HAMANN BEFORE KIERKEGAARD: A SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGICAL OVERSIGHT

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> The inscription on a tile stove in Kold's Tavern in Fredensborg applies to Hamann: *allicit atque terret.*
>
> —Kierkegaard

To judge from his works and journals, Kierkegaard admired no modern author as much as Johann Georg Hamann (1730–1788). In a journal entry from around 1837, he writes, "Hamann and personal life on the whole in its immediate origin from the depths of character are the *hyperbole* of all life."[1] In another entry he calls him "the greatest humorist in Christendom," which is to say, "the greatest humorist in the world."[2] In 1843 and 1844, he quotes him in the epigraphs, respectively, to *Fear and Trembling* and *The Concept of Anxiety*. In drafts of the latter work, he says, "[M]y soul clings to Socrates, its first love, and rejoices in the one who understood him, Hamann; for he has said the best that has been said about Socrates," adding that Hamann and Socrates are "two of the perhaps most brilliant minds of all time."[3] And in the *Philosophical Fragments*, which also dates from this period, he praises him as one

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1. Søren Kierkegaard, *Journals and Papers*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1970), II 1543 [*n.d.*, 1837], (*Pap.* II A 623). Hereafter cited as "*JP*" by volume.

2. *JP* II 1681 [*n.d.*, 1837], (*Pap.* II A 75).

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

"who held firmly to the paradox."[4] In view of such extraordinary statements, one would think that modern Kierkegaard scholarship would have shown more than a passing interest in Hamann. With relatively few exceptions, however, it has not, so that Kierkegaard's lament about Hamann's fate in the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* applies, ironically, as much to modern Kierkegaard scholarship as it did to the Hegelian historian Michelet:[5]

> [T]he 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. But the system is hospitable. 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.[6]

Such disregard is understandable given that Kierkegaard mentions Hamann infrequently and, for the most part, only in passing.[7] Indeed, one is bound to receive the impression that, were Hamann truly influential, Kierkegaard would have treated him in no less topical fashion than he does Socrates, Lessing, and Hegel. But if one looks beyond the thematic presence of these figures to Kierkegaard's understanding of what it means to be a Christian author in an age that has "forgotten what it means to exist," Hamann's influence is immediately apparent. In fact, following Gregor Malantschuk, one could argue that the principal reason why Kierkegaard never dealt with Hamann in systematic fashion is that he so closely followed his example: "The fact that he [Kierkegaard] did not also write a

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4. Søren Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), 52–53.

5. Among the exceptions are Albert Anderson, "Hamann," *Bibliotheca Kierkegaardiana* vol. 10, ed. Niels Thulstrup and Marie Mikulová Thulstrup (Copenhagen: C. A. Reitzels Forlag, 1982), 110–34; Thorsten Bohlin, *Kierkegaard's Dogmatische Anschauung*, trans. Ilse Mener-Lüne (Gütersloh: C. Bertelsmann, 1927), 55–60 and 186–88; Friedrich Schulze-Maizier, "Hamann und Kierkegaard," *Tat* 28 (1936–1937): 605–19; Wilhelm Rodemann, *Hamann und Kierkegaard* (Gütersloh: C. Bertelsmann, 1922); Ronald Gregor Smith, "Hamann and Kierkegaard," *Kierkegaardiana* 5 (1964): 52–67; Steffen Steffensen, "Kierkegaard und Hamann," *Orbis litterarum* 22 (1967): 399–417; and H. E. Weber, "Zwei Propheten des Irrationalismus: Joh. G. Hamann and S. Kierkegaard als Bahnbrecher der Theologie des Christusglaubens," *Luthertum* [*Neue Kirchliche Zeitschrift*] 28 (1917): 23–58, 77–125.

6. *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), 224.

7. As Stephen Dunning has put it, "Kierkegaard nowhere sets down in systematic fashion his substantive agreements and disagreements with Hamann. Indeed, if there is any single, outstanding characteristic of his references to Hamann, it is that the overwhelming majority of them are merely aphorisms or expressions which he quotes but does not explain or elaborate." See Stephen Dunning, "Kierkegaard's 'Hegelian' Response to Hamann," *Thought* 55 (1980): 262.

treatise on humor with Hamann as its representative is no doubt due . . . to his own penetrating experiments as a humorist, which provided him with experiences that made him personally the representative of humor in his own life as well as in his authorship."[8]

To be sure, Hamann's humor (most obviously, his comical use of pseudonyms) profoundly affected the development of Kierkegaard's budding authorship (providing a model of specifically Christian, as opposed to merely Socratic, irony) and, as such, warrants independent consideration. In the following, however, my concern is to highlight other, less obvious aspects of his influence. For example, Hamann was not only an obvious model for Kierkegaard's religious-existential response to Hegel and the Hegelians but also a direct source for many of the concepts that today are associated almost exclusively with Kierkegaard, such as indirect communication, the infinite difference between God and human beings, the paradox, and even the "teleological suspension of the ethical."[9] Moreover, Hamann was not only a profoundly important literary and intellectual model but apparently even a personal role model as well. Consider Kierkegaard's remarkable admission that, had he known earlier about Hamann's common-law marriage to Regina Schumacher, he might have thought differently about the prospects of his own marriage to Regina Olsen:

> Amazing! Yesterday I spoke with Jorgen Jorgensen, who has now become an avid reader of Hamann. In Hamann's writings he has found evidence that Hamann was not married to his wife but lived with her out of wedlock, consequently as a concubine. And I, who have looked for this most eagerly, have not found it. At one time this would have been of the greatest importance to me. And yet it would not really have

8. See Gregor Malantschuk, *Kierkegaard's Thought*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971), 90; see the Hongs's commentary in *JP* II: 574: "Early in his writings Kierkegaard designated Hamann as representative of the highest position, the stage of humor as the confinium or border sphere of the Christian religious. Yet Kierkegaard did not present the stage of humor with Hamann as the representative, analogous to the presentation of irony with Socrates as the representative in *The Concept of Irony*. The reason for this was that Kierkegaard's writing up to and including *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* was on the whole under the sign of humor (expressed by the use of pseudonyms), because the center of gravity for Kierkegaard himself during this period lay in the humorous, yet with the Christian religious in reserve." To which one might simply add that Hamann was to Kierkegaard the paradigmatic example of a *Christian* humorist, and hence did not fit squarely within the humorous understood as a prereligious sphere of existence.

9. It is true, though, that Hamann never developed these notions as *concepts*, and this is why Kierkegaard, rather than Hamann, came to be regarded as having authored them. For example, in Hamann the notion of the "teleological suspension of the ethical" is not treated explicitly but implied in a discussion of the wise men and the ethically insufferable consequences of their journey of faith. See Hamann's *Die Magi aus Morgenlande zu Bethlehem*, in Johann Georg Hamann, *Sämtliche Werke*, historical-critical edition, ed. Josef Nadler (Vienna: Herder Verlag, 1949–1957), 2:140. Hereafter cited as "N" by volume.

> helped me, but it would have given the matter a little different twist if I had known that Hamann had dared to do such a thing. Of course I have thought of the possibility, but I did not know that Hamann had carried it through. But at the time I was sure that it could not be done that way.[10]

Clearly, if Kierkegaard thought of Hamann as a kind of guide in matters of such personal consequence, he was something more than one's average Hamann enthusiast—even if Hamann might appear to be, in light of a systematic accounting of subjects and persons in Kierkegaard's writings, a *quantité négligeable.*

The following is thus intended to show that Hamann anticipates and informs multiple aspects of Kierkegaard's philosophy. In the *first* section, I discuss Hamann's religious-existential protest against the rationalism of the Enlightenment, most famously against Kant, as a prototype of Kierkegaard's own protest against Hegel and the Hegelians. In the *second,* I discuss Hamann's understanding of Socrates since, according to Kierkegaard, he has said the best that has been said about him. In the *third,* I discuss his reception of Hume and his novel application of Paul's (and Luther's) understanding of the law to the relationship between faith and reason. In the *fourth,* I discuss his practice of indirect communication as a model for Kierkegaard's own—a practice that is necessary, according to Hamann, since "faith cannot be communicated like merchandise."[11] In the *fifth,* I discuss Hamann as a source for Kierkegaard's doctrine of the paradox and, in particular, how both of them reject any attempt to naturalize or rationalize or ameliorate the offense of revelation (as occurs, most famously, in Hegel's speculative rendering of the cross), in short, any attempt to reduce revelation to immanence or to a prior content of consciousness. In the *sixth,* I discuss a pair of related existential concepts that are often thought to originate with Kierkegaard (at least as regards the particular sense he gives to them) but in fact trace back to Hamann: namely, anxiety and infinite

10. *JP* II 1558 [1847], (*Pap.* VIII 1 A 251). The circumstances of Hamann's "marriage of conscience" are complex. Briefly, there were three reasons: (1) as a consequence of his conversion, his best friend, Christoph Berens, revoked Hamann's engagement to his sister, Catharina Berens, the very one Hamann believed God had intended for him; (2) when Hamann first met Regina Schumacher, she was a servant in his father's house, and her social standing would have made a formal marriage socially embarrassing—so Hamann reasoned—especially for Regina herself; (3) Hamann detested the regime of Frederick the Great, and—almost as a sign of contradiction—refused civil marriage under its terms. Of course, such reasoning did not ameliorate the offense. Hegel, for one, considered his arrangement deplorable, as did some of Hamann's friends. But even if he did not marry Regina, he clearly loved her and was faithful to her, his "hamadryad," and she became the mother of his four children. Thanks to the Kierkegaard scholar, Charles Bellinger, for help with this reference.

11. Johann Georg Hamann, *Briefwechsel,* 7 vols., ed. W. Ziesemer and A. Henkel (Frankfurt am Main: Insel Verlag, 1955–1979), 7:176. Hereafter cited as "ZH" by volume.

difference. Regarding the first, I argue that Hamann provided Kierkegaard with the initial inspiration for *Fear and Trembling* (as the work's motto suggests). Regarding the second, I discuss how Hamann is a source both for Kierkegaard's dialectical philosophy and, indirectly, for Barth's dialectical theology—though, to the end, he is far more embracing of the world and more joyously affirming of God's continual self-communication through it, than either of them.

In a final section, I argue that Hamann is not only a precursor to Kierkegaard, who stands *with* him against an increasingly secular, post-Christian culture, but is in many ways to be *preferred* to him. However much Hamann prophesied against a self-destructive rationalism that denied divine transcendence, for him this world never ceased being *God's* world—a world *full* of God's abasing glory and love.[12] This is not to say that Kierkegaard denies such things; it is simply to say that in Hamann there is not a trace of otherworldly Gnosticism. Thus, *as a Christian*, he took great pleasure in eating, drinking, and smoking his pipe; in corresponding with his many friends over candlelight; in venturing into his garden every morning, afternoon, and evening as "another Nimrod" looking for food.[13] Indeed, Hamann is so profoundly anti-Gnostic, so joyful, almost Dionysian in his sensibility, as to be the one modern Christian one wishes Nietzsche had known.[14] And in this respect, among others, in as much as Hamann, the Lutheran, presents a more optimal response than does Kierkegaard, the Lutheran, to Nietzsche, the one-time Lutheran—and to modernity and "post"-modernity in general—"Hamann before Kierkegaard" is not simply a matter of chronological priority, but also, one could argue, a matter of ecclesial, Lutheran (and Catholic) priority.

I: HAMANN'S RELIGIOUS EXISTENTIALISM: AGAINST THE ENLIGHTENMENT

Oddly enough, Kierkegaard's first exposure to Hamann was likely mediated by Hegel's lengthy review of Hamann's writings, which appeared in two parts in the *Jahrbücher für wissenschaftliche Kritik* in 1828 and was later

12. See my introduction to Hamann and his early confessional writings, "Hamann's London Writings: The Hermeneutics of Trinitarian Condescension," *Pro Ecclesia* 14, no. 2 (Spring 2005): 191–234.

13. Josef Nadler, *Johann Georg Hamann 1730–1788: Der Zeuge des Corpus mysticum* (Salzburg: Otto Müller Verlag, 1949), 275. Cf. ZH 4:196, 384.

14. Although Nietzsche was aware of Hamann, and on a few occasions refers to him in connection with Herder, his acquaintance with him seems to have been superficial, which is understandable given Hamann's obscurity during this time.

published as part of Hegel's collected works in 1835.[15] At the very least, Kierkegaard would have been familiar with the review, as substantial as it was, and, undoubtedly, would have found it interesting—perhaps even inspiring—given Hegel's complaints about Hamann's style, his stubborn individuality, his resistance to systematic expression, and his corresponding unwillingness to write *directly* for the public at large. Indeed, despite Hegel's evident respect for Hamann's genius, the overall tone of the review suggests that Hamann was a thorn in his side, one who defied his "absolute" knowledge and could not be made to fit the Procrustean bed of his dialectic. After all, this would have required that he at least understand him; and, as Goethe observed (who, incidentally, once had a lengthy conversation with Hegel about Hamann), with Hamann's writings this is precisely the problem. For, as he puts it, "When one opens them . . . one must completely renounce what is ordinarily called understanding."[16]

Aside from the spectacle of Hegel's frustration over the form of Hamann's writings, Kierkegaard would undoubtedly also have been interested in their content, particularly since Hamann's passionate religious protest against Kant and the Enlightenment presented an obvious parallel to his own emerging struggle against Hegel and the "age of speculation." Indeed, in Hamann he would have discovered nothing less than a prototype of his own philosophy: a humorous, indirect, existential defense of Christian faith against an overbearing systematic rationalism that threatened to deny it. For example, decrying the Enlighteners' misplaced *faith* in reason and their flagrant transference of divine authority and attributes to it, Hamann asks, "What is highly praised *reason* with its universality, infallibility, supereminence, certainty, and evidence? An *Ens rationis*, a stuffed dummy, which a *flagrant* superstition of unreason imputes with *divine attributes*."[17] Similarly, in a satirical apostrophe written in the voice of the little letter *h*, which was about to be "martyred," that is, eliminated, in the name of new "rational" orthographical reforms (which did away with the terminal, seemingly superfluous *h* in such words as *Muth* and

15. Steffensen, "Kierkegaard und Hamann," suspects this to be the case, noting that Kierkegaard first mentions Hamann shortly after Hegel's review was first published as part of his collected works in 1835. G. W. F. Hegel, "Hamanns Schriften," *Jahrbücher für wissenschaftliche Kritik*, nos. 77–80 and 107–14 (1828), cols. 620–40 and 859–64; rpt. in *Berliner Schriften, 1818–1831*, vol. 11 of *Werke in zwanzig Bänden*, ed. E. Moldenhauer and K. M. Michel (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1986), 275–352.

16. *Dichtung und Wahrheit*, Book 12, in *Werke*, 14 vols., ed. E. Trunz (Hamburger Ausgabe) (München: Beck, 1956), 9:226.

17. N 3:225. Hamann's emphasis. See Oswald Bayer, *Autorität und Kritik: Hermeneutik und Wissenschaftstheorie* (Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 1991), 44: "In Kant the authority of Scripture is inherited by the authority of reason . . . *auctoritas, infallibilitas, perfectio, sufficientia, perspicuitas and efficacia*, above all self-interpretation, power of criticism . . . —all these *modi operandi* and attributes of Holy Scripture, which can only be *modi operandi* and attributes of the triune God himself, Kant ascribes to reason."

Rath), he accuses the *Aufklärer* of hypostatizing reason and of falling victim thereby to a "philosophical idolatry" that is worse than the "crudest paganism" and the "blindest popery":

> The object of your meditations and devotion is not GOd [*sic*], but a mere word-image (*Bildwort*). Such is the case with your *universal human reason*, which, going beyond mere *poetic license*, you have divinized into a real *person*; you have fabricated so many similar gods and persons through the *transubstantiation* of your *word-images* that, when compared to your philosophical *idolatry*, the crudest *paganism* and the blindest *popery* will be justified and perhaps even absolved at the Last Judgment.[18]

Aside from illustrating Hamann's nominalist tendencies, the implications of this statement are many. At one level, it indicates the basis of his prophetic indictment of his contemporaries: their idolatrous, cultic devotion to reason. And in this regard, he frequently satirizes the "high priests" in the court of Frederick the Great, most notably, Voltaire.[19] At another level, it reveals the basis of his philosophical critique of the "Enlightenment" in general: its ironic lack of clarity regarding something as basic as the effect of language (which is always historically contingent) upon the alleged "timelessness" and "universality" of reason. As a result of this intellectual blind spot, Hamann suggests, the "*Aufklärer*" are prone, on the one hand, to misuse language (e.g., to hypostatize it) and, on the other hand, to abuse it (as is the case with the orthographical elimination of the terminal German *h*).

A further consequence of Hamann's "metacritique" is that he effectively turns the tables on the *Religionskritik* of the Enlightenment in general (which presumed to critique religious tradition from a neutral, purely rational standpoint), inasmuch as for him the contest of the age between (secular) reason and (revealed) religion is not so much between reason and religion as between a religion that is grounded in the *data* of historical revelation and a flagrant *superstition* regarding abstract concepts, which are transubstantiated into "so many other gods." Indeed, in Hamann's view, far from being free of superstition, which it famously impugns, the Enlightenment is founded upon its own peculiar mythology, whereby reason is first magically purified of every earthly tincture and determination—for example, history, tradition, experience, and, miracle of miracles, language—and then gilded with the glory of its own

18. N 3:106. The term *Bildwort*, literally "word-image," is a neologism that plays on the fuller significance of *Bild* ("image") and connotes as well the German verb *bilden*, which means to fashion or construct. In the present context, however, Hamann's meaning is plain: he would have us recall the *Bilderverbot*, the prohibition against images, in Exodus 20, suggesting that the Enlighteners are idolaters, who have, at the end of the day, simply taken the word *reason* and fashioned it into an idol—an up-to-date golden calf—to worship.

19. See N 2:205.

"universality."[20] For Hamann, however, this is nonsense; the entire notion of the purity of secular reason is a specious fiction and, in any event, an idol (cf. 1 Cor 8:4). Thus, in view of this new mythology, which passes for philosophy—in view of this new rationality whose genealogy is like that of Melchizedek, "without father, without mother, without race"—he says that, like Simonides, he is speechless in the face of this "new age."[21]

Clearly, in view of such trenchant criticisms of the Enlightenment, Hamann would have stood out to Kierkegaard as one of the most powerful Christian apologists since Pascal, having defended Christianity through a devastating and highly ironic "metacritical" assault on the rationality of the age.[22] Essentially, this defense consisted of a two-pronged offense: On the one hand, attacking the notion of "pure reason," Hamann sought to deprive the *Aufklärer* of any neutral, tradition-free standpoint from which imperiously to judge the Christian tradition; on the other hand, at a phenomenological level, he disputed the claims of the *Aufklärer* to understand faith, or even existence, in rational terms, as in the following statement from his *Doubts and Ideas*:

> [O]ur *existence* is older than our *reason*. . . . Because our reason derives the material of its concepts merely from the external relations of visible, sensible, unsteady things, in order to fashion them according to the form of its inner nature and use them for its pleasure and purpose: the ground of religion lies in our *whole existence* and outside the sphere of our cognitive powers, all of which taken together constitute the most arbitrary and abstract mode of our existence.[23]

Hamann's most salient point here, once again, is that reason is in no way as absolute as the *Aufklärer* claim; it is dependent on the senses and

20. Nowhere, for Hamann, is this so evident as in Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, which he was, as it happens, the first (after Kant himself) to read and review. See N 3:277–80 and Hamann's *Metakritik über den Purismum der Vernunft* (N 3:283–89). Out of respect for Kant, neither was published during Hamann's lifetime. For further discussion of Hamann's critique of Kant, see my review essay, "Enlightenment Revisited: Hamann as the First and Best Critic of Kant's Philosophy," *Modern Theology* 20 (April 2004): 291–301.

21. N 3:133. The allusion here is to the figure of Simonides, who is mentioned in Cicero's *De natura deorum*. As the story goes, Simonides was questioned every day by the tyrant, Hiero, about the nature and existence of God; each time he gave no answer except to ask for twice as much time to consider the matter as he had the previous day. See *The Nature of the Gods*, trans. P. G. Walsh (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), book 1, 60. In a draft of the *Metakritik*, Hamann similarly says, "I'm getting on with pure reason as that philosopher did with its Ideal. The deeper he reflected, the more speechless he became. According to its discoveries, there is a land *this side* of experience, and *beyond* it nothing but mist. Reason without *experience* seems to be just as impossible as *reason* without *language*. *Tradition* and *language* are the true elements of reason." See Oswald Bayer, "Hamann's Metakritik im ersten Entwurf," *Kantstudien* 81, no. 4 (1990): 437.

22. Incidentally, the term *metacritical* and its variants are original to Hamann—not to postmodern philosophy or literary criticism.

23. N 3:191.

"derives the material of its concepts" from them. In fact, he says that it "constitutes the most arbitrary and abstract mode of our existence." His profounder point, however, is that existence is *prior* to reason and therefore cannot be explained by it. In other words, he highlights reason's inherent epistemological weakness: its inability to account for or even touch upon existence (since it deals by nature in abstractions and essential determinations). Indeed, because of this fundamental incomprehension of existence qua existence, reason can in no way claim any absolute authority (that is not hypocritical) to judge in matters of faith and tradition. Having humbled reason in this manner, Hamann then goes on to place faith itself beyond the reach of reason, saying that religion is grounded in our "*whole existence*" and lies "outside the sphere of our cognitive powers." For if faith is grounded in existence, and existence is incomprehensible to reason, then faith itself is beyond reason's grasp. What is more, as a primordial comportment that corresponds to the priority of existence qua revelation, faith is not only *beyond* the reach of reason but in a real sense *prior* to it. For it is by faith (understood as a distinct mode of knowing) and not by reason that one receives existence and the world as God's self-revelation, whereas reason alone, that is, pure reason, can only grasp at the essences of things *after the fact* of their existence (and even this it can do only in a limited way apart from grace).

For Hamann, then, faith is neither subject to reason nor answerable to it. On the contrary, reason is dependent upon faith since it can no more account for existence than it can establish its own (however much it may try to ground itself in the manner, say, of Descartes's *cogito*). And in this way, Hamann points the way to a new kind of philosophy: an existential philosophy that begins, not with transcendental determinations that never touch upon existence, but with the sheer fact of existence (and the religious dependence that this implies). As he puts it to Jacobi in 1785, calling for a reversal of the tradition of modern philosophy, "Not *Cogito; ergo sum,* but vice versa, and more Hebraic: *Est; ergo cogito,* and with the inversion of such a simple principle perhaps the whole system might receive a new language and direction."[24] In other words, existence is prior to thought, or, more precisely, the divine "I Am" is prior to thought: "*He Is,* therefore I think." With this one insight, whose philosophical depth was not fully appreciated until the late Schelling developed it in the 1820s in his "positive philosophy" against the "negative philosophy" of Hegel (and which Kierkegaard subsequently appropriated via Schelling), Hamann liberates faith from every overbearing rationalism that would presume to judge faith (or existence) according to *its* terms.

At the same time, in distinguishing and defending faith *from* reason (in order to affirm reason's ordination to faith), Hamann ends up

24. ZH 5:448.

safeguarding reason from *itself* (which helps to explain why Oswald Bayer calls him a "radical *Aufklärer*" and why one may justifiably view him as a prophetic herald of Nietzsche). For apart from faith, as Hamann recognized, reason cannot only not ground itself or existence, however much it may try (Hegel's philosophy being the paramount attempt at this), it is also incapable of forestalling its own collapse into skepticism and nihilism. Indeed, from Hamann's perspective, reason, unaided by faith and tradition, like the unsuccessful sons of Sceva (Acts 19:14–16), ironically ends up inciting skepticism and nihilism the more vigorously it tries to banish them—as in Kant's philosophy, whose unwitting legacy Hamann prophesied a full century before Nietzsche. Hamann's polemic against the Enlightenment is thus in no way an assault on reason per se; still less does it constitute a form of "irrationalism," as Isaiah Berlin erroneously maintained.[25] Rather, it is an attack against an overblown and idolatrous doctrine of reason, which threatened not only to undermine religious faith but, upon collapsing, even to destroy reason itself.[26]

A further problem that Hamann identifies with the Enlightenment, and which Kierkegaard famously repeats against the Hegelians, is its inauthentic separation of thought from life, that is, from concrete, embodied existence, not to mention its denigration of the senses and the passions, which for Hamann are the wellsprings of human creativity. The result, which Hamann especially deplores in his *Aesthetica in nuce* (1762), is an inevitable enervation of the human person, who, in keeping with his understanding of the *imago Dei*, is much *more* than reason. Thus, he indirectly says to Mendelssohn, who tried unsuccessfully to recruit him as an editor for his journal, "One can certainly be a man without being an author. But whoever expects good friends to judge the writer apart from the man is more inclined to poetic than philosophical abstractions."[27] In other words, whereas the "whole man," whose faith is grounded in his "whole existence," does not make the absurd mistake of forgetting that he exists, the abstract thinker is prone to precisely this metaphysical severance of

25. See 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); see James O'Flaherty's debate with Berlin in the *New York Review of Books*, November 18, 1993.

26. In this respect Hamann makes abundantly clear the truth of Aquinas's maxim that faith does not destroy reason (*non destruit*) but rather "exceeds" (*excedit*) and "perfects" it (*perficit*). See *De veritate* q. 14, a. 10 ad 9; *Summa theologiae* I, q. 1, a. 8 ad 2; ibid., I, q. 2, a. 2 ad 1. Admittedly, it may be unusual to read Aquinas in this connection, but it is nevertheless an implication of his thought. One would also have to make a more adequate distinction than Hamann does between a "natural" faith (as a primordial comportment) and the "supernatural" virtue of faith in Christ, and so on. Here, at least, it serves to show that Hamann (in this regard) is no more a fideist than Aquinas himself was and that Hamann's "fideism," for lack of a better word, is ultimately meant to save reason from skepticism and the nihilism that reason inevitably engenders as soon as it attempts to ground everything—from human subjectivity to the existence of an external world to a secular state—on its own terms.

27. N 2:201.

thought from existence.[28] How unoriginal it is, then, when Kierkegaard makes the wonderful remark: "If Hegel had written his whole logic and had written in the preface that it was only a thought-experiment . . . he undoubtedly would have been the greatest thinker who has ever lived. As it is he is comic."[29] The same holds true of Kierkegaard's devastating portrait of the abstract thinker as a

> fantastic creature who lives in the pure being of abstraction, and an at times pitiful professorial figure which that abstract creature sets down just as one sets down a cane. When reading the biography of such a thinker (for his books may very well be excellent), one sometimes shudders at the thought of what it means to be a human being.[30]

Thus, like Kierkegaard, Hamann protests against every disembodied rationalism that would separate thought from being, speculation from concrete existence; and, as if to embody this protest, he counters the proud systems of reason with the humility and existential authenticity of his "fragments." With regard to world-historical speculation, for example, he writes, "I do not know of anything better with which to respond to the universal blather and its index finger, daintily pointing from a distance into the great, wide world . . . than the most exact locality, individuality, and personality."[31] Similarly, he says to Lindner, "I am not suited to [universal] truths, principles, and systems, but to pieces, fragments, whims, and sudden notions."[32] To Herder, he says, "Gaps and deficiencies—constitute the highest and most profound knowledge of human nature, by which we must hoist ourselves up to its ideal—sudden ideas and doubts—the *summum bonum* of our reason."[33] And later to Jacobi he gnomically says, "A system is in itself already an obstacle to truth."[34]

Hamann thus anticipates Kierkegaard's response to Hegel on multiple fronts: (1) he exposes the superstition and idolatry behind the Enlightenment's doctrine of reason; (2) he disputes the claims of the *Aufklärer* to judge faith, especially in view of reason's inherent epistemological weak-

28. For more on the concept of the "whole man" as an aspect of Hamann's thought, see James C. O'Flaherty, *Johann Georg Hamann* (Boston: Twayne, 1979), 34–43.

29. *JP* II 1605.

30. Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 302.

31. N 3:352.

32. ZH 1:430. Thus, the concept of the "fragment," as a modern literary form of opposition to modern systematic thought, originates not with Kierkegaard, as in his *Philosophical Fragments*, but with Hamann, who first uses the term in his "London Writings" (1758) as a title for a collection of "fragments" [*Brocken*] (N 1:298–309). From then on, the term proceeded to have currency among the German Romantics, Friedrich Schlegel in particular, with whom Kierkegaard was familiar.

33. ZH 3:34.

34. ZH 6:276; cf. N 2:140: "The system of today, which allows the proof of your premises, will be the fairy-tale of tomorrow."

ness (e.g., its inability to ground existence or even itself); (3) he thereby makes a distinct space for religious faith in view of the inevitable blind spots and systemic incompleteness of any purely secular rationalism; and (4) he illumines the deleterious existential consequences of such rationalism: the transformation of the human being into a pitiful creature, who, in Kierkegaard's felicitous phrase, sets down his existence "as one sets down a cane."[35] And in all these ways he points the way toward an existential doctrine of faith that is freed from the constraints of rational legitimacy.

II: HAMANN'S *SOCRATIC MEMORABILIA*

Published in 1759 on the heels of his London conversion, and conceived as a response to Kant's and Christoph Berens's (a close friend) concerted efforts to "bring him to reason" and reconvert him to the Enlightenment, the *Socratic Memorabilia* is the first salvo of Hamann's authorship—an authorship that is one of the most ironic in modern letters since, in Hamann's view, the "Enlightenment" was an age of profound spiritual *darkness* and those who purveyed its doctrines, claiming to be guides, were *blind*.[36] But if Hamann showed himself to be a master of irony—and as such a model to Kierkegaard—as a Christian author his ultimate intention was not simply to satirize his contemporaries but to win them back to orthodox Christianity.

Of course, Kant, Berens, and the *Aufklärer* at large had no intention of returning; for them this would have entailed a *sacrificium intellectus*, a relinquishing of the very intellectual freedom from religious tradition and authority that they had so earnestly fought to attain. Indeed, in their view it would have meant a return precisely to a state of immaturity, superstition, and uncritical deference, the very thing from which, upon "enlightenment," they had escaped, as from a kind of "darkness." Such was the Enlightenment's version of Plato's "allegory of the cave," with Socrates leading the way. Clearly, therefore, given how deeply this ideology had taken hold of the imagination of the age, including that of his friends, no direct communication of faith would do. And so Hamann resorted to indirect means, making his first attempt at indirect communication through a beguiling portrait of Socrates, the very one whom the *Aufklärer* had adopted as their patron and champion.

35. See note 30.

36. See, for example, Hamann's letter to Christian Jacob Kraus regarding Kant's famous essay, "What Is Enlightenment?" (ZH 5:289–92), in *What Is Enlightenment?*, ed. James Schmidt, trans. and annot. by Garrett Green (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 145–53.

Being the "greatest humorist in Christendom" (in Kierkegaard's phrase), Hamann doubtless enjoyed the ironies of his age. Clothing himself in the mask of Socrates (the very one touted as a champion of rationalism in an age of mythology and superstition, who rejected any authority that could not endure the scrutiny of reason), he shows with much satisfaction that Socrates' wisdom consisted not in his learning or dialectical skill but in his profession of ignorance. He shows, furthermore, that Socrates' ignorance, far from confirming his interlocutors in their established conceptions, was precisely what most confounded them; and from this he draws the conclusion that few thinkers would be less amenable, indeed more dreadful, to his contemporaries, the modern-day Athenians, than Socrates. As he puts it, "All Socrates' ideas, which were nothing but the expectorations and secretions of his ignorance, seemed as fearful to them [the Athenians] as the hair on the head of the Medusa, the navel of the Aegis."[37] Moreover, adding insult to injury, in a day that considered Socrates an alternative to Christianity, an excuse to think for oneself independently of faith and tradition, Hamann depicts him as a forerunner of Christ.[38] In every respect, therefore, the *Socratic Memorabilia* was a loaded gift, a Trojan horse, a radical attempt to undermine the pretensions of the *Aufklärer* and thereby lead them to Christ, showing that their favorite hero—an account of whom they could scarcely resist reading—would have wasted no time interrogating their universal "rationality," questioning their self-certainty, humbling their pride, and instructing them in that true philosophy of learned ignorance, which is a prelude to Pauline wisdom (1 Cor 8:2–3).

At the heart of the *Socratic Memorabilia,* then, is an ironic reversal of the conventional wisdom of the Enlightenment. For the *Aufklärer,* enlightenment was to be attained by accessing one's own rational faculty, by daring to think for oneself (*sapere aude!*), as Kant later programmatically formulates it in 1784.[39] For Hamann, however, contra Kant, it consists in precisely the opposite: a humble confession of ignorance—indeed, in becoming a child (Mark 10:15). And he finds it particularly interesting that this reversal of the "wisdom" of the Enlightenment is anticipated by the oracle of Apollo at Delphi:

37. N 2:73.

38. As James C. O'Flaherty points out, "This thought is, of course, not original with Hamann. It had been held by many of the church fathers, including Justin Martyr, Lactantius, Minutius Felix, and others." See James C. O'Flaherty, *Hamann's Socratic Memorabilia: A Translation and Commentary* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1967), 6. The parallels include the following: both were martyred because of their witness to the truth; Socrates' daimon guided him into truth just as the Holy Spirit was later to guide believers into the truth; Socrates was wise because he recognized his own ignorance (cf. 1 Cor 8:2–3); Socrates' ugliness contrasted paradoxically with his wisdom, just as the form of a servant (cf. Isa 53:2) did not accord with the glory of the Son of God.

39. See Hamann's letter to Kraus (note 36).

> *Know thyself!* The door of that famous temple proclaimed to all who entered to offer a sacrifice to the god of wisdom and to ask his advice concerning their trivial affairs. Everyone read, admired, and knew this saying *by heart.* They wore it upon their foreheads like the stone in which it was engraved, without comprehending the meaning of it. The god doubtless laughed behind his golden beard when, during the time of Socrates, the ticklish [question] was put to him as to who among all those living at the time was the wisest.[40]

The god "doubtless laughed" because of the irony that Socrates, though he professed to be ignorant, was the wisest of all and, more generally, because this divine judgment, though it appears foolish, in fact *makes* foolish—even puts to shame—the learning and conventional wisdom of the world (cf. 1 Cor 1). Thus Hamann could find in the god's verdict a pagan anticipation of the ironic judgments of the Gospels: "But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first" (Matt 19:30); "all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted" (Luke 18:14); "I came into this world for judgment so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind" (John 9:39), and so on.

But what he finds most wonderful about Socrates' profession of ignorance is that it leads to his *being known* by the god, in direct anticipation of Paul's teaching in 1 Cor 8:2–3:

> For the testimony that Socrates gave of his ignorance I know of no more honorable seal and at the same time no better key than the oracle of the great *teacher of the Gentiles*: Ει δε τις δοκει ειδεναι τι ουδεπω ουδεν εγνωκε καθως δει γνωναι: Ει δε τις αγαπα ΘΕΟΝ ουτος εγνωται υπ' αυτον. *"If anyone thinks that he knows something, he does not yet know as he ought to know. But if a man loves God, he is known by him"*—just as Socrates was known by Apollo to be a *wise man.* But as the seed of all our natural wisdom must decay and perish into ignorance, and as from this *death,* from this *nothing,* the *life* and *nature* of a higher knowledge must spring forth newly created—thus far the *nose* of a Sophist does not reach.[41]

In other words, the *Aufklärer,* like the Sophists, think they know something when, in fact, they have not yet begun to know as they ought. If they had, they would humble themselves and confess their ignorance, like Socrates. Instead they are proud and, consequently, ignorant of one of the profoundest revelations of paganism, which coincides with the teaching of Paul (and Origen): that true wisdom consists not in *knowing* and flaunting how much one knows but in humbly confessing one's ignorance (one's sins) and thereby *being known* (cf. Matt 7:23). As Scripture says, God "regards

40. N 2:70
41. N 2:74. Cf. John 12:24.

the lowly" (Ps 138:6). Accordingly, the purpose of reason (and of Socratic dialectic) is not to "puff up" with false knowledge—the "one-eyed" "encyclopedic" knowledge Hamann associated with the "Enlightenment"—but to deconstruct such knowledge so that true knowledge can begin: the kind of knowledge that begins with humility and leads to love (1 Cor 8:1–2.).

Whether or not the *Socratic Memorabilia* had its intended effect—vis-à-vis Kant, it seems to have failed—Kierkegaard was evidently impressed by it. Indeed, if Hamann was "full of Hume" when he wrote the *Socratic Memorabilia* (for reasons we shall see), Kierkegaard was full of Hamann when he wrote *The Concept of Anxiety*:

> For [Hamann] has said the best that has been said about Socrates, something far more remarkable and rare than that he taught young people and made fun of the Sophists and drained the poison cup: Socrates was great because he distinguished between what he understood and what he did not understand.[42]

At first glance, Hamann's observation would hardly seem noteworthy. But in view of the pretentious claims of the *Aufklärer* (and Hegel's later claim to possess "absolute knowledge"), Kierkegaard realized what a profound and comical remark it really was:

> Is it not remarkable that the greatest master of irony and the greatest humorist, separated by 2,000 years, may join together in doing and admiring what we should suppose everyone had done, if this fact did not testify to the contrary. Hamann says of Socrates: "He was great because he distinguished between what he understood and what he did not understand." If only Socrates could have had an epitaph! Many an innocent person has drained the poisoned cup, many a one has sacrificed his life for the idea, but this epitaph belongs to Socrates alone: Here rests Socrates, he distinguished between what he understood and what he did not understand. Or perhaps better simply to quote Hamann's words.[43]

In other words, what connects Hamann, the "greatest humorist," to Socrates, the "master of irony," is his recognition of the greatness of Socrates' minor feat: that he made an elementary distinction (which

42. *JP* II 1555 [*n.d.*, 1844], (*Pap.* V B 45). In Hamann's own words: "Socrates was, gentlemen, no mean critic. He distinguished in the writings of Heraclitus what he did not understand from what he understood, and drew a very proper and modest inference from the comprehensible to the incomprehensible" (N 2:61). Unless otherwise noted, translations are from O'Flaherty, *Hamann's Socratic Memorabilia*.

43. *JP* II 1554 [*n.d.*, 1844], (*Pap.* V B 44). Cf. *Concept of Anxiety*, 198: "The greatest humorist (Hamann) said of the only ironist (Socrates) that Socrates was great in that he distinguished between what he knew and what he did not know." See also 177, where for the title page to *The Concept of Anxiety*, Kierkegaard even envisioned a timeline, "Socrates (400 B.C.) — — — — — — Hamann (1758 A.D.)," as if to highlight the singularity of self-knowledge. Interestingly, Kierkegaard notes the date 1758, which is the year of Hamann's conversion.

everyone should have made but did not) between what he did and did not understand. As for the humor of the remark, Kierkegaard gives the following explanation: "The humor lies in the reproduction as well as in the evaluating solemnity and the apparently fortuitous character of the remark," adding, "That the best men become victims is already a terrible judgment upon the world, but this epitaph is a judgment far more terrible."[44] Presumably, what is so terrible is that Hamann's modest epitaph should be so fitting: that it should have been so extraordinary to have made so elementary a distinction and that so many intellectuals, by implication, should thereby be judged insufficiently honest as to be capable of it. Thus Kierkegaard says that Hamann's words, modest as they are, are "the best that have been said about Socrates." In another entry he fills out the comparison, saying, "Hamann's relationship to his contemporaries—Socrates' to the Sophists (who could say something about *everything*)."[45] Clearly, living among the Hegelians, the purveyors of absolute knowledge, Kierkegaard saw himself in a similar light; and given its content, a Socratic manifesto written by the "greatest humorist in Christendom" in defense of Christian faith, it is quite possible that no modern text was more important to the development of Kierkegaard's philosophy than Hamann's *Socratic Memorabilia.*

III: CONVERTING HUME: ON FAITH AND REASON

The other philosopher who figures prominently in the *Socratic Memorabilia* is David Hume, and Hamann's use of him is arguably even more novel, ironic, and witty than his use of Socrates. For it is one thing to hear Socrates speaking like an apostle; it is another thing to hear Hume, the renowned skeptic and foe of Christianity, defending it. Yet this is precisely the use Hamann makes of him, turning him on his head, using his own sword against him (cf. 1 Sam 17:50–51), which is one of Hamann's favorite literary devices in his "metacritical" crusade.[46] The most obvious

44. Kierkegaard, *Concept of Anxiety*, 199; (*Pap.* V B 55:14).

45. *JP* II 1547 [*n.d.*, 1840–1841], (*Pap.* III B 17).

46. As with all neologisms in Hamann's vocabulary, this one carries a host of meanings, of which only a few can be indicated here. At one level, it implies a few centuries before Derrida a radical form of literary criticism, which lays bare the unconsidered presuppositions of a given text—with the notable difference that Hamann's "metacriticism" always functions as a *praeparatio evangelica* (in the sense of 1 Cor 8:2–3). At another level, it is a criticism conducted in the conscious awareness of its relativity vis-à-vis divine judgment; as such, it does not absurdly usurp divine judgment for itself, like standard criticism, but consciously refers beyond itself to the eschatological judgment of Christ (2 Cor 5:10), the true critic to whom (borrowing Kant's phrase) "all must submit." It is, in this sense, a more sober form of criticism. See Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Norman Kemp Smith (New York: St. Martin's, 1965), 9 (A XII).

example of this is his (otherwise standard) translation of Hume's "belief" as *Glaube,* which has the felicitous and even primary connotation of religious "faith." To be sure, this is to read Hume against his intentions. But for Hamann, who read Hume's philosophy in the ironic light of a divine joke played on Hume, this is beside the point. For his entire philosophy says what he did not intend it to say: that we live in this world "by faith, not by sight" (2 Cor 5:7). Indeed, from Hamann's perspective, inasmuch as skepticism reveals the epistemological weakness of reason, far from undermining religious faith, it precisely makes straight the way to it.[47]

Thus, in Hamann's hands Hume is converted into a John the Baptist among the philosophers; what is more, his skepticism supports one of Hamann's fundamental claims, which is based upon his radical application of Paul's (and Luther's) understanding of the law: that just as the purpose of the law is not to make one righteous but to reveal sin (Rom 3:20), so, too, the purpose of reason is not to make one wise but to reveal one's ignorance. In other words, for Hamann, reason functions as the law. As the law is fulfilled as a pedagogue to Christ (Gal 3:24)—since it prepares the heart through repentance for the forgiveness and righteousness that would come through faith—the task of reason is fulfilled when the active "self-justification" of knowledge (like the "old man" and his "good works") "dies" and suffers conversion into a "passive justification" of "being known," so that one now knows "as one ought to know" (and acts as one ought to act), namely, as one conscious of the indwelling grace of the Holy Spirit.[48] As Hamann puts it to Lindner shortly before writing the *Socratic Memorabilia,*

> Our reason is therefore just what Paul calls the law—and the command of reason is holy, righteous, and good; but is it given—to us to make us wise? Just as little as the law of the Jews was given to make them righteous; rather, it is given to convince us of the opposite: how unreasonable our reason is, and that our errors should increase by it, just as sin increased through the law.[49]

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47. Cf. Philo's remark in *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion,* ed. with an intro. by Richard H. Popkin (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1980), 89: "To be a philosophical sceptic is, in a man of letters, the first and most essential step towards being a sound, believing *Christian.*" Hume may have said this in jest (Philo getting the best of Cleanthes as it were), but for Hamann, who was well aware of Hume's critical stance toward dogmatic belief, this is beside the point. See Michael D. Redmond, "The Hamann–Hume Connection," *Religious Studies* 23 (March 1987): 101.

48. Thus, contra Isaiah Berlin, Hamann is no implacable enemy of "enlightenment," but its most radical proponent: inasmuch as by "enlightenment" one means not an "auto-illumination" but a genuine illumination by the Holy Spirit. See in this regard Hamann's letter to Christian Jacob Kraus regarding Kant's famous essay, "What is Enlightenment?" (ZH 5: 289–92).

49. ZH 1:355–56. Cf. Hamann's remark to Jacobi, ZH 5:95: "But you know already that I think of reason just as St. Paul does of the entire law and the righteousness of the schools [*Schulgerechtigkeit*], that I trust it with nothing more than the knowledge of error, [and] as unfit for any way to truth and life. The final aim of the researcher, according to your own conviction, is what cannot be explained, cannot be pressed into clear concepts—and hence does not belong to the *ressort* of reason."

Similarly, in a letter of no small consequence to the history of ideas, he writes to Kant:

> The Attic philosopher Hume has faith necessary if he should eat an egg or drink a glass of milk. He says: Moses, the law of reason, to which the philosopher appeals, condemns him. Reason is not given to you to make you wise, but to [help you to] recognize your folly and ignorance; just as the Mosaic law was given to the Jews not to make them righteous, but to make them [perceive] their sins [to be] more sinful.[50]

Even if Hamann's *Socratic Memorabilia* did not win Kant over, his early reception of Hume, which included partial translations of Hume's *Treatise on Human Nature* and *Dialogues*, doubtless made an impression, contributing to—if not directly affecting—Kant's famous "awakening" from his "dogmatic slumbers." A half century later, it also made an impression upon Kierkegaard, who was familiar with Hamann's correspondence from this period:

> Hamann draws a most interesting parallel between the law (Mosaic law) and reason. He goes after Hume's statement: "the last fruit of the world's wisdom is the recognition of human ignorance and weakness" . . . "our reason," Hamann goes on to say, "is therefore just what Paul calls the law—and the command of reason is holy, righteous, and good; but is it given to us to make us wise? Just as little as the law of the Jews was given to make them righteous; rather, [it is given to us] in order to convince us of the opposite, how unreasonable our reason is, and that our errors should increase by it, just as sin increased through the law."[51]

It would be difficult to exaggerate the importance to Kierkegaard of Hamann's thinking in this regard, particularly at this juncture in his own thought; for it is arguably from this notion of reason's proper end (*telos*), as Hamann understood it, that Kierkegaard would develop his doctrine of the paradox.[52]

Admittedly, Hamann does not develop the matter as does Kierkegaard into an explicit dialectic between reason and the paradox; but the rudiments of such a dialectic are already present in Hamann's notion of revelation bringing reason to its proper end or, perhaps one should say, its proper point of departure: when reason comes to recognize its incompre-

50. ZH 1:379.

51. *JP* II 1540 [September 12, 1836], (*Pap.* I A 237).

52. See, for example, *Philosophical Fragments*, 37: "[T]he thinker without the paradox is like the lover without passion: a mediocre fellow. But the ultimate potentiation of every passion is always to will its own downfall, and so it is also the ultimate passion of the understanding [*Forstand*] to will the collision, although in one way or another the collision must become its downfall. This, then, is the ultimate paradox of thought: to want to discover something that thought itself cannot think."

hension. Accordingly, for Hamann (before Kierkegaard), faith lends itself neither to demonstration nor even to probability; and it is precisely this notion that Kierkegaard would develop into a more systematic form:

> Hamann rightly declares: Just as "law" abrogates "grace," so "to comprehend" abrogates "to have faith." It is, in fact, my thesis. But in Hamann it is merely an aphorism; whereas I have fought it through or have fought it out of a whole given philosophy and culture and into the thesis: to comprehend that faith cannot be comprehended or (the more ethical and God-fearing side) to comprehend that faith must not be comprehended.[53]

One hardly need dispute Kierkegaard's claim to being the more systematic thinker—though Hamann was certainly more than a mere aphorist.[54] What is important here is simply that Kierkegaard found in Hamann an understanding of faith that derives from another source than reason and, as such, is not bound to rational expectations or requirements of plausibility, demonstrability, and intelligibility. In the *Socratic Memorabilia,* for example, Hamann draws the following distinction between the implausible propositions of faith and the demonstrable truths of reason:

> What one believes, therefore, does not have to be proven, and a proposition can be ever so incontrovertibly proven without on this account being believed. There are proofs of truths that are as worthless as the application that can be made of the truths themselves; indeed, one can believe the proof of a proposition without lending one's approval to the proposition itself. The reasons of a *Hume* may be ever so convincing, and the refutations of them based merely on derivative principles [*Lehnsätze*] and doubts; yet faith wins and loses equally, whether one is dealing with the ablest pettifogger or the most honorable attorney. Faith is no work of reason and therefore cannot succumb to any attack by it; for *faith* arises as little from reasons as *tasting and seeing* do.[55]

Hamann's *first* point is that a proof can be ever so valid without inspiring any credibility or (to borrow Kierkegaard's phrase) any "subjective passion." Thus, in a letter to Jacobi, he not only distinguishes between the "*correctness*" of an explanation and the "*fruitfulness*" of the truth, but adds the striking observation: "For if they are fools, who deny the existence of God in their hearts, those appear to me even more senseless who first want to prove it."[56] In other words, even if one could prove God's existence, this alone would not suffice to inspire faith; and if a proof can-

53. *JP* II 1559 [*n.d.*, 1849], (*Pap.* X² A 225).

54. This is why, relatively speaking, he enjoys so much more popularity today, of the kind Hamann expressly avoided, having limited himself to what he considered the more authentic literary form of "fragments," "fine flat cakes," and "petits pâtés." See N 4:460f.

55. N 2:73.

56. ZH 6:277.

not do this, which is its very point, then the very attempt to prove God's existence is in some sense pointless.[57]

Well before Kierkegaard, then, Hamann is happy to say that the articles of the Christian faith are not only indemonstrable but improbable (as if their objective uncertainty is more suited to the subjective passion of faith); indeed, he even goes so far as to say *with* Hume that one cannot believe them without a "subversion" of the understanding and a "continued miracle" in one's own person.[58] Kierkegaard himself makes a note of this: "On page 406 [of the Roth edition] one sees the complete misunderstanding of a Christian and non-Christian in Hamann's answer to an objection by Hume: Well, that's just the way it is."[59] This is not to say that Hamann misunderstood Hume; rather, it is to note the irony that Hamann could so positively affirm Hume's intended critique of the Christian faith. In fact, Hamann delights in the irony himself, so much so that he calls it "orthodoxy and a witness to the truth from the mouth of an enemy and persecutor—all his [Hume's] doubts are proofs of his argument."[60] Hamann's *second* point in the above passage is that faith springs from an altogether different source than reason and therefore cannot be criticized by it; nor a fortiori can it be assimilated by reason as a dim foreshadowing of what reason always already possessed but had merely forgotten. And in this respect he anticipates Kierkegaard's anti-Platonic line of argument in the *Philosophical Fragments*.

IV: FAITH AND INDIRECT COMMUNICATION

Hamann and Kierkegaard thus stand together as Christian authors at a unique juncture in intellectual history: whereas the early Christian apologists contended with a pagan culture that had yet to come to faith—in

57. Admittedly, this makes it difficult to see how Hamann is *not* an irrationalist (as was claimed previously). His point, however, remains that the autonomous operation of reason is able neither to prove God's existence nor to ground itself. Indeed, in this last respect it is at every point dependent upon faith and cannot be divorced from it without collapsing into nihilism. Positively stated, it is first in relation to faith that reason functions properly and comes into its own.

58. See *Enquiries Concerning Human Understanding and Concerning the Principles of Morals*, 3d. ed., ed. P. H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon, 1975), 131: "[U]pon the whole, we may conclude, that the *Christian Religion* not only was at first attended with miracles, but even at this day cannot be believed by any reasonable person without one. Mere reason is insufficient to convince us of its veracity: And whoever is moved by *Faith* to assent to it, is conscious of a continued miracle in his own person, which subverts all the principles of his understanding, and gives him a determination to believe what is most contrary to custom and experience." See ZH 1:356, "Hume may have said this with a scornful and sardonic air; nevertheless it is *orthodoxy* and a witness to the truth in the mouth of an enemy and persecutor of the same."

59. *JP* II 1539 [September 10, 1836], (*Pap.* I A 100).

60. ZH 1:356.

the one God who became incarnate in Christ—they were contending with a secular culture that was suddenly and avowedly *beyond* it. Indeed, each was dealing with a secular intellectual culture that, if not outright hostile to orthodox Christianity, at least presumed to have outgrown it and thus looked back (and down) upon the "religious imagination" as an immature stage in the development of the human race (though Lessing and Hegel are arguably more sophisticated than this). Their common endeavor, therefore, was to show that faith is *not* an obscure intimation of rational verities dressed in mythology and superstition that can be dispensed with upon the attainment of "enlightenment" or "absolute knowledge." Rather, for them it is a supernatural virtue that lies *beyond* the reach of reason, indeed, represents an *existential* advance beyond it. This is why faith cannot be transmitted en masse like the doctrines of the Enlightenment; on the contrary, it can be communicated only indirectly to individuals in the hope of an existential appropriation. As Hamann strikingly puts it, "Faith is not everyone's matter, nor can it be communicated like merchandise, rather it is the kingdom of heaven and hell in us."[61]

It was from Hamann, then, that Kierkegaard learned the art of indirect communication (understood by both of them as the proper form of evangelical writing in an age of secular reason, an age seemingly inoculated against any direct communication of faith, in keeping with Paul's sober asseveration in 2 Cor 4:4). Accordingly, both employ pseudonyms in order to give their readers room for reflection, that is, room to appropriate more freely the existential import of their communications. As Hamann says, "I can accomplish no more than the arm of a signpost, and am too wooden to accompany my readers in the course of their reflections."[62] For "self-knowledge is the most difficult and the highest, the simplest and the most sickening natural history, philosophy, and poetry."[63] Clearly, Hamann suffers from no illusions about the difficulties involved; on the contrary, recalling Plato's account of the philosopher's difficulty communicating with those in the cave, he likens the communication of faith to a conversation with dreamers:

> A dreamer can have more lively impressions than one who is awake; see more, hear more, think more . . . dream with more order than one who is awake can think; a creator of new objects, great events. Everything is *true* for him, yet everything a deception. . . . There are dreamers who submit to

61. ZH 7:176. See Bayer, *Autorität und Kritik*, 116: Hamann writes for "'hidden readers, whom God knows and understands' better than he does. Therein lies their freedom. The self-communicating truth cannot be necessitated; and thus its witness does not wish to force it." The communication of truth is thus left to the "sovereign right of that author who ultimately interprets and judges."

62. N 2:76.

63. ZH 1:374.

> being questioned and respond intelligently. If in this case a person who is awake wished to put such a dreamer to the test and asked him about his own condition: an exchange of ideas could easily take place. . . . And if the person who is awake spoke the words: you are dreaming, dear friend, a heated exchange between the two could arise.[64]

As it happens, the dreamers to whom Hamann refers in this letter are none other than Kant and Berens, and the "heated exchange" is a reference to Hamann's postconversion conversation with them in the summer of 1759 at an inn on the outskirts of Königsberg, where "the two" more or less ambushed him and tried to bring *him* to his senses. Hamann viewed the entire affair ironically, of course, since, in his view, *he* was the one who was awake, while Kant and Berens were dreaming. Thus, far from being intimidated by them (two friends, one a philosophical giant), he took their efforts as seriously as a person awake and in full command of his faculties would take the reasoning of a sleepwalker. But as he goes on to say in a passage that caught Kierkegaard's attention,

> The question remains, whether in all the world it is possible for a person who is awake to convince a person who is dreaming, so long, namely, as he is asleep, that he is asleep? No—Even if God himself spoke with him, he is compelled to send the word of power in advance and to allow for its fulfillment: Awake, thou that sleepest. (cf. Eph 5:14)[65]

In the same letter, Hamann notes that, in the Gospel of Matthew Christ deals most often with the following three illnesses: the palsied, the possessed, and sleepwalkers, the last of whom contract this illness, as Hamann puts it, through the "changing shape and taste of the public and the age" and through the "approbation and applause" they receive from it. He also notes that Christ left his gift of healing to his disciples. Thus, as a modern-day disciple, Hamann views it as incumbent upon himself to speak to his contemporaries in a therapeutic language suited to them—which was precisely what he attempted to do in the *Socratic Memorabilia*—and in this way he hopes to awaken them from their spiritual slumber. Indeed, he hopes that his own writings might perform the service that Scripture once performed for him: that his own writing might become by grace a kind of "Scripture," even a kind of "speaking in tongues." As he puts it to Lindner,

> A layman and unbeliever can explain my manner of writing in no other way than as *nonsense,* since I express myself with various tongues and speak the language of sophists, of puns, of Cretans and Arabians, of wise

64. ZH 1:369–70.
65. ZH 1:370. See *JP* II 1539 [September 10, 1836], (*Pap.* I A 100).

> men and Moors and Creoles, and babble a confusion of criticism, mythology, rebus, and axioms, and argue now κατ' ανθρωπον [i.e., in a human way] and now κατ' εξοχην [i.e., par excellence].[66]

In other words, like the gift of tongues, Hamann intends his writings to be a "sign to unbelievers" (1 Cor 14:22); and certainly they are stupefying, even foolish "nonsense" to anyone lacking the "gift of interpretation" (which would in this case involve an intimate understanding of the specific circumstances that occasioned them). At the same time, he intends his writings to carry the "metacritical" power of eschatological judgment:

> My conception of the gift of tongues is perhaps as novel as Paul's conception of prophecy, namely, that it consists in παρουσια and εξουσια [i.e., in the authority of eschatological judgment], so that the hiddenness of the heart would be revealed, and the layman would fall on his face, pray to God, and confess that God is truly in us.[67]

Thus, notwithstanding Hamann's sober assessment of the possibility of effecting belief in an unbeliever, he nevertheless hoped that his writings would be conducive to this end. Specifically, he hoped to lead his contemporaries to repentance in order that they might thereby come to experience for themselves the comfort of the Spirit (Matt 5:4) and thus come to understand what Paul proclaims as the central mystery of the gospel: the indwelling, sanctifying presence of the Holy Spirit by virtue of faith in Christ.[68] As he profoundly realized, however, this mystery cannot be approached, much less experienced, except by way of humility. Like a Christian Socrates, therefore, he attempted to lead his contemporaries to self-knowledge, and from self-knowledge to humility—once one has learned to suffer one's ignorance—and from humility to faith, that is, not merely the *fides quae* of an intellectual assent but an experiential faith in the God who indwells those who love him (John 14:21–22). And in this particular sense he attempted to be the true Socrates—the Ariadne—of his age: to lure "his fellow citizens out of the labyrinths of their learned sophists to a truth in the inward being, to a wisdom in the secret heart" (cf. Ps 51:6).[69]

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66. ZH 1:396. The Greek word that Hamann quotes here in the accusative, εξοχην, occurs only once in the New Testament (Acts 25:23), where it is rendered as "prominent" as in the "prominent men of the city." A more standard translation based on classical usage would be "par excellence," but Hamann seems to mean something more akin to what Paul says in 1 Cor 2:4, though in this case as a verbal demonstration "of the Spirit and of power."

67. ZH 1:396.

68. See, for example, John 14:17; 1 Cor 3:16, 6:19; Col 1:26–27, and so forth.

69. N 2:77.

V: DIALECTIC VS. *THEOLOGIA CRUCIS NATURALIS*

The similarities between Hamann and Kierkegaard are thus substantial: both advocate a form of religious existentialism over against some form of idolatrous rationalism, whether that of the Enlightenment or the Hegelians, and both write indirectly as Christian authors in an attempt to communicate faith to an age that had "grown beyond it." That being said, Hamann never reaches the dialectical pitch expressed in Kierkegaard's writings—to the point, say, of attacking the notion of divine immanence as such (as Kierkegaard comes close to doing in the *Philosophical Fragments*). Indeed, Hamann's entire sensibility as a Christian, as articulated above all in his *Aesthetica in nuce,* is predicated upon the kenotic *presence* of a God who speaks continuously "to his creatures through his creatures."[70] And even when he speaks of a "dialectic," he means by this not any ultimate opposition between God and world but a "dialectic" between God's radical immanence to the creature (which is so radical that no creature can escape it) and his equally radical transcendence of the creature (which makes him seem "as nothing").[71]

And yet, given the tendency of his age toward one form of immanence or another—whether the immanence of Spinoza's pantheism or Kant's autonomous reason—it remains the case that Hamann speaks to his contemporaries, as does Kierkegaard, as a prophet of transcendence. Accordingly, while he admired Socrates' dialectical skill in assuming the position of his interlocutors in order to assist their understanding from within, he never sought to lead his readers to a moment of recollection (αναμνησις), that is, to that which they already possessed. Rather, he seeks to *confront* his contemporaries with the "external word" (Luther's *verbum externum*)—a word that is not found within the inventory of reason as something always already in its possession but is encountered as strange, even alien, to the point of contradicting every rational expectation. Indeed, for Hamann, the Word of God (in Christ, creation, and Scripture) is mysteriously hidden from reason, even "sealed" against it by an offensive form, and so he naturally rejects any *theologia crucis naturalis* that would refashion the cross in the image of reason. As he puts it in a prophetic apostrophe to his contemporaries: "Will you succeed in dispensing with the *divine* determination of a stumbling-block, a rock of offense, a sign of contradiction by means of new interpretations, new translations, new doctrines, new sermons, new grammars and vocabularies!"[72]

70. N 2:198.
71. N 2:204.
72. N 3:150.

No doubt, there will continue to be "new interpretations, new doctrines, new sermons, new grammars and vocabularies," that is, new attempts to accommodate divine revelation to the conventional thinking of the time. From Hamann's perspective, however, such attempts to rationalize what is strictly a matter of faith (like Hegel's speculative Good Friday)—and thus to dispense with any need to commit oneself, to surrender oneself, to a truth, to a revelation, to a God, beyond oneself—ultimately represents a fallen way of thinking that is mired in a concupiscence of self-justification, a narcissistic incurvature of the self upon itself, which effectively obscures the facts, the *data*, of revelation and certainly mitigates the "subjective passion" of any faith regarding them.[73] As Hamann puts it as early as 1764 (seventeen years before the appearance of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*), "the wisdom of the world has begun to transform itself from a universal science of the possible into a universal ignorance of the real."[74] Similarly, to Jacobi, he describes the rationality of the age in terms of an "*underworld* that shadow-boxes with ideas and speculations in the face of data and facts, with theatrical deceptions in the face of historical truths, with plausible probabilities in the face of testimonies and documents."[75] In other words, inasmuch as reason can see and verify only that which is made in *its* universal image—that which it can recollect a priori from its own inventory—it has no place for the particular historical truths that constitute the object of Christian faith.[76] Still less does it have room for the improbable—not to mention the absurd—say, a virgin birth, an Incarnation, a Crucifixion (of God), a Resurrection, a forgiveness of sins, a Eucharist, and so forth. As Hamann puts it, "Is it not an old notion, which you have often heard from me: *incredibile sed verum*? Lies and novels must be probable, hypotheses and fables; but not the truths and fundamental doctrines of our faith."[77]

One can imagine how this last remark would have affected Kierkegaard; for it is precisely this notion that he developed into his doctrine of the

73. See Oswald Bayer, "Der Neuzeitliche Narziß," in *Gott als Autor: Zu einer Poietologischen Theologie* (Tübingen: Mohr-Seibeck, 1999), 73–85; *Autorität und Kritik: Zur Hermeneutik und Wissenschaftstheorie* (Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 1991), 42–43; "Das Sein Jesu Christi im Glauben," *Theologische Literaturzeitung* 108, no. 4 (1993): 275–84. Perhaps the ultimate point to be made here is that if truth were fully immanent to consciousness, fully accessible to reason, if, that is, truth were simply another way of speaking about reason, then it would not only be insipid, like a tautology, incapable of inspiring any wonder or awe, but (against every intuition) could never be loved—unless the ultimate truth is not love of another, but love of self; not love of the different, but love of the same.

74. N 4:271.

75. ZH 6:256.

76. See H. S. Reimarus, *Apologie oder Schutzschrift für die vernünftigen Verehrer Gottes*, ed. Gerhard Alexander (Frankfurt am Main: Insel Verlag, 1972), 1:171: "Man is not made for a religion that is founded on facts, and particularly such as are said to have happened in one corner of the earth."

77. Noted by Kierkegaard *JP* II 1540 [*n.d.*], (*Pap.* I A 237); cf. ZH 7:176; N 2:161. The phrase *incredibile sed verum* comes from Seneca.

paradox. In the *Philosophical Fragments*, for example, Climacus places Hamann's words directly in the mouth of the paradox: "Comedies and novels and lies must be probable, but how could I be probable?" Then, having "ushered the understanding to the wonder stool," the paradox replies with another set of Hamann's words: "Now, what are you wondering about? It is just as you say, and the amazing thing is that you think that it is an objection, but the truth in the mouth of a hypocrite is dearer to me than to hear it from an angel and an apostle."[78] This last statement is perhaps Kierkegaard's greatest tribute to Hamann, for here he places the very words in the mouth of the paradox that initially struck him as blasphemous.[79] In fact, with respect to Hamann's words, Climacus says, "I admit that I trembled when I wrote them down. I could not recognize myself, could not imagine that I, who as a rule am so diffident and fearful, dared to write anything like that."[80] Yet Kierkegaard seems to have appreciated Hamann's point, for "offense has one advantage: it points up the difference more clearly."[81] In other words, it highlights and safeguards the difference, which reason tends to collapse, between reason and revelation, God and human beings.

For Hamann and Kierkegaard, then, the task of a Christian author, whether in an age of secular reason or "absolute knowledge," is to offend reason's vanity, to breach its immanence, and to awaken it to the possibility of revelation—to that which cannot be determined in advance a priori. And, in this respect, together with the late Schelling, they form a distinct countertradition to the rationality of the Enlightenment, which culminates in Hegel. For Hamann and Kierkegaard, however, the challenge was not simply to bring reason to acknowledge historical revelation but to find revelation where it would least expect it, that is to say, *sub contrario*: the eternal God in time, the infinite God in a virgin's womb, the omnipotent God on a cross, the glory of God disgraced, the *Ipsa Forma* disfigured, the wisdom of God made foolish, even the holiness of God made sin (Isa 53:2; 1 Cor 1:18ff.; 2 Cor 5:21). Such is the dialectic of revelation as understood by Luther, Hamann, Kierkegaard, and even Nietzsche, who recognized the scandal and, consequently, would never have presumed to reduce Christianity to rational terms.

That being said, the ways in which Hamann and Kierkegaard present this dialectic are notably different. In Kierkegaard it tends to be cramped into the "paradox," whereas in Hamann it is always presented in terms of the "self-emptying" humility of God, which he saw everywhere and

78. Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, 52.

79. See *JP* II 1693 [*n.d.*], (*Pap.* II A 105): "Humor can therefore approach blasphemy; Hamann would rather hear wisdom from Balaam's ass or from a philosopher against his will than from an angel or apostle."

80. Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, 53.

81. Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, 54.

which defines his distinctly Christian aesthetics of God's self-abasing glory. For both of them, however, the dialectic of revelation is always asserted prophetically *against* the immanence of secular reason, and in this respect they anticipate the dialectical theology of Gogarten and Barth.

VI: INFINITE DIFFERENCE AND THE CONCEPT OF ANXIETY

The notion that God is radically transcendent is hardly original to dialectical theology. After all, one of the principal challenges of the early apologists in contending with Gnosticism was to convince the world of the opposite: that the God who "dwells in unapproachable light" (1 Tim 6:16) had come near (Phil 4:5) and assumed flesh (John 1:14) in Christ. Even Barth's famous assertion of an "infinite qualitative difference between God and man" is so unoriginal as to be a commonplace of Christian theology from Gregory of Nyssa to Dionysius to Maximus to the *Deus tamquam ignotus* of Aquinas.[82] The same holds true *mutatis mutandis* of Luther, whose entire theology can be viewed in terms of the disproportion between the terrifying hiddenness of the *Deus absconditus* and the manifest grace of the *Deus revelatus*. And among moderns one can scarcely fail to mention Pascal, that quintessential mathematicoreligious thinker of infinites. What *is* distinctive to Barth, however, is his thundering intonation of this difference against a "Christian" culture that had forgotten it—a culture that was still under the spell of Schleiermacher and Hegel. And in this regard, no one stands more obviously in the background of Barth's theology than Kierkegaard, for whom "there is a difference between King Solomon and Jørgen the hatmaker."[83]

But here again, with regard to the "infinite difference" between God and human beings and the assertion of this difference against the various idolatries of immanence, no one stands more obviously in the background of Kierkegaard's own philosophy than Hamann. In *Golgotha and Schehlimini*, for example, Hamann speaks of an "infinite disproportion," which is overcome neither by "divine reason" (or any modern, i.e., age-old, Promethean sleight of self-deification), nor by the palladium of the "divine law," but only by faith, which rejoices in divine condescension:

> In view of the *infinite disproportion* [*das unendliche Missverhältnis*] between man and God, "public educational establishments, which refer to rela-

82. See Karl Barth, *Der Römerbrief* (1922) 15th ed. (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag, 1987), 80; cf. 42, where he matter-of-factly says: "Man is man and God is God." Cf., for example, Aquinas, *De veritate* q. 2, a. 11 ad 4.

83. Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 126; cf. 195, "the absolute difference between God and man consists precisely in this, that man is a particular existing being . . . ; while God is infinite and eternal."

> tions between man and God," are nothing but nonsensical propositions in dried up words, which infect the inner humors according to the amount a speculative creature is able to absorb. In order first to dispose of the *infinite disproportion,* before one can speak of relations . . . one must either become a partaker of *divine nature,* or Deity must take on *flesh and blood.* The *Jews* sought to acquire parity through the Palladium of their *divine law,* and the *naturalists* through their *divine reason:* as a result, there remains for the Christians and *Nicodemus* no other mediating concept than to believe with one's whole heart, with one's whole soul, with one's whole mind: *And God so loved the world*—This faith is the victory that has overcome the world.[84]

Clearly, in view of this passage, Hamann would side with Barth in maintaining a dialectical stance over against every speculative attempt to naturalize the divine, whether through the apotheosis of secular reason (in the Enlightenment) or of religious consciousness (in Schleiermacher), or through any identification of finite reason with the Absolute (in Fichte and Hegel).[85] For, however much a "speculative creature" may be able to "absorb," as Hamann humorously puts it, in no way can it overcome the "infinite disproportion" between God and human beings. In fact, the very attempt to do so is comical, as the most that any inflation of reason or religious consciousness can attain is but, as Barth would have it, the heaven of our earth.[86]

In view of the above passage, however, the difference between Hamann and dialectical theology (and even Kierkegaard) is also apparent, given that for him the infinite difference is not so much revealed by the Incarnation as *traversed* by it. Indeed, for Hamann, the Incarnation is not a sign of negation or contradiction, which leaves the world, as it were, *sous rature*—the very notion would likely have struck him as a grotesque distortion of the gospel—but the emblem of an infinite love, which initiates the greatest imaginable ennobling of the creature (beyond any self-made "overman" poor Nietzsche ever imagined) in keeping with the gospel (John 10:35) and the early Church Fathers. To be sure, Hamann maintained a dialectical position over against every form of immanent rationalism that refuses to suffer the improbability of revelation. But unlike the early Barth (and, arguably, unlike Kierkegaard), he never lost sight of the positive heart of the dialectic (which is really only dialectical to a fallen intellect that cannot fathom the improbability of a love that unites all things), namely: that miraculous crossing whereby God descends *ad inferos* and human nature, in the "first born from the dead" (Col 1:18), the first of many brothers (cf. Heb 2:11), is led *upward*

84. N 3:313. Hamann's quotations are from Mendelssohn's *Jerusalem: oder über religiöse Macht und Judentum.*

85. For a good précis of Barth's position, see Karl Barth, *Die christliche Dogmatik im Entwurf* (1927) (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag, 1982), 123–42.

86. Cf. Karl Barth, KD III/2, 11ff.

(Phil 3:14) "through the greater and perfect tent" into heaven itself (Heb 9:11–24). Indeed, for Hamann, the ultimate mystery of Christianity is not that of divine aseity and alterity, as in negative or dialectical theologies, but of sonship and adoption, of the mystical body of Christ, and of that marvelous and wholly gracious interchange or *commercium* of *anthropomorphosis* and *apotheosis* that takes place within it.[87]

Another concept in Kierkegaard's vocabulary that traces back to Hamann is "anxiety," which for both of them is directly related to "infinite difference." Accordingly, anxiety is not so much a passing psychological state as a fundamental existential and religious category. In a letter to Herder from 1781, Hamann refers to it as a "holy hypochondria," which reminds us that we are not at home in the world and helps to preserve us from the "putrefaction" of the *saeculum*:

> This anxiety in the world is the only proof of our heterogeneity. If we lacked nothing, we should do no better than the pagans and the transcendental philosophers, who know nothing of God and like fools fall in love with lovely nature, and no homesickness would come over us. This impertinent disquiet, this holy hypochondria is perhaps the fire with which we season sacrificial animals in order to preserve us from the putrefaction of the current *Seculi*.[88]

That this passage should have interested Kierkegaard is obvious. In a journal entry, however, presumably written during the drafting of *The Concept of Anxiety*, he notes a certain difference: "Hamann makes an observation which I can use, although he neither understood it as I wish to understand it nor thought further about it."[89] Such dissatisfaction is typical: whereas Hamann expresses himself in fragments and aphorisms, Kierkegaard seeks greater, even systematic, clarification. And to this end he develops a psychological analysis of anxiety in terms of the infinite qua possibility: "Whoever is educated by anxiety is educated by possibility, and only he who is educated by possibility is educated according to his infinitude. Therefore possibility is the weightiest of all categories."[90]

Admittedly, one will not find any similar definitions in Hamann's writings, nor anything like the kind of abstract reflection to which Kierkegaard was inclined. Nevertheless, their view of the matter is fundamentally the same. For both of them, anxiety betrays the legerdemain,

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87. N 3:194.

88. ZH 4:301f.; quoted by Kierkegaard in *Concept of Anxiety*, 162.

89. *JP* I 96 [*n.d.*, 1842], (*Pap.* III A 235).

90. Kierkegaard, *Concept of Anxiety*, 156. Cf. 157: "If [someone] . . . maintains that the great thing about him is that he has never been in anxiety, I will gladly provide him with my explanation: that it is because he is very spiritless." Cf. 158: "Whoever does not wish to sink in the wretchedness of the finite is constrained in the most profound sense to struggle with the infinite."

the comical self-deception, of every speculative attempt to sleight the difference between God and human beings; and, as such, it is at bottom an existential category, as it would be for Heidegger. Unlike Heidegger, however—who takes the form of anxiety from Kierkegaard but strips it of any transcendent content—for Hamann and Kierkegaard, anxiety is directly tied to faith. As Kierkegaard puts it, recalling Augustine's *cor inquietum*, "Now the anxiety of possibility holds him as its prey until, saved, it must hand him over to faith. In no other place can he find rest, for every other place of rest is mere chatter, although in the eyes of men it is sagacity."[91] In other words, faith is defined by an anxiety that shows the wisdom of the world and the peace it offers (of the kind Hegel longs for in his *Science of Logic*) to be a false security, even a deception.[92] Thus in his lyric memorial to Abraham, Kierkegaard defines faith in terms of "fear and trembling" (cf. Phil 2:12). But here again, the particular sense that he gives to this phrase comes from Hamann, specifically, from the sixth of Hamann's *Fragments*, where he suggests not only the title of Kierkegaard's famous work, but even its seminal idea. As Hamann puts it, "When one considers how much strength, presence of mind, and speed, of which we are otherwise not capable, the fear of an extraordinary danger inspires in us: then one can understand why a Christian is so superior to the natural, secure man, because he seeks his blessedness with constant fear and trembling."[93]

VII: HAMANN BEFORE KIERKEGAARD: A MATTER OF LUTHERAN PRIORITY

Hamann thus stands in the background of Kierkegaard's entire philosophy: from his existential polemic against Hegel to his practice of indirect communication to his central doctrines of infinite difference, anxiety, and the paradox—not to mention his own experiments, made in light of Hamann's example, as a Christian humorist.[94] Specifically, Hamann comes *before* Kierkegaard in that (1) he established the legitimacy of faith as something qualitatively different from reason and irreducible to it; (2) he illuminated as no other before him the deleterious existential consequences of a totalizing secular reason, that is, a rationality that is divorced from faith (and tradition) and seeks to be grounded in itself *alone*; (3) he

91. Kierkegaard, *Concept of Anxiety*, 158.

92. See the second preface to Hegel's *Wissenschaft der Logik* in *Werke*, 5:34, where he pines "amid the loud noise of the day and the numbing of mindless chatter . . . for participation in the passionless silence [*leidenschaftslose Stille*] of pure thought [*der nur denkenden Erkenntnis*]."

93. N 1:308.

94. See *JP* II 1681 [*n.d.*, 1837], (*Pap.* II A 75).

practiced a deliberate form of indirect communication as the best way to communicate faith to those who considered themselves beyond it; and (4) he argued that Christian existence, inasmuch as it involves a lively sense of the infinite difference between God and human beings, is authentic, undeceived, a matter of "fear and trembling," whereas secular, purely rational existence is not (and to this extent he highlights the difference between the Christian and those whom Nietzsche called "the last men").[95] And in all of these ways he stands *with* Kierkegaard as a prophet against modernity, that is, as a prophet of transcendence against a smug, puritanical, and adamantly secular form of rationality that wishes to know nothing beyond itself—to the point of fanatically expunging, in the name of reason, every last remnant of religious tradition that could impede the expansion of secular freedoms—and, as a result, inevitably collapses into the various idolatries of immanence.

But, as we have also had occasion to see, Hamann is not reducible to Kierkegaard; he is not simply a precursor, a forerunner, even if Kierkegaard tends to present his relationship to him in such terms (e.g., Hamann is the aphorist, Kierkegaard the rigorous systematic thinker). This is evident in that Hamann could inspire such a quintessential pagan as Goethe, who, in turn, was admired by Nietzsche. Indeed, notwithstanding their great similarities, Hamann is not only different from Kierkegaard, but different in ways that arguably make him a more powerful and prophetic spokesman for contemporary Lutheranism and for contemporary Christianity in general.

At one level, certainly, their difference is a function of circumstance. The Hegelian rationalism with which Kierkegaard was particularly concerned was not overtly antagonistic toward Christian faith; nor, according to its own terms, did it have to be. Christianity was not a rival to be overcome. Rather, in a simple reversal of the Catholic teaching regarding the relationship between faith and reason, Hegelian rationalism could claim to be the conceptual fulfillment and perfection of what faith, in the form of representational consciousness, only dimly discerned.[96] Similarly, while Hegel was at one level against the Romantics, he nevertheless recognized the "truth" of romantic longing for the transcendent and incorporated it into his system, so that his philosophy very much retains a religious quality.[97] Of course, for Kierkegaard, to incorporate

95. Needless to say, Nietzsche's indictment of the "last men" is tied up with an entirely different set of presuppositions—the most obvious being his atheism. Nevertheless, he shares with Hamann and Kierkegaard a terrifying vision of the feckless banality of modern secular rationalism.

96. Thus, for Hegel—in an inversion of Aquinas's doctrine—reason could be said to "exceed" and "perfect" faith; and in this regard, inasmuch as the speculative content of faith is *aufgehoben* (in the sense of "preserved") by reason, there is no ultimate opposition between them but a more or less peaceful ordering of one to the other.

97. See, for example, Georg Lasson's preface to Hegel's *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Religion* (Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 1974).

transcendence into reason is fundamentally to misconceive the nature of faith qua faith and of transcendence qua transcendence. The point here, however, is that Hegelian rationalism still had a certain regard, a certain "notion," of these terms, however distorted and compromised they may have become. And thus, while it represented a genuine development of the Enlightenment and would be historically inconceivable apart from it, it was more of a heterodox theological enterprise, a last attempt to take seriously what Hegel, in no uncertain terms, called the "absolute religion" of Christianity.[98]

In Hamann's day, however, the relationship between faith and reason was more truly a standoff—like that between a parent and an adolescent who cannot imagine any reconciliation of freedom and obedience, independence and parental authority.[99] The true fulfillment of the Enlightenment and the true embodiment of its spirit are to be seen, therefore, not in Hegelian rationalism but in the increasingly secular rationality of today. For here it is no longer a question of faith being ordered to reason (as in Hegel), much less is it a question of any intrinsic ordering of reason to faith, which is dogmatically ruled out from the start.[100] Rather, here faith and reason are strictly and dialectically opposed (in a way that, in

98. See Cyril O'Regan's groundbreaking work, *The Heterodox Hegel* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994).

99. In this regard Hegelianism represents a relative advance in philosophical maturity: a willingness to take the claims of faith and supernatural revelation seriously. For that matter, Hegel understood the force of Hamann's criticisms of the Enlightenment; he knew that its doctrine of disembodied, ahistorical reason was sheer fantasy and that any violent sundering of reason from history and tradition was tantamount to intellectual patricide.

100. At one level, this is understandable: for modern man, there is nothing mysterious about reason or nature, that is, nothing that would point to faith or the supernatural, because he is no longer a mystery to himself—neither as a being in possession of logos, a being who thinks and speaks, nor as a being that simply "exists." Admittedly, modern man might occasionally be disturbed by the possibility of transcendence, any last vestiges of the "beyond," that is, some depth-dimension that is beyond his control or lies beyond his powers of explanation; but thanks to the "therapriests" of modernity, even this anxiety, this last "paranoia" regarding another world, this last "delusion" regarding a supernatural vocation, can be "cured." Indeed, it is quite possible to destroy a supernatural vocation; all that is required is an ideology loud enough to silence the gentle promptings of conscience and a mind plastic enough to receive it: to accept that transcendence can be dismissed as a fiction of an alienated consciousness (Feuerbach, Marx); or, assuming that transcendence can be reduced to some kind of "depth" dimension, to accept that it can be explained in terms of the unconscious (Freud) or in terms of the "will to power" (Nietzsche) or simply in terms of what reason, according to its own myth of progress, has yet to understand. Of course, all of these explanations have the form of dogmas and therefore, formally, are matters of faith. Thus, reason, in the attempt to dispense with transcendence, to be autonomous, ironically shows that it is not. For if it denies its ordination to faith, revelation, and the supernatural, it inevitably posits some mythology or at least some theory, which is to be believed but cannot be confirmed in its place.

Kierkegaard's day, they were not).[101] And for this reason, because Hamann was one of the first Christian authors to contend with this virulent, puritanical form of rationality, and because, above all, he prophesied that it would end in nihilism, he is arguably of greater contemporary relevance to the church.

In sum, Hamann is arguably more relevant in that (1) he provides a more devastating critique of the assumptions of modern secular reason; (2) he more clearly establishes the necessity of reason's ordination to faith, both for its own natural operation, without which it collapses into skepticism and nihilism, and for its own supernatural fulfillment in the contemplation of revelation; (3) he more aptly and prophetically diagnosed the trajectory of modern European thought, anticipating the advent of nihilism a full century before Nietzsche; and (4) he offers a more full-blooded Christian aesthetic: a vision of all things in light of God's self-abasing glory, which at once affirms the infinite difference between God and human beings and overcomes it. Indeed, one could say that he presents a more balanced view of the Christian life in general: on the one hand, a life of "fear and trembling," of "holy hypochondria"; on the other hand, a life that could be so at ease with the world, so reconciled to it through faith, as to find God in the paradise of his garden and his kitchen—speaking of the latter, he says, quoting Heraclitus, "Here too *are the gods*."[102]

When comparing Hamann and Kierkegaard, however, there remains one issue of central importance to consider, even if it cannot be treated adequately here: namely, Hamann's notorious humor, which is, ironically, the point of their greatest convergence (Hamann is the "greatest humorist in Christendom," i.e., "the greatest humorist in the world") and, at the same time, the point of their ultimate divergence (Hamann both "allures and terrifies"). Thus, on the one hand, Kierkegaard can find in Hamann a model for his own pseudonymous, humorous authorship; on the other hand, precisely with regard to Hamann's humor, he can chide him for his worldliness and for a tensionless "reconciliation" with existence.[103] In short, for Kierkegaard, Hamann is not dialectical enough. Thus, notwithstanding their great similarity, Kierkegaard himself ultimately forces a choice between them: between his Christian dialectic and Hamann's Christian aesthetic. Of course, one must immediately make certain quali-

101. This dialectic, which is philosophically dubious inasmuch as reason cannot sustain it—and in this respect modern secular reason is but a naïve posturing upon a platform that Hamann destroyed—is then manifested at the level of popular imagination in a political dialectic between the public exterior sphere of reason and the private interior sphere of faith, whereby any rapprochement between them is viewed as an ideological transgression or, in modern America, as a violation of the establishment clause—to the point that one can confess one thing and politically do another, as if faith could be separated from works (cf. Jas 2:14ff.; Matt 7:15ff.; Eph 2:10).

102. ZH 4:401; ZH 5:373.

103. See *JP* II 1548 [*n.d.*, 1840-41], (*Pap.* III B 20).

fications, most notably that Kierkegaard too affirms the redemptive condescension of God in the paradox of the God-man, which entails a paradoxical return to the aesthetic sphere. One must also note that Hamann's aesthetic is not without a dialectical form (though the sense of the term here is very different since it is a dialectical *unity* grounded in Christ): of height and depth, majesty and abasement, glory and *kenosis*.[104]

But this difference remains: in Kierkegaard, God's condescension can seem almost docetic, to the point that it does not affect the world at all, being restricted to the singularity of the "paradox" (which is itself an *abstraction*) and the corresponding passion of an isolated modern subject; whereas, for Hamann, God condescends into the world utterly, redeeming all of creation, leaving nothing too base or too mundane or too "secular" (as though there could ever be any purely secular space that is not an illusion) to escape God's infinitely abasing love (as Augustine too, in light of Ps 139, so profoundly grasped). Indeed, as Hamann discovered from his conversion experience in London and continued to maintain throughout his life, God is to be found, by virtue of the shocking humility of his love, precisely *in* the world and often in the most surprising places; and for this reason, faith is *not* a leap across Lessing's ditch but a discovery of the one who is already there—already in the contingencies of history and one's own life—waiting to be found, waiting even to fellowship and dine with his creatures (cf. John 14:21–22; Rev 3:20) but hidden from human pride. In a letter to Jacobi, which applies perhaps equally to Kierkegaard, Hamann says:

> *Sapere aude*—for the kingdom of heaven no *salto mortale* is required. It is like a mustard seed, like yeast, like a treasure hidden in a field, like a merchant, who was looking for good pearls and found one—το παν εστιν ΑΥΤΟΣ. All the fullness of the Godhead has room in a little child, in a crib. . . . According to my *Anthropomorphismo*, the breath of his nose and the breath of his mouth are sufficient (Ps. 104:29, 30). God help us if it were left to us to become the creator, inventor, and smith of our future happiness. The first commandment is: you *should eat* (Gen. 2); and the last: come, everything is prepared. Eat, my dear ones, and drink, my friends, and be intoxicated.[105]

After Hegel, it is understandable that Kierkegaard would have been wary of any hasty reconciliation with the world that would undermine

104. As he says in the *Aesthetica in nuce*, "The unity of the author is reflected even in the dialectic of his works; —in all of them *one* note of immeasurable height and depth! A proof of the most glorious majesty and the emptiest *kenosis!* A miracle of such infinite calm, which makes GOD [*sic*] resemble nothing, that one must either as a matter of conscience deny his existence or be a beast [Ps 73:22]; but at the same time of such infinite power that fills all in all that one does not know how to save oneself from his inmost activity!—" (N 2:204).

105. ZH 5:275. See Oswald Bayer and Christian Knudsen, *Kreuz und Kritik: Johann Georg Hamanns Letztes Blatt* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1983), 92–93.

the infinite difference between God and human beings. For Hamann, however, who maintained a "holy anxiety" in this regard and whose entire authorship is conducted under a profoundly eschatological sign, such reconciliation is possible, not on the basis of any rational mediation, but solely on the basis of a faith-inspired vision of God's self-abasing glory and love in Christ, through whom "God was pleased to reconcile in himself all things" (Col 1:20). Indeed, Hamann's "worldliness" is possible only for the "new creature" in Christ (2 Cor 5:17), who can rejoice in the world precisely because, even amid sin and contradiction, it is *already* redeemed; as Christ himself says, "It is finished" (John 19:30). This is the faith that overcomes the world (John 16:33) with the "ministry of reconciliation" (2 Cor 5:18) and does not stand defeated in dialectical opposition to it. This is the faith that inspires Hamann's life-affirming joy, which is so excessive and so fundamentally *Christian* as to put Nietzsche and all his anti-Christian rhetoric to shame. And this is why, at the end of the day, Hamann's joyful vision of God's self-abasing glory in creation is arguably preferable to Kierkegaard's dialectic, which keeps God (despite his best intentions) outside of it (cf. 2 Cor 6:16; Song 1–8).