cf. 2 Cor. 11: 14).²⁰

The source of the hypocrisy, in Hamann’s view, lay in the Enlighteners’ doctrine of reason, specifically their claim that reason is free – “pure” – of the contingencies of history and tradition. To Hamann, simply from a philosophical perspective, this was nonsense. For reason, he argued, is not accidentally but essentially a matter of language; and language, in turn, is obviously bound up with history and tradition. And yet it was precisely upon such dubious grounds that the Enlighteners presumed to dispense with tradition, indeed to arrogate for themselves the authority hitherto afforded historical revelation – whereby the run-of-the-mill *Aufklärer* could suddenly think himself a greater authority than Moses. Moreover, as Hamann prophetically perceived, it was upon this dubious foundation that the Enlighteners sought to advance a specific political agenda, to inaugurate a new, essentially ahistorical and therefore purely secular society, one that could function not only without divine revelation, but as if there were no God (*etsi Deus non daretur*). In other words, Hamann foresaw in the Enlighteners’ political dream a society that would be for all intents and purposes atheistic – a society for which any revelation, however true, and any prophetic testimony, however saintly, would be fundamentally irrelevant, extrinsic to the concerns of government, allowed perhaps at the margins as a matter of subjective, merely personal opinion, but deprived of any objective legitimacy in matters of state and public policy.

As Hamann anticipated, however, the price of so strict a separation of reason from religious tradition (of philosophy from theology) would be reason’s own demise, and with it the creation of a moral vacuum, inasmuch as for him reason has no integrity apart from history and tradition (reason too, he argued, has a genealogy), and can attain no *enlightenment* apart from grace and revelation. Indeed, admitting only the dim light of reason alone, refusing to admit the clarifying, supernatural light of faith, the Enlighteners would bring about no “cosmopolitical chiliasm,” but rather, as Hamann prophesied five years prior to the French revolution, new forms of violence perpetrated by those ostensibly under their “tutelage.” As he put it in response to Kant’s famous essay,

The enlightenment of our century is a mere northern light, by virtue of which no cosmopolitical chiliasm can be prophesied except one that can be prophesied in a sleeping cap and behind the stove. All the empty talk and reasoning about liberated dependents, who pose as guardians to guardians who are themselves dependents but equipped with *couteaux de chasse* [hunting knives] and daggers, is a cold, unfruitful moonlight without enlightenment for the lazy understanding and without warmth for the cowardly will – and the whole answer to the posed question is a *blind illumination* for every dependent who strolls along at noon.²¹

²⁰ Cf. Isa. 58: 6; 60: 1–2; 61: 1.

²¹ My emphasis. Hamann to Christian Jacob Kraus, in ZH V, p. 291. Cf. Garrett Green’s translation and notes in Schmidt, *What is Enlightenment?*, pp. 145–53.

In Hamann's vocabulary, therefore, the word "enlightenment" is always loaded with irony, arising from the discrepancy between his contemporaries' secular and his own theological understanding of the term. For his contemporaries it meant an awakening to the immanent, "natural light" of reason, typically conceived in *univocal* terms, i.e., in the absence of any analogical relation to, or dependence upon, a divine light or Logos. For Hamann, on the other hand, the term "enlightenment" suggested the supernatural presence of transcendence shining in the darkness, like the light of the star of Bethlehem, in any event, something *more* than reason alone can grasp or anticipate. In short, theirs was the light of an "auto-illumination"; his, the illuminating supernatural presence of the *gift* of the Holy Spirit (Luke 11: 13), apart from whom our reasonings are proportionately dark, debilitated, and confused. As the Psalmist says, "In thy light we see light" (Ps. 36: 9).

Of course, *if* the light of reason is understood not in secular, but in theological terms, namely, as a divine gift (as something that is one's own only as something given) and thus as the obscure beginning of an incremental sharing in the light of God, which cannot be completed apart from the light of faith, *then* there is no need to see the light of faith in dialectical opposition to the light of reason. Rather, as with the relation between nature and grace (which is the ontic correlate of the noetic relation between reason and faith), the light of faith could then be understood as the perfecting *illumination* of what reason dimly discerns, according to what de Lubac, in keeping with ancient and medieval tradition, calls "the twofold relation of the *datum optimum* of creation to the *donum perfectum* of divinization."²² In short, as two different gifts, reason and faith, like nature and grace, might then be understood analogically, which has the advantage of preserving some sort of relation, without collapsing the interval of difference between them.

But this, one must be clear, is not the modern doctrine of reason, and it was not to this carefully balanced doctrine, which recognized reason's limitations and need for faith and revelation, that Hamann was opposed. On the contrary, the Enlightenment's doctrine of reason was characterized precisely by the collapsing of any analogical interval between nature and grace, reason and faith. Whereas the ancient and medieval doctrine of reason was one of reason's analogical participation in a divine light or Logos, the modern doctrine of reason is that of an autonomous rationality, which admits no light beyond its own and no authority beyond the private volitions into which it inevitably resolves. If, therefore, Hamann tends to oppose faith to reason, one must emphasize that he is not critical of reason *per se*, which he regarded as a divine gift and essential part, together with language and religion, of the "bond of society,"²³ but only of reason's misuse, i.e., when it is presumptuously and hypocritically made "absolute" and as a consequence, in the absence of any higher ordination, given its cultural-linguistic dependence, ultimately resolves into the tastes and prejudices of the time. It is in this light, therefore, as a form of ironic protest against *this* particular doctrine of reason, that one should understand the obscurity and dialectical form of Hamann's authorship – from his cryptic oracles to his "clouds" of learned laconisms – namely, as a way of saying, of reflecting in an outwardly facing mirror, that his contemporaries, the *lumières* of the Enlightenment, are "in the dark."

²² See Henri de Lubac, *A Brief Catechesis on Nature and Grace* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1984), p. 50.

²³ N III, p. 231.

But if Hamann's obscure, indirect, allusive style is a function of his protest against his contemporaries' claim to give light *directly*, without any historical mediation, apart from any tradition or revelation, purely by the accessing of one's own native powers, it is also a positive function of the tradition in which he stands. Whereas the *Aufklärer* purveyed their doctrines according to the Cartesian model of clear and distinct ideas, he spoke according to an entirely different model, a biblical, prophetic model: from the darkness preceding creation, out of which God said, "Let there be light" (Gen. 1: 3); to the darkness and thick clouds atop Mt Sinai from which Moses emerged, his face illuminated, to deliver the Law (Exod. 20: 21; 34: 29ff.); to the light of the Word made flesh, which shines in the darkness (John 1: 5ff.); to the sure prophetic word, "which shines in a dark place" (2 Pet. 1: 19), etc. Indeed, the whole of Hamann's authorship can be understood as playing upon the contrast between secular and theological notions of light, darkness, and what passes for genuine illumination. All of which is summed up in a late unpublished writing where he quotes Horace, saying: "Non fumum ex fulgore, sed ex fumo dare LUCEM."²⁴ In other words, whereas the *Aufklärer* claimed to give light – in the words of *The Baltimore Sun*, "Light for All" – in Hamann's view they merely produced darkness and smoke. He, on the other hand, produced darkness, and did so intentionally, in the hope of giving light, since in a fallen world genuine spiritual illumination presupposes the recognition of a need, a lack, indeed, a confession that one has hitherto been intellectually and spiritually "in the dark" (cf. Isa. 9: 2; Matt. 5: 3).

The following chapters are thus concerned with a figure who took an exceedingly ironic and prophetic stand against his age, and who did so in a way that continues to challenge what passes for "enlightenment" in our own. To be sure, postmodern philosophy eventually caught up with Hamann's metacritique of "pure reason," which leaves modern secularism without any foundation in something called "reason alone," and thus without the same degree of faith in reason that once was so confidently espoused. But even if secular *reason* has collapsed – in fulfillment of Hamann's prophecies – *dogmatic* secularism, even in the absence of compelling reasons, remains. This can be seen in the strident debates, especially in America, between the adherents of religious tradition and those who, in the name of a purely secular state, would expunge every trace of religious influence from the public sphere and public policy, demanding an absolute separation of the inner from the outward, religious conviction from political obligation – all of which is enshrined in the mantra that "religion is best kept out of politics." What is rarely asked in these debates, however, is whether such demands are even coherent – whether the notion of a political order based upon a tradition-free rationality is even philosophically defensible. Hamann argued that it was not. Indeed, from his perspective, seeing the void looming behind it, the notion of a secular rationality that is thought to exist independently of tradition is utterly groundless and vacuous, something that can be maintained only as an ideological fiction or fabrication – a modern ignoble lie, if you will – which reduces to what Nietzsche would call the "will to power." Accordingly, he prophesied that the Enlightenment, theoretically unable to support itself, being based upon illusions regarding its own rationality, would end in nihilism. In the view of partisans of the Enlightenment, this may make Hamann an "irrationalist"; in view of the developments of philosophy and culture in our time, however, it makes Hamann uncannily prophetic. And for this reason – not to mention his insightful views on a range of

²⁴ N III, p. 347. From Horace, *Ars Poetica*: "Not smoke from lightning, but from smoke to give light" (Hamann's emphasis).

topics, including biblical exegesis, faith, reason, history, revelation, language, poetry, artistic genius, human sexuality, paganism, Judaism, and the mysteries of Christianity – he speaks beyond his age to our own.

NOTORIOUS DARKNESS: READING SIBYLLINE LEAVES

While a discussion of style may be superfluous in the case of other authors, for whom style is more or less accidental to the content that is conveyed, in the case of Hamann it is unavoidable. As O’Flaherty observes, “Whoever deals with Hamann’s thought must perforce come to terms with the difficult but fascinating subject of his style.”²⁵ On the one hand, this is due to the extraordinary importance Hamann attached to the question of style. Following Buffon, he says, “Le style est l’homme même.”²⁶ Similarly, he says to his son,

My dear child, I commend to you the *evangelical law of economy* in speaking and writing: Accounting for every *vain, superfluous* word – and *economy of style*. In these two mystical words lies the whole art of thinking and living. Everything that Demosthenes was thinking of when he repeated a single word three times is for me contained in the two words *economy and style*.²⁷

On the other hand, the necessity of discussing Hamann’s style is due to the fact that in the history of German letters no writings, with the possible exception of Jacob Böhme’s hermetic corpus, are more readily regarded as dark, obscure, and even unintelligible. As Bayer acknowledges, “The prejudice has stubbornly persisted to this day that Hamann is dark. Everyone who has heard of him or his sobriquet, the *Magus in Norden*, associates it with a mysterious darkness.”²⁸ Indeed, as H. A. Salmony claims, “no work in the German language is as difficult to understand as every one of Hamann’s writings.”²⁹

Such a view of Hamann is by no means peculiar to modern-day readers, however. As Eckhard Schumacher observes, “from the first reviews in the 1760s to the literary histories of the nineteenth century to today’s lexical entries, Hamann’s texts have been variously characterized as the superlative of darkness, the paradigm of unintelligibility.”³⁰ As a Hamburg reviewer of Hamann’s *Socratic Memorabilia* unsparingly put it, “No *alchemist*, no *Jacob Böhme*, no *mad enthusiast* could say or write anything more *unintelligible* and *nonsensical* than one may read here.”³¹ Similarly, the first lexicon article on Hamann from 1811 speaks of “the dark chaos of his mystical and unnatural style ... his mysterious allusions, his fanatical excursions, his affected *bon mots*, his puzzling citations, his exaggerated use of biblical texts, and his

²⁵ JGH, p. 100.

²⁶ N IV, p. 424.

²⁷ ZH V, p. 88; cf. ZH V, p. 177. Demosthenes is supposed to have said that the most important element in the art of speaking is, “firstly, the performance [*hypokrisis* = *actio*], secondly, the performance, and thirdly, again the performance.” The phrase “economy of style” is a reference to Matt. 12: 36f. See Bayer, *Zeitgenosse im Widerspruch*, p. 41.

²⁸ Bayer, *Zeitgenosse im Widerspruch*, p. 20.

²⁹ H. A. Salmony, *Hamanns metakritische Philosophie* (Zollikon: Evangelischer Verlag, 1958), pp. 15–16.

³⁰ Eckhard Schumacher, *Die Ironie der Unverständlichkeit: Johann Georg Hamann, Friedrich Schlegel, Jacques Derrida, Paul de Man* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2000), p. 89. The following account of Hamann’s style and the history of its reception follows that of Schumacher, pp. 89–102.

³¹ From the *Hamburgische Nachrichten aus dem Reiche der Gelehrsamkeit*, vol. 57 (1760), p. 452.

disconnected, unbalanced, metaphorical manner of expression, which are merely a few of the errors that he gladly heaps upon his readers as though they were ornaments.”³² And a century later, Ludwig Reiners concludes: “In comparison to Hamann’s writings, Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit* is ... perfect vacation reading. For with Hamann something new appears: intentional, created darkness.”³³ Such conclusions might seem exaggerated were it not for Hamann’s own statements to this effect. For example, in his own pseudonymous review of his own *Socratic Memorabilia* he not only quotes the Hamburg review with approval, but even refers to himself as “unintelligible,” “dark,” “cryptic,” even “deranged”; and to his writing as “comparable to a *Japanese* or *Chinese* picture, in which one can perceive *wild* and *dreadful* figures, but whose significance no *rational* person can understand.”³⁴

Given such a self-portrait, one can hardly be surprised at the familiar accusations of “darkness” and unintelligibility; nor can one be surprised at Berlin’s thesis of Hamann’s irrationalism. Indeed, given Hamann’s apparent intention *not to be understood*, it is a legitimate question whether any effort to understand him is doomed to fail from the start. As even so learned a critic as Lessing put it to Herder, “I would not [presume] to understand [Hamann] in all respects; at least I would not be able to be sure whether I understood him. His writings seem to be tests of manhood for those who claim to be polyhistorians. They truly require a little knowledge of everything [*Panhistorie*].”³⁵ If this was true for Lessing, whose erudition and familiarity with the debates of the time was virtually unmatched, readers of today cannot hope to fare better. Nor is it promising to know that Hamann was often not even understood by his friends. Thus the *Teutsche Merkur* refers to him in 1775 as the leader of a sect, “who has succeeded in gaining many admirers, who revere him without understanding him.”³⁶ And true enough, the very one who first hailed him the *Magus in Norden*, Friedrich Carl von Moser, confesses to Herder: “I admire the visionary Hamann without understanding him.”³⁷ So too Jacobi confesses to Hamann, “I have not been able to come to the bottom of your dark method ...”³⁸ And, adding to the absurdity, on several occasions Hamann even admits that he no longer understands himself.³⁹

As O’Flaherty has pointed out, however, noting the existence of several collections of Hamann’s sayings, such perceptions “must be immediately qualified by the fact that scattered throughout his generally obscure prose are many succinct, epigrammatic, and very quotable expressions.”⁴⁰ As Jean Paul put it to Friedrich Schlegel,

³² Schumacher, *Die Ironie der Unverständlichkeit*, citing the *Lexicon deutscher Dichter und Prosaisten*, ed. Karl Heinrich Jördens, vol. VI (Hildesheim, 1811).

³³ Ludwig Reiners, *Stilkunst: Ein Lehrbuch der deutscher Prosa*, newly edited by Stephan Meyers and Jürgen Schiewe (Munich: C. H. Beck, 1991), p. 265.

³⁴ N II, pp. 86ff; cf. his remark to Herder, ZH III, p. 38, “Ha! Ha! Such crumpled, confusing and anomalous allegorical figures have become my *element*, without them I can neither breathe nor think.”

³⁵ Letter from Lessing to Herder, January 25, 1780, *Lessings Briefe* (Berlin and Weimar: Aufbau Verlag, 1967), p. 463.

³⁶ *Fortsetzung der kritischen Nachrichten vom Zustande des teutschen Parnassus*. In *Der Teutsche Merkur*, 18/2 (December 1774), pp. 174f.

³⁷ ZH IV, p. 480.

³⁸ ZH VI, pp. 233f. (January 17, 1786).

³⁹ See, for example, ZH IV, p. 202 (July 2, 1780); ZH V, p. 358 (February 11, 1785); ZH VI, p. 269 (February 15, 1786); and ZH VII, p. 157 (April 22–3, 1787).

⁴⁰ *JGH*, p. 100.

"I read a sentence [of Hamann] and put it away and have enough eggs to brood over in my mind."⁴¹ And, true enough, amid the thick darkness of his style, one will find here and there many wonderful aphorisms, which shine forth, as it were, out of the darkness. As Matthias Claudius observes, "he has wrapped himself in a midnight robe, but the golden little stars shining from it here and there betray him, and allure, so that one does not regret the effort [required to understand him]."⁴² Likewise, Mendelssohn issues the following advisory to prospective readers in his review of Hamann's *Crusades of the Philologist*: "Since you might be tempted against your will to throw away this strange little volume and will not have the patience to search the desert for the genuinely pleasant spots it affords, allow me to charm your attention with a few examples."⁴³

This is not to say that Hamann was incapable of limpid prose, or that he only occasionally stumbled upon a felicitous phrase. On the contrary, in order to begin to understand the originality of his style, one must appreciate the fact that its difficulties are in large part intended. To be sure, this is something of a *novum* in the history of western literature: an author who would seem intentionally to defy any attempt to understand him. Without presuming to get to the bottom of Hamann's style, however, which may very well be impossible, one may at least venture the following preliminary explanation as to why he wrote in the peculiar way that he did.⁴⁴ On the one hand, negatively, it should be seen as a calculated attempt to show up the *Aufklärer*, i.e., to show that they are not as bright as they think, indeed, to force upon them a confession of ignorance, in order that they might thereby be made more disposed to the light of faith they (in Hamann's view) sorely lack. So, too, it is an attempt precisely to reinstate the distance, which the *Aufklärer* had collapsed, between reason and the mysteries of the faith – an attempt, in short, to safeguard the mysteries of the faith as mysteries, which defy reduction to "reason alone." On the other hand, positively, the difficulty of Hamann's writings is bound up with what could be described as an intentionally "sublime" style – a style that seeks to produce light out of darkness, and impresses almost to the degree that one has first experienced a corresponding degree of interpretive pain.⁴⁵ As Goethe explains,

In order to achieve the impossible he lays hold of all elements; the profoundest, most mysterious perceptions, where nature and spirit meet in secret, illuminating lightning flashes of understanding, which beam forth from such an encounter, images laden with significance suspended in these regions, provocative sayings from sacred and profane authors, and whatever else might be added in the way of humor – all this constitutes the wonderful totality of his style, his communications.⁴⁶

Clearly, Goethe was fascinated by Hamann's style; and, given phrases like "lightning flashes of understanding," he more than suggests that reading him was a kind

⁴¹ Jean Paul, *Sämtliche Werke*, ed. Eduard Berend (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1952), vol. 6, pp. 258f.

⁴² Matthias Claudius, *Sämtliche Werke* (Munich: Winkler Verlag, 1968), p. 23.

⁴³ Moses Mendelssohn, "Rezensionsartikel in *Briefe, die neueste Literatur betreffend (1759–1765)*", ed. Eva J. Engel, in *Gesammelte Schriften: Jubiläumsausgabe*, vol. 5/1 (Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: Friedrich Frommann Verlag, 1991), p. 559.

⁴⁴ For more on Hamann's style, see especially O'Flaherty's introduction to the *SM*, pp. 61–85.

⁴⁵ To this extent it is also an intentionally parabolic style, which purposely keeps a vain, unsympathetic, or otherwise preoccupied reader at bay, but yields an unexpected return for those properly disposed to the message it contains (cf. Mark 4: 1–20).

⁴⁶ Goethe, *Dichtung und Wahrheit*, book XII, in *Werke*, 14 vols., ed. E. Trunz (Hamburg: Christian Wegner Verlag, 1961), vol. 9, p. 515.

