

Introduction

Sokrates war, meine Herren, kein gemeiner Kunstrichter. Er unterschied in den Schriften des Heraklitus, dasjenige, was er nicht verstand, von dem, was er darin verstand, und that eine sehr billige und bescheidene Vermuthung von dem Verständlichen auf das Unverständliche. Bey dieser Gelegenheit redete Sokrates von Lesern, welche schwimmen könnten.

Sokratische Denkwürdigkeiten, W II 61

The first impression created by Hamann's striking style is of a colourful abundance of impenetrable allusions that do not produce a clear cumulative sense. Hamann seems to refuse the contract between reader and author that demands relevance, directness, clarity. This obscurity is different in kind from that of other demanding authors, though some may make few concessions. They must be read closely if they are to be read at all; nonetheless, the attentive and persistent reader hopes to be rewarded by things falling into place. Hamann baffles this expectation and unsettles the reader without offering even presumptive inclusion to 'them that are without' (Mark 4:11).

A natural reaction is that such obscurity is a pseudo-learned encrustation, an exotic and pretentious texture, merely decorative – within Hamann's peculiar aesthetic; also that it is free association without underlying coherence, spontaneously strung together around a cluster of core themes. This fits in with the reception, going back to 1775,¹ of Hamann as a precursor of Sturm und Drang; in Sven-Aage Jørgensen's neat summary: 'Über den Anreger, den man zum Vorläufer machte, hat man den eigentlichen Hamann vernachlässigt'.² The consensus of more recent work on Hamann, backed up by his own remarks on his style and by the texts themselves, is that there is a thread leading out of the labyrinth (cf. B I 311:11, 'Faden').

¹ See B III 162f., to Hartknoch, 27 February 1775. Hamann reports that the *Teutscher Mercur* 'mich zum Oberhaupt einer sehr ansehnlichen Secte und Schule unter den schönen Geistern des deutschen Parnasses creirt und proclamirt hatte', lumping him together with, among others, Klopstock and Herder. *Johann Georg Hamann: Briefwechsel*, vols I–VII, ed. by Walther Zieseemer and Arthur Henkel (from vol. IV Henkel alone) Wiesbaden: Insel, 1955–79, cited as 'B'.

² *Johann Georg Hamann: Sokratische Denkwürdigkeiten: Aesthetica in nuce: Mit einem Kommentar herausgegeben von Sven-Aage Jørgensen* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1998 (1968)), p. 191. This volume contains an excellent, clear and brief introduction to Hamann's work as a whole.

It is my contention that the thread is a theological one. That is, the substance of Hamann's thought is not discursive, but lies in the radical application of a complex of conservative Lutheran ideas, firmly founded in the Bible, to Enlightened debates about religion. His critique does not rest on arguments – except for a small stock of anti-intellectual ploys used indifferently against any elaborate system or terminology – but on a sophisticated appeal to Christian faith. To the extent that a given Enlightenment text challenges or threatens Christianity, for Hamann it is thereby already unquestionably in the wrong, and his entire attack sets out to establish the absoluteness of the division between the two, because 'He that is not with me is against me'. Hamann saw, perhaps more clearly than anyone except Kant, that compromise opened the way to secularisation, and he believed that the answer was a return to Christian fundamentals.

Most of Hamann's works are polemical reactions to current intellectual events, commonly a recent publication. Though this background, as well as the education of an eighteenth-century intellectual – for instance in classics and theology – are presumed in the reader, even Hamann's contemporaries found his writing impenetrable; and he explicitly distances himself from the norms of the emerging public sphere.

Some of the difficulty arises from Hamann's intensive dependence on contexts which are now more obscure than they were when he wrote, but he wrote texts which were already difficult in themselves. He often seems to read his targets at cross purposes. Personal, political, intellectual and religious elements are intimately intertwined in the genesis of his works and in his understanding of what they stood for, so that a biographical and genetic approach to reading them is particularly appropriate and productive; not only does this help in identifying specific allusions and relevant contexts, but it reveals the unity of Hamann's work, and its roots as a whole in his life and circumstances.

Secondly, Hamann generally offers a critique of his opponent rather than an explicit discursive statement of his own position, and this is connected both with his hostility to the public sphere and with his message; indeed his quarrel with the public sphere in a nutshell is that it insists on transparency, but his message can only be approached indirectly, *im Krebsgang* as it were, both for rhetorical reasons and for reasons of substance – because his difference with the Enlightenment is not ultimately a matter of arguments, so not suited to discursive presentation. Some things, Hamann would say, are in themselves not transparent, but can only be seen 'through a glass darkly' – at least for now, until the Kingdom come (Revelation 12:10).

A more serious difficulty that arises from and compounds the first two is the complexity in detail of Hamann's writing. Anyone who simply picks up one of his books and attempts to read a page is likely to be immediately baffled. The text is thick with allusions, but the structure they are meant to support is not signposted. It is difficult to distinguish assertions in the author's own voice from irony, parody, quotation – or misquotation. The texture is tangled and impenetrable, the reader utterly dependent on his own resources to find a way in, through or out.

Previous work on Hamann may be divided into two phases, before and after the war. Scholars such as Joseph Nadler, the editor of the standard edition of the works, and Rudolf Unger, the author of *Hamann und die Aufklärung*, attempted to make sense of Hamann as the instigator of Sturm und Drang and, beyond it, romanticism. They saw Hamann as an inspired subjectivist who flung his texts together in a creative frenzy. Instead of 'mikrologischer Detailkommentar' Unger proposes 'eine Analyse des grundsätzlichen Ideengehalts der schwierigen Schrift [i.e. *Aesthetica*]' (p. 241); because he thinks Hamann's work consists of 'Worte sibyllinischer Begeisterung' (p. 264), this means explaining it in terms of *Geistesgeschichte* rather than from the structure of the text. In the same vein, but taking a more negative view of the result, Isaiah Berlin's *The Magus of the North* conveys Hamann's dark richness and passion, but not his coherence.³

The subtitle of one of Hamann's better known works, *Aesthetica in nuce*, lent support to such interpretations: 'Rhapsodie in kabbalistischer Prose'. Germanists took a particular interest in this text because its apparent preoccupation with aesthetics suggests it might throw some light on literary developments influenced by Hamann, and that is indeed the case, to the extent that other writers took *Aesthetica* as a programme – but influence may depend on misinterpretation. The most distinguished example is Goethe, who was introduced to Hamann's writing early on by Herder.⁴ In fact the book's topic was biblical hermeneutics;

³ Rudolf Unger, *Hamann und die Aufklärung*, 2nd edn (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1963 (1925)); Isaiah Berlin, *The Magus of the North: J. G. Hamann and the Origins of Modern Irrationalism* (London: Murray, 1993). This book was based on a draft of thirty years earlier.

⁴ He found the experience confusing, as he records in *Dichtung und Wahrheit*, Hamburger Ausgabe IX 409. The influence on his style in *Von deutscher Baukunst* was pernicious, he later felt: 'so aber verhüllte ich, durch Hamanns und Herders Beispiel verführt, diese ganz einfachen Gedanken und Betrachtungen in eine Staubwolke von seltsamen Worten und Phrasen, und verfinsterte das Licht, das mir aufgegangen war, für mich und andere', IX 508. The following from his general assessment of Hamann's works on pp. 514f. seems especially worth quoting: 'Schlägt man sie auf, so gibt es abermals ein zweideutiges Doppellicht, das uns höchst angenehm erscheint, nur muß man durchaus auf das Verzicht tun, was man gewöhnlich Verstehen nennt. ... Jedemal, wenn man

it is a polemic against Johann David Michaelis's edition of Lowth's lectures on Hebrew poetry. That debate is certainly relevant to questions of style in contemporary literature, but Hamann's interest lies in what it means for reading the Bible.⁵

The subtitle is informative, but not in the way one might first assume. To modern ears, the word 'rhapsody' suggests the Dionysian abandonment of orderly structure in favour of spontaneous creative expression. Perhaps this meaning, in German at least, owes something to Hamann's use of the word here. But the Greek word simply means a recital of epic poetry, and is derived from a verb 'to stitch together' – other men's words. Hamann's epigraph at the bottom of the title page picks out this sense: 'colourful sewn clothes as booty, worked colourful cloths around my neck as booty' (Judges 5:30). This is an indication of his method, to string together fragments of his opponents' words – triumphantly, having defeated them. At the same time, confusingly (the confusion is typical) it is a criticism of their own piecemeal method when it comes to the Bible, as is shown by the context of the quotation, itself a prime example of the parallelism discovered by Lowth: Sisera's mother thinks the riders come bearing spoil after victory in battle, but in fact Sisera has been killed. Hamann is announcing his intention to beat Michaelis at his own game.

This complexity is an indicative illustration of how difficult it can be to read Hamann without getting bogged down in the details. Earlier scholars, before the war, nonetheless attempted to do so using the usual methods, which at the time also meant an emphasis on literary movements and intellectual trends within them. There was thus a tendency to shoehorn Hamann into his role as a precursor of later developments, and even to see him as representative of his period, combining, albeit with exceptional uniqueness, elements that were nonetheless common property of the *Zeitgeist*.⁶

sie aufschlägt, glaubt man etwas Neues zu finden, weil der einer jeden Seite inwohnende Sinn uns auf eine vielfache Weise berührt und aufregt.' IX 515.

⁵For a helpful introduction to the hermeneutic tradition on which Hamann draws, see Jørgensen's article 'Hamanns hermeneutische Grundsätze', in *Aufklärung und Humanismus*, ed. R. Toellner, Wolfenbütteler Studien zur Aufklärung, VI (Heidelberg: Verlag Lambert Schneider, 1980), pp. 219–31.

⁶The weakness of this approach is exemplified in the following sentence taken from a discussion by Unger of the various components of Hamann's intellectual makeup, including his 'Sinnen- und Triebleben', transfused with religious feeling: 'Auch hier zielte der Grundzug der geistigen Bewegung letzten Endes auf den konkreten und objektiven Idealismus ab, wie die von Hamann zu Herder, der Romantik, Schelling, Hegel und Schleiermacher fortgehende Entwicklungslinie beweist' (Unger, *Hamann und die Aufklärung*, p. 234). The argument is circular.

It was only when theologians discovered Hamann that the deliberate intricacy of his writing began to be appreciated and systematically exploited.⁷ But Hamann announced it at the inception of his Christian authorship; for example, in the second preface of *Sokratische Denkwürdigkeiten* Hamann says how he hopes his intended readers will understand him: 'Wo ein gemeiner Leser nichts als *Schimmel* sehen möchte, wird der Affect der Freundschaft Ihnen, Meine Herren, in diesen Blättern vielleicht ein mikroskopisch Wäldchen entdecken' (W II 61). He later expanded on this image:

Hier ist der Verfasser in seinem Elemente und der Schimmel seiner Einfälle ist in der That nichts anders als ein mikroskopisches Wäldchen von satyrischen Erdschwämmen, witzigen Pfifferlingen, blühendem Isop, der an der Wand wächst, aufgedunsenen Melonen, kritischen Nüssen ...⁸

This shows that Hamann's complexity was a deliberately cultivated strategy. The title page of *Aesthetica* is a case in point: the more you look, the more you see. I have just argued that the connotations of Hamann's use of the word 'Rhapsodie' do not include enthusiastic inspiration; but the quotation from Plato on the first page of the text introduces that very resonance, present in the classical conception of poetic inspiration by the Muses. The quotation at the head of the page of the opening lines of Horace's first Roman ode, with its religious language ('Musarum sacerdos', priest of the Muses) reinforces this. However, the real point for Hamann is that Hebrew scripture is divinely inspired, not in the sense of this mythical topos, but by the Holy Spirit; and so is he, because he speaks in God's cause.

Much recent work on Hamann takes the form of commentaries that tease out the allusions as I have done in part for the title page of *Aesthetica*, and this is so nearly the only way of reading him that more discursive studies – including this one – inevitably slip in and out of the same mode; but there is an apparent problem, which occurs at every turn, about how to take things. Why not understand the Horace and Plato quotations as an invitation to read the word 'Rhapsodie' the other way, as suggesting an exuberant outpouring? The epigraph from

⁷ Hamann's style has been analysed both in monographs on the style as such, especially Büchsel 1953, Hoffmann 1972, and in commentaries on individual works or detailed studies, especially the series 'Hamanns Hauptschriften erklärt', Lumpp 1970 on *Aesthetica*, Baur 1991 on Hamann's journalism, and Bayer 2002 on the *Metakritik*, that demonstrate its micrological deliberateness sentence by sentence. Drawing on these detailed conclusions, there are now several more general theological treatments of Hamann, including Gründer 1958, Bayer 1987, and Griffith-Dickson 1995. In addition to the Reclam edition mentioned above, the Germanist Sven-Aage Jørgensen has written a study in the series 'Sammlung Metzler', as well as a number of informative articles. Hegel's 1828 essay on Hamann, a review of Roth's edition of the works, is surprisingly perceptive for its time, and especially useful as a biographical summary. Hegel, 'Hamann's Schriften', in vol. XI of the Suhrkamp edition of Hegel, pp. 275–352.

⁸ W II 272. In 1763 Hamann published a pamphlet containing real and mock reviews of *Kreuzzüge* together with his comments, from which this passage is taken.

Judges could be sufficiently explained as being exuberant in itself, and a prominent textual example debated by Lowth and Michaelis; and after all, there had always been a kinship between religious and poetic ecstasy. The specifically religious resonance Hamann attaches to the idea of 'enthusiasm' – the German 'Begeisterung' captures the etymology of the Greek word, except that there it is a god, 'theos', at its heart rather than a spirit – could be taken as merely programmatic, not substantive. But as the reader begins to sense Hamann's position and its contraries, above all his religious allegiance and his suspicion of the Enlightenment, and once certain recurrent clusters of associations become familiar (for instance, Enlightenment–Lucifer–Babel–Berlin) a sense of understanding gradually emerges. With other authors, this process is smoother even if it may be far from perfunctory; but though familiarity makes Hamann's texts a little easier to disentangle (though still always knotty) there is a particular danger, because he gives the reader so little help, that the pattern in which they begin to make sense is of the reader's own making.

It was indeed Hamann's intention that the reader should give the essential core of truth 'einen Leib wie er will'⁹ provided he accept it, so this would not matter to him as long as his fundamental evangelical purpose was served; moreover, he can hardly have expected his contemporaries to read him with quite the concentrated and sustained philological attention normally reserved for scripture, so the confusion must be part of the intended effect. But just as the scholarship he attacked in *Aesthetica* treats scripture as a set of human documents, 'a book like any other', rather than a vehicle for religious truth, the Germanist must try to read Hamann himself disinterestedly – something it was his whole purpose to prevent.

That certainly means recognising his religious and philosophical outlook. The compass that Hamann held more firmly than the bulk of his contemporaries, and with an assurance that few even among theologians can today probably equal, was scripture, with which he was intimately familiar in an age that in any case remained suffused with it in school and church, Enlightenment notwithstanding. His texts are bursting at the seams with scriptural allusions that carry with them associations of theological argument which on examination prove largely to structure his thought. Whereas quotations from Hamann's targets may be ironic in unstable ways, the Bible is for him the rock of ages, the touchstone of truth, a stumbling-block for the ungodly. For this reason, his writing lends itself particularly well to exegesis of just the kind that theologians employ on the Bible, itself a tissue of allusions, echoes and ambiguities.

⁹ B I 335; see the discussion in Chapter I of Hamann on Chladenius and Augustine's hermeneutics.

However, systematic and dogmatic theologians do not read the Bible 'wie gute alte Philologen ihren Horaz lasen' (Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, 'Warum ich so gute Bücher schreibe' §6),¹⁰ but as a doctrinal authority against which to measure their own theological concepts, and a basic framework within which to accommodate their positions. This is one intelligible way to read a sacred text, and within the context of belief, perhaps it is the most important one. What, for example, does the Bible say about marriage or homosexuality in modern circumstances rather than in the Ancient Near East? What is the Koran's view of relations between Muslim and infidel? Anyone who looks to scripture with the eye of faith must expect it to have something meaningful to contribute in the present, and it is part of the job of theology to articulate and discipline this hermeneutics.

Because Hamann took it upon himself to be a spokesman for the Word, a 'Prediger in der Wüsten' (W III 291), he can be read in something of the same way, as indeed he wished to be. Even if done with philological tact, this presents several dangers.

Given the degree of imaginative engagement Hamann's texts require if the reader is to follow his leaps and twists, it is easy to read more sense into a given passage, word or resonance than is actually there; the author did not necessarily decide on or intend a specific interpretation, and the very difficulty was meant to open the way in for readers with differing starting-points, seeing 'fruit concealed in them, to which to which they fly in delight, chirping as they seek for it and pluck it.'¹¹

There is no substantial disagreement as to the broad outlines of Hamann's theological position, but this open-ended style matters more when it comes to assessing his view of those he attacked. The literature, by theologians not philosophers, is all but unanimous in ascribing to him a profound understanding of Kant, accepting uncritically Hamann's claim to have seen through the sophistry of pure reason. But when the supposed insight must be painstakingly reconstructed from obscure hints, it is all the more important to guard against the hermeneutic circle. I have tried to do so by attending to the wider context of the works Hamann attacked. I seek to provide a critical assessment of Hamann's response to the contemporary scene, and an explanation of it, rather than to excavate theological insights for modern times. For this reason, I have little to say about much of the more general work on

¹⁰ *Kritische Studienausgabe*, 2nd edn, ed. Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari (Munich: De Gruyter, 1988), p. 305.

¹¹ Augustine, *Confessions*, XII 28/38; see Chapter I for Hamann's conversion of this hermeneutic principle into a maxim of style.

Hamann by theologians. My disagreement with them does not rest on points of detail, but arises from the different aims of the disciplines of intellectual history and theology, and is everywhere the same: I believe I have shown that Hamann's response to the individual authors he targeted is undifferentiated, and that the roots of the complex of ideas and attitudes he draws on each time lie in Lutheran theology, not in fresh intellectual engagement. That is, after all, unsurprising, because the claims of faith, at any rate in the radical form that Hamann advanced them, do not pretend to rest on argument.

This study is an investigation of three late works, *Konxompax* (1779), the *Metakritik über den Purismus der Vernunft* (c. 1784), and *Golgatha und Scheblimini!* (1784). The last two are intimately linked genetically, and they have their roots in the concerns of *Konxompax* and before. Though all three texts are given equal weight, Hamann's attack on Kant has a central place because Kant's stature as a thinker makes this a good test case both for appreciating Hamann's answering strengths and for the usefulness for that purpose of the approach taken here. As it turns out, the attitude of all three works is remarkably similar, given the variety of their targets; by and large, the elements Hamann picks out to attack are generic Enlightenment traits rather than views specific to each author.

Hamann's hostility to the *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* is already explained by his general attitude to Enlightenment thought, of which Kant's book was a monumental and decisive example. In order to understand why Hamann attacked it in the way that he did, or perhaps, better, why he applied his now established method to this text and not another – he often enough chooses minor targets – it will help to establish a broader context and Kant's place within it. That boils down to two questions: what were Hamann's own concerns as reflected in his other polemical works, particularly recent ones; and what links Kant's book, in Hamann's eyes, to those concerns? In other words, a genetic approach is called for. The *Metakritik* shows continuities of thought further before and after, but a convenient cut-off point for establishing its context is 1778, when Hamann's muse stirred again after several unproductive years. I propose to answer the first question on the basis of Hamann's letters and the major work of the preceding years, *Konxompax*.

Konxompax, which was a response (not quite a contribution)¹² to the *Fragmentenstreit*, deals in broad terms with the same issues as the *Metakritik*. This connection between works

¹² Though Hamann, pleased at the speedy publication of his book, wrote to Herder: 'Ich meynte doch etwas zur Sache und für den gegenwärtigen Augenblick gesagt zu haben.' B IV 80:10f., 17 May 1779.

with quite different immediate topics will illuminate the latter text, but it then also means that *Konxompax* can serve as an example of Hamann's approach in its own right, parallel to the polemic of both the *Metakritik* and *Golgatha*, a reply to Mendelssohn's *Jerusalem*.

Chapter I prepares the ground for these studies of individual works by describing the circumstances that first led Hamann to take up his pen in the cause of Christ. Tracing the development of his sense of prophetic mission will illuminate both his unique way of reading and writing, derived from a piece of Augustinian hermeneutics meant for the Bible alone, after all not 'a book like any other', and also the typological view of history that justified Hamann, he felt, in stepping forward. The light in which he saw his world and within it the texts he attacked is also the light in which his own work makes sense.