

# Life and Writings 1730–1788

*My mother is an unrefined peasant, and I, as you know, a Sauvage du Nord sans rime et sans raison, who understands neither rhymes nor syllogisms, neither manners nor maxims.*

Hamann to Jacobi<sup>1</sup>

*Hamann ... a true πῶν of harmony and discord, light and darkness, spiritualism and materialism.*

Schelling<sup>2</sup>

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

Kierkegaard<sup>3</sup>

Hamann was born on August 27, 1730 in the east Prussian port city of Königsberg (now Kaliningrad).<sup>4</sup> His father, Johann Christoph Hamann, hailed from Lausitz and was a beloved bather-surgeon in the old city; his mother, Maria Magdalena Nuppenau, was a pious woman of poor health from Lübeck. The elder of two sons, Hamann was named after his paternal uncle, Johann Georg (1697–1733), who was an author of some repute, having produced a poetry lexicon, which was reprinted as late as 1765, a sequel to a popular Baroque novel, and a collection of hymns, some of which were set to music by Georg Philipp Telemann and, in one case, by Georg Friedrich Händel.

Raised, prophetically enough, in the old-city bathhouse in the street of the Holy Ghost, Hamann speaks happily of his childhood and glowingly of his parents. In a fragment dated 1778, *Apologie meines Cretinen*, he relates a story in which his father was once asked by a certain chancellor whether he did not wish to have the title doctor or counselor, to which his father replied, “Your excellence, I already have a title ... a few weeks ago I was a lead pallbearer at my brother-in-law’s funeral, and I heard the people behind me exclaim: ‘That’s *the old town bather!*’ A few days ago, at the funeral of one of my patients, I was in the last pair of the procession, and heard people around me saying: ‘That’s *the old town bather!*’ Thus, whether in the first or last pair, my title is ‘the old town bather,’ and as such I wish to live and die.”<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> ZH V, p. 463.

<sup>2</sup> F. W. J. Schelling, *Sämtliche Werke*, ed. K. F. A. Schelling (Stuttgart and Augsburg: J. G. Cotta’scher Verlag, 1856–61), I, vol. 10, p. 171.

<sup>3</sup> JP II 1546 (*Pap.* II a, 442) (May 22, 1839).

<sup>4</sup> The present chapter is based upon the following sources: Hamann’s autobiography in *Londoner Schriften*, ed. Oswald Bayer and Bernd Weissenborn (Munich: C. H. Beck, 1993) (*LS*), pp. 313f.; C. H. Gildemeister, *Johann Georg Hamann’s des Magus in Norden, Leben und Schriften*, 6 vols. (Gotha: Friedrich Andreas Perthes, 1857–1873); Josef Nadler, *Johann Georg Hamann 1730–1788: Der Zeuge des Corpus mysticum* (Salzburg: Otto Müller Verlag, 1949) (*NB*); and James C. O’Flaherty, *Johann Georg Hamann* (Boston: Twayne, 1979) (*JGH*).

<sup>5</sup> N III, p. 324. The title of this text refers to Hamann’s younger brother, who suffered and died prematurely from mental illness.

His father's humility, occupation and, above all, his therapeutic tub left a deep impression on him. "Wonder not," he says, "if that tub, whose impartiality was once sung by an old poet, is as holy [to me] as the midwife arts of Phainarethe ... were to the son of Sophroniscus [i.e., Socrates]." <sup>6</sup> And again, years later he remarks to Jacobi that he venerated his father's tub like Socrates his mother's midwife's stool, adding lines from a Greek poem he had envisioned as an epigraph: "The bather and the ... always bathe / The worst and the best man / In the same tub." <sup>7</sup> As it happens, these seemingly incidental remarks are highly significant to Hamann's self-understanding as an author; for it is in this light that he understood his own vocation as a Christian Socrates, seeing his own literary productions as "metacritical tubs" in which to wash the feet of his age (see John 13: 5f.).

### THE MAKING OF A PHILOLOGIST

Though Hamann's parents were of modest means, they did everything they could to promote his education; and so he was tutored from an early age in various subjects, especially languages, among them Greek, French, and Italian, acquiring a proficiency in philology that would decisively influence his intellectual development and interests. The nature of his instruction was haphazard, however. For instance, his first teacher ran the bizarre experiment of teaching him Latin without grammar, and it is to this that Hamann would later attribute the unsystematic nature of his own reading and writing. Even so, he managed to become a remarkably good translator of classical texts – so good, in fact, that his second teacher regarded him as a Greek and Latin prodigy. His progress in languages was countered, however, by setbacks in such basic studies as history, geography, and writing, similarly contributing, he suggests, to a difficulty organizing and expressing his thoughts that he never entirely overcame.

Eventually, after the brief employment of a tutor, the last of many, Hamann's father sent him to a public school, where he met with success, finishing first in his class. It was during this period that he was introduced to philosophy, theology, mathematics, and Hebrew, and his head became "a fair booth full of wholly new goods." <sup>8</sup> With an encyclopedic curiosity, which he later equated with dissipation, he then matriculated at the University of Königsberg in the spring of 1746. Though he initially considered a vocation to theology, he soon abandoned the idea, feeling drawn instead to classical and belletristic literature, and in particular to all things French. As he puts it,

What kept me from having a taste for theology and all serious disciplines was a new inclination that had awakened in me for things ancient, for criticism – then for the so-called beautiful and fine arts, for poetry, novels, philology, for French authors and their talent for poetic composition, for painting, depicting, for pleasing the imagination, etc. <sup>9</sup>

A more immediate reason he cites for not taking up theology, however, was a speech impediment, in addition to his poor memory, the corruption of the clergy, his high estimation of this vocation, and his sense of hypocrisy – though afterwards he confesses a lack of faith in the "source of all good," from whom he could have expected to receive what he lacked, and with whose help he could have overcome any obstacles. <sup>10</sup>

<sup>6</sup> N III, p. 324.

<sup>7</sup> ZH V, p. 331.

<sup>8</sup> LS, p. 321.

<sup>9</sup> LS, p. 323.

<sup>10</sup> LS, p. 322.

While at the university, Hamann (like Kant before him) was a student of Martin Knutzen (1713–51), the professor of logic and metaphysics, who was well known throughout Europe for his particular combination of pietism and Wolffian rationalism. The professor who elicited his greatest respect, however, was the Wolffian professor of physics and member of the Berlin academy, Karl Heinrich Rappolt (1702–53), whom he admired for his humor, his knowledge of Roman authors, his poetry, and, notwithstanding his outspoken opposition to pietism, the simplicity of his Christian wisdom.<sup>11</sup> While at the university he also formed many friendships, most notably, with Samuel Gotthelf Hennings (1725–87), Johann Gotthelf Lindner (1729–76), and Johann Christoph Berens (1729–92), collaborating with the latter two on a weekly periodical for women, which was modeled on the English *Tatler* and ran for nearly a year, called *Daphne*.<sup>12</sup> Whether or not *Daphne* “belongs to the best weekly publications of the century,” as Nadler claims, it was Hamann’s first venture as an author; and though the overall style of the publication was “light and pleasant,” in keeping with the general optimism of the Enlightenment, his pseudonymous contributions clearly “sound the more serious ethical and religious notes of the publication.”<sup>13</sup>

At some point in his studies, Hamann took up law and for a time seems to have envisioned a legal career; by 1752, however, he left the university without a degree as a self-designated *atrium liberalium cultor* and *homme de lettres* to find a job as a *Hofmeister* (a private tutor), among the minor nobility of the Baltic.<sup>14</sup> Partly through family connections, he managed to secure posts in Livonia and later in Courland. His main objective, however, was to find employment in Riga, where he hoped to rejoin his friends Berens and Lindner. (Berens was a native of the city, where his family owned a trading house; Lindner began teaching at the cathedral school of Riga in 1753, becoming rector in 1755.) In the meantime, given ample time for leisure, he indulged his intellectual curiosity to the point of gluttony, virtually bankrupting himself on books and employing his friends, especially Lindner, in the service of procuring them. Among the authors he read during this period were Descartes (on whom he wrote an essay), the historian Chladenius, the French Jesuit Rapin, and the English Shaftesbury.<sup>15</sup> Of the latter two, Hamann also made translations: of Rapin’s *Réflexions sur l’Eloquence, la Poétique, l’Histoire et la Philosophie* (1686), and of the first two essays in Shaftesbury’s three-volume *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times* (1711); the first of these concerned religious enthusiasm, the second, among other things, common sense and the right of reason to scrutinize the claims of tradition.<sup>16</sup>

As these translations suggest and Hamann’s notebooks from this period confirm, Rapin and Shaftesbury had a decisive influence upon his intellectual development. Rapin, whose collected works Hamann owned, provided the basis for his knowledge of the

<sup>11</sup> *LS*, p. 322.

<sup>12</sup> For Hamann’s contributions to *Daphne*, see N IV, pp. 15ff.

<sup>13</sup> See NB, p. 43; *JGH*, p. 20. For further treatment of Hamann’s contribution to *Daphne*, see Bernhard Gajek, “Hamanns Anfänge,” *Eckart* 29 (1960), pp. 113–18. See also Wolfgang-Dieter Baur, “Johann Georg Hamann als Religionspublizist,” *Neue Zeitschrift für systematische Theologie*, 31 (1989), pp. 141–64.

<sup>14</sup> NB, p. 43.

<sup>15</sup> For Hamann’s study of Descartes, see N IV, pp. 221ff.

<sup>16</sup> For Hamann’s translations of Rapin and Shaftesbury, see N IV, pp. 45–91. See also Nadler’s textual notes, pp. 466f., 473f.

history of philosophy and the Church Fathers. He also provided a bibliographical source for Hamann's growing library, which included works of Cornelius Agrippa von Nettesheim, Albertus Magnus, Francis Bacon, Tommaso Campanella, Copernicus, Galileo, Gassendi, Hobbes, Giordano Bruno, Machiavelli, and Raymond Lull.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, according to Nadler, Hamann found in the writings of the Jesuit not only a favorable portrait of Socrates (the subject of Hamann's first major work) and a critical and religiously motivated reserve *vis-à-vis* dogmatic rationalism, but also the notion of divine condescension (*Herunterlassung*), which is arguably the most important theme of Hamann's thought and authorship.<sup>18</sup> The influence of Shaftesbury, on the other hand, was (if not initially, then ultimately) negative, inasmuch as he represented the very deism that Hamann would spend his life combating. Indeed, Shaftesbury is typically mentioned in Hamann's works in connection with Voltaire, Diderot, and Bolingbroke as an enemy of faith and revelation. Nevertheless, Hamann could request as late as 1766 that Herder send him as many of Shaftesbury's works as he could acquire, finding in Shaftesbury a model for his own evocative, satirical style.<sup>19</sup>

In addition to his translations of Rapin and Shaftesbury, Hamann made two other translations during this period that are worth noting. The first signals his preoccupation with (and, for the time being, apparently sympathetic attitude toward) the "free thinkers" of the Enlightenment: his translation of a short, inflammatory work by the Italian Count Alberto Radicati (1698–1737) titled *La Religion Muhammedane comparée à la païenne de l'Indostan par Ali-Ebn-Omar, Moslem*.<sup>20</sup> The work feigns to be a translation from the Arabic of a letter written by a certain Muslim, Ali-Ibn-Omar, to a certain Brahmin named Cing Kniu [*sic*], and includes, curiously enough, the following epigraph from Lactantius: "Is it not better to live like cattle than to worship deities so impious, profane, and sanguinary?"<sup>21</sup> Why Hamann should have been so interested in the work is unclear. In any case, it represented a direct challenge to his at this point nominal Christian faith – one that eventually led him to study the Koran in Arabic. For not only does the work exalt Islam as approximating a natural religion of reason, it directly implies that the Hebrew (and Christian) Scriptures, like the Vedas, are a "collection of ill conceived fables that are without connection, without order, as outlandish as they are depraved, which offend the senses as well as reason,

<sup>17</sup> N IV, p. 466. Needless to say, some of these authors were more influential than others. For the time being, one might simply note the importance of the Renaissance philosophers Bruno (1548–1600) and Campanella (1568–1639). Of the former, Hamann claimed that his principle (originally in Cusa) of the *coincidentia oppositorum* was worth more than all of Kant's critique (ZH IV, p. 462); with regard to Campanella one might note his doctrine, which one finds earlier in Raymond Sabundus and was fundamental to Hamann's Christian vision, that God reveals himself through the analogous books of nature and Scripture.

<sup>18</sup> N IV, p. 467. See also NB, pp. 59f.

<sup>19</sup> N IV, pp. 474f.

<sup>20</sup> Before Voltaire, Radicati was one of Europe's most hostile opponents of traditional Judaism and Christianity. In 1726, under suspicion by the Inquisition, he took refuge in England, where he became friends with Anthony Collins and Matthew Tindal, two of the most outspoken English deists. In 1733, after a brief imprisonment, he fled to Paris and then to Holland, where he died, apparently after recanting. The work under discussion was published in London in French in 1737. See Nadler's notes, N IV, pp. 480f.

<sup>21</sup> From Lactantius, *The Divine Institutes*, I, 21, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 7 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1994). The point of the letter, which contains an introductory biography of Mohammed, is to convince Cing Kniu that his prejudice against Islam is wholly unjustified given the preposterousness of his own beliefs, i.e., his willingness to believe certain incredible, indeed, scandalous stories about the divine in the Vedas. The author then claims that the religion of Mohammed and the testimony of the Koran are, by comparison, the picture of sound reason.

and are utterly insulting to the Godhead.”<sup>22</sup> In this regard Radicati draws a parallel between a story in the Vedas, which he lampoons and judges to be blasphemous, and the biblical account of Exodus, both of which, he implies, portray a God who unjustly punishes people for the very things God causes in them (e.g., Pharaoh’s hardened heart). Whatever Hamann may have thought of Radicati’s work at this point in his life, it revealed that the Enlightenment had a favorable attitude toward Islam (as approximating a religion of reason) and a corresponding hostility toward Judaism (arguably even an anti-Semitism) and Christianity (inasmuch as it rests upon Judaism), thus setting the stage for Hamann’s conversion and passionate defense of the Hebrew Bible against the “enlightened” critics of the age. Indeed, whereas the *Aufklärer* strove to *separate* Christianity from Judaism, and to clarify Christianity into a natural religion, as we shall later see, Hamann sought both to defend the positive revelation given to Israel, and to reaffirm as *indissoluble* the prophetic bond between them.

Although Hamann was chiefly engaged with intellectual subjects during this time, he also immersed himself in the study of trade and commerce, in part because of the influence of his friend Berens, who had hopes of recruiting him for his family’s trading firm. In fact, the last translation of this period, and the only one to be published, is a translation of Plumard de Dangeuil’s *Remarques sur les avantages et les desavantages de la France et de la Grande Bretagne, par rapport au commerce et aux autres sources de la puissance des etats* (1754). The translation was solicited by Berens for the purposes of increasing trade in the Baltic and popularizing the interests of a growing merchant class. It was also appended with a substantial essay by Hamann himself (his first published work), which extols the merchant as the soldier of the future, whose “weapon of trade” promises an end to war and a new era of peace; and who, as the nobleman of the future, promises an end to social injustice and the establishment of a genuine commonwealth.<sup>23</sup> Although this was Hamann’s first and last substantial foray into economic theory, his views in this regard never seem to have changed, and would later be brought to bear in his critique of the economic policies of Frederick the Great.

## HAMANN’S CONVERSION

During his *Hofmeisterzeit* (1752–6) Hamann thus acquired a vast knowledge of the intellectual cross-currents of his day, and on this basis would soon emerge as an important mediator within Germany (especially to Kant) of contemporary philosophers such as Rousseau and Hume. The immediate course of his life, however, was determined by his friendship with Berens. Berens had recently returned from Paris full of Enlightenment ideas and had plans for Hamann as a kind of press secretary for his family’s firm. The initial plan was for Hamann to attend Berens on trips to Petersburg and London, ostensibly for trade negotiations on behalf of the city of Riga. Matters developed more quickly than expected, however, in all likelihood

<sup>22</sup> N IV, p. 202. The positive valuation of Islam as a religion of reason, requiring no appeal to anything beyond reason, such as miracles, the Trinity, or Christ’s resurrection, was a commonplace during the Enlightenment.

<sup>23</sup> N IV, pp. 225–42. See also NB, pp. 65f. Hamann had already read Rousseau’s *Discours sur l’origine et les fondements de l’inégalité parmi les hommes*, and his essay represents, in some measure, a response to it.

because of the imminent European outbreak of the Seven Years War (1756–63), and so Hamann was dispatched to London alone, stopping in Königsberg for some time to care for his ailing mother until her early death.<sup>24</sup> On October 1, 1756 he set off for London, apparently in no haste (perhaps foreseeing the folly of trade negotiations during the war), making lengthy stops in Berlin, where he made the acquaintance of prominent *Aufklärer*, including Moses Mendelssohn, with whom he was soon to engage in a lively correspondence; and then in Lübeck, where he tarried for nearly two months with his mother's family. Finally, he arrived in London, via Bremen, Amsterdam and Rotterdam, late in the evening on April 18, 1757.

Unfortunately, Hamann left no details concerning the specific nature of his mission (whether it was primarily commercial or also involved a diplomatic component).<sup>25</sup> What we do know is that it involved contact with the Russian embassy and was a complete failure. As Hamann puts it,

When I disclosed the nature of my business to those I was appointed to meet, they marveled at the importance of my affairs, even more at the manner in which they were carried out, and perhaps most of all at the choice of the person with whom such matters were entrusted. After they recovered from their initial amazement, they began to smile – unabashedly revealing their opinion of those who had sent me ...<sup>26</sup>

Disconcerted, Hamann wrote a brief letter to the Russian ambassador, whose reply, for all its graciousness, only confirmed the pointlessness of the mission. Thus began the downward spiral that ended in Hamann's conversion: "I went about depressed, staggering to and fro, without a soul with whom to share my burden, who could give me advice or help."<sup>27</sup>

With no further reason to be in London and little money to spare, Hamann reports being near "desperation" and seeking to allay his troubles through "empty amusements." At this point it occurred to him to procure a lute, the one instrument he played, and try to make his living as a musician. Soon thereafter he came into the company of a wealthy English lute player, and for a time enjoyed his patronage: "I ate for free, I drank for free, I made love for free, I raced around for free; I fruitlessly alternated between gluttony and reflection, between reading and knavery, between industriousness and complete inactivity ..."<sup>28</sup> And, at least temporarily, he thought he had found what he was looking for, assuring himself, "he can make you famous, you now have at least one person with whom to socialize, you have a house where you can amuse yourself, you can practice the lute, you can assume his profession and be as happy as he is."<sup>29</sup> And yet he admits that he nowhere found rest, moving as many as twelve times within the year. Things finally fell apart when he discovered that his patron was having a homosexual affair, at which point he moved

<sup>24</sup> Upon her death, Hamann composed an effusive memorial, *Denkmal*, which he included in his *Kreuzzüge des Philologen* (1762). See N II, pp. 233–8.

<sup>25</sup> O'Flaherty's conjecture (*JGH*, p. 22), following Nadler, is that it was both, and thus *handelspolitisch*. Accordingly, Hamann was sent to London in order to secure a trade agreement on behalf of the Baltic port cities that were seeking greater independence from Prussia. Hamann's and Berens's assumption, which turned out to be correct, was that the Seven Years War would leave Russia in control of East Prussia (including Königsberg). Apparently, what they did not foresee was that England would shift its alliance to Prussia, *ipso facto* forestalling relations with the Baltic cities now under Russian occupation. See NB, p. 22.

<sup>26</sup> *LS*, p. 337 (N II, pp. 34f.).

<sup>27</sup> *LS*, p. 338 (N II, p. 35).

<sup>28</sup> *LS*, p. 339 (N II, p. 37).

<sup>29</sup> *LS*, p. 339 (N II, pp. 36f.).

to a coffeehouse, and from there to a room in a home on Marlborough Street, where he resided from February 8, 1758.<sup>30</sup>

It was here, with no money, a £300 debt, and failing health that he began an intensive reading of the Bible. As he puts it,

I wanted to seclude myself in this house, and sought to comfort myself with nothing but all my books, quite a few of which I had not yet not read or at least read without much consideration or putting them to proper use. At the same time, God inspired me to obtain a Bible ... having previously been indifferent to it.<sup>31</sup>

Having finally found one to his liking (most likely the Oxford Bible of 1755), he began his reading on March 13, but to no great effect. Six days later, however, on Palm Sunday, he began his reading anew and gradually began to perceive that God was somehow speaking *to him* and that the same one who authored the Bible was also the author of his life.<sup>32</sup> A few weeks later, on the evening of March 31, as he was reading the fifth chapter of Deuteronomy, he “fell into deep reflection, thought about Abel, of whom God said: the earth *opened its mouth* to receive the *blood* of your *brother* –”<sup>33</sup> and suddenly

I felt my heart beat, I heard a voice sighing and wailing in its depths as the voice of blood, as the voice of a murdered brother, who wanted to avenge his blood if I did not at times hear it and should continue to stop up my ears to its voice. – that precisely this made Cain a restless fugitive. I felt at once my heart swelling, it poured itself out in tears, and I could no longer – I could no longer hide from God that I was the murderer of my brother, that I was the murderer of his only begotten Son.<sup>34</sup>

Herein lies the heart of Hamann’s conversion, beginning with a sense of guilt (“I too am Cain”) and ending with a profound sense of forgiveness and peace (essentially following the pattern of Matt. 5: 3–4). For no sooner do “we hear the blood of the redeemer crying out in our heart than we feel that its ground has already been sprinkled ..., that the same avenging blood cries grace to us.”<sup>35</sup> Similarly, he speaks of his conversion in terms of an exchange:

<sup>30</sup> The third party in question was a rich “baron” named Senel, and so the whole matter of Hamann’s falling out with him is known as the “Senel affair.” There has been some speculation that Hamann himself had become sexually involved with his patron, and that he left out of jealousy. See H. A. Salmony, *J. G. Hamanns metakritische Philosophie* (Basel: Zollikon Verlag, 1958). But this is not supported by the evidence. See Wilhelm Koepf, “Hamanns Londoner Senelaffäre, Januar 1758” in *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche* 57 (1960), pp. 92–108; 58 (1961), pp. 68–85. Indeed, Hamann’s view of homosexuality is quite clear: while he excuses Socrates’ homoerotic tendencies on account of his pagan context and his aesthetic sensibility, i.e., a desire to see a harmony of inner and outward beauty (see N II, pp. 67f.), he consistently impugns the court of Frederick the Great for its “tolerance” and homosexual license. For an example of his sharp rhetoric in this regard, see N III, p. 30. Moreover, as we shall see in Chapter 8 *vis-à-vis* modern *Scheidekunst*, Hamann’s vision of reality is fundamentally nuptial, even at the level of philosophy, as expressed in terms of a coincidence of opposites (*coincidentia oppositorum*), whereby marriage points typologically to the central mystery of the hypostatic union of divine and human natures in Christ, and ultimately to the eschatological mystery of the union of Christ and his Church, along the lines of Paul (Eph. 5: 31f.). See also ZH VII, p. 158: “What God has joined together, no philosophy can separate; just as little unite, what nature has separated. Divorce and sodomy sin against nature and reason [–] the elemental philosophical forms of original sin, dead works of darkness [–] with the *Organis* of our internal and external life, our physical being = nature and metaphysical being = reason.”

<sup>31</sup> *LS*, p. 342 (N II, p. 39).

<sup>32</sup> *LS*, p. 59 (N I, p. 4).

<sup>33</sup> *LS*, p. 343 (N II, p. 41).

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> *LS*, pp. 138f. (N I, p. 78).

My son! Give me your heart! – Here it is my God! You demanded it, as blind, hard, rocky, misguided, and stubborn as it was. Purify it, create it anew, and let it become the workshop of your good Spirit. It deceived me so many times when it was in my own hands that I no longer wish to recognize it as my own. It is a leviathan that you alone can tame – – by your indwelling may it enjoy peace, comfort, and blessedness.<sup>36</sup>

In short, he says that God poured him “from one vessel into another” (cf. Matt. 9: 17).<sup>37</sup> And afterwards, The Spirit of God continued, in spite of my great weakness, in spite of the long resistance that I had previously mounted against his witness and his stirrings, to reveal to me more and more the mystery of divine love and the benefit of faith in our merciful and only Savior.<sup>38</sup>

The immediate consequence of Hamann’s conversion was a lyrical outpouring of meditations on the Bible, which he originally titled *Tagebuch eines Christen* (Diary of a Christian), but which have come to be known collectively as the “London Writings.” As Nadler poignantly puts it, “They are ... the diary of a soul concerning the greatest experience it could possibly have: [becoming] a child of God.”<sup>39</sup> At the same time, however, their content is, in Nadler’s words, “the whole of creation, nature, and history, the kingdom of God and the kingdom of man.”<sup>40</sup> Indeed, what is so interesting about Hamann’s conversion is that, rather than leading to a pietistic withdrawal from the world, it led precisely to a more intensive engagement with it. Thus, having completed the London Writings in only a few months, and with no further reason to stay in England, Hamann set sail for Riga on June 27, 1758, fittingly enough, aboard a warship.

### HAMANN’S FALLING OUT WITH BERENS

Upon returning, in spite of the failure of his mission, Hamann received a warm welcome from the Berens family; it was understood that the mission’s failure was not his fault. And so he quickly resumed work, corresponding with Berens, who was still in Petersburg, and assuming the familiar role of a house tutor to some of the younger members of the family. But if things had superficially returned to normal, Hamann himself had clearly been changed. As he put it to his brother around this time, summing up his new attitude after his conversion:

God does not wish to hear us, to receive us, and to know us except in his Son ... I write to you not as an enthusiast [*Schwärmer*], not as a Pharisee, but as a brother, who could not love you as long as he did not know and love God; but who now wishes you well with all his heart, and since he has learned to pray, will not forget to pray for you too. ... One’s heart loves one’s brothers through God alone ... If we do not know Jesus, we have come no further than the pagans. As the apostle James says, all miracles, all mysteries, and all works of faith and true religion are united in the worthy name by which we are called Christians. This worthy name, by which we are called, is the only key of knowledge, which opens the heaven and the hell, the heights and the depths, of the

<sup>36</sup> LS, p. 345 (N II, pp. 42f.).

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> LS, p. 343 (N II, pp. 40f.).

<sup>39</sup> NB, p. 76.

<sup>40</sup> N II, p. 198; NB, p. 78.



human heart. . . . Now I live in the world with pleasure and with a light heart, and know that godliness holds promise for this life and the life to come, and that it is useful for all things (1 Tim. 4: 8). Since I have come to know God's Word as the medicine, as the wine, which alone is able to make our heart glad and our face to shine with oil, as the bread that strengthens the heart of man, I am neither a misanthrope, nor a hypochondriac, nor an accuser of my brethren, nor an Ishmael of divine providence ...<sup>41</sup>

While at the Berens home, he continued to indulge his intellectual curiosity, reading, among others, Batteux, Kant, Klopstock, Lessing, Ramler, Wieland, and Winckelmann, whose *Gedanken über die Nachahmung in der Malerei und Bildhauerkunst* had appeared in 1756.<sup>42</sup> His chief interest at the time, however, was Catharina Berens (1727–1805), his friend's sister, whom he considered to be the spouse God intended for him.<sup>43</sup> Since Christoph was still in Petersburg, he wrote to ask for his permission to marry her.<sup>44</sup> The surprising response, which arrived in early January, 1759, was an unequivocal "No." Presumably, Hamann had shared with Berens some of the details of his conversion in London, knowing very well his friend's antipathy toward all forms of "enthusiasm"; possibly he also communicated his waning interest in a commercial vocation. Nevertheless, he was shocked and deeply hurt, and soon thereafter returned to Königsberg.

The nature of Hamann's falling out with Berens becomes clearer in light of a letter to their common friend Lindner in March of the same year. In it Hamann identifies the source of the problem: Berens's disgust over his conversion, his fear of losing a friend and fellow laborer in the cause of the Enlightenment, and his corresponding, patronizing counsel that Hamann "keep only as much religion as is necessary."<sup>45</sup> To which Hamann wryly responds, "This is prudent advice, like that of Job's wife, who did not intend to curse God, but to *bless* him."<sup>46</sup> He then goes on to say,

If our friend sees my current state of mind as one greatly to be pitied, do not let him look upon my enthusiasm [*Schwärmerey*] as an *alienum quid* that could not befall him [as well ...] I am a leopard, and his soap will not change my spots. . . . All his flattering hurts me more than his most caustic remarks. They are the probes by which he wants to sense whether I am still possessed of sound reason and ambition. If an enthusiast is a fool, ask him . . . whether in view of his goals . . . he would not have to recognize himself as one. . . . If he wants to know what I do now, tell him that I *Lutherize*; for something must be done. This adventuresome monk said in Augsburg: here I am – I cannot do otherwise. God help me. Amen.<sup>47</sup>

Clearly, Berens, an enthusiastic entrepreneur, was troubled by Hamann's lack of ambition; as Hamann saw it, however, he could not go back to laboring for "the god of this world" (2 Cor. 4: 4). He had made a break: instead of working for men, he now aimed to work for God: "The best side one can take [in this life] is to work for

<sup>41</sup> ZH I, pp. 242f.

<sup>42</sup> Gildemeister, *Johann Georg Hamann*, vol. 1, pp. 155f.

<sup>43</sup> See *LS*, p. 435 (N II, pp. 52f.).

<sup>44</sup> See *LS*, pp. 434f. (N II, pp. 52f.).

<sup>45</sup> ZH, p. 306.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>47</sup> ZH, p. 307.

the sake of God; to live because he wills it, to work because he wills it, to rest.”<sup>48</sup> And so he says, “My vocation is neither to be a businessman, nor a civil servant, nor a man of the world. ... Reading the Bible and praying are the work of a Christian ...”<sup>49</sup> But if Hamann’s relationship with Berens had soured, it was not broken, as each amicably continued his efforts to convert the other. As Hamann puts it to Lindner,

I do not recognize the vehement tone that you detect in our friend’s letters. I see everything as an effect of his friendship, and this itself I see as a gift as well as a test from God. He warns or promises that he will not lose sight of me; and I shall certainly not lose sight of him and his family. But he should worry about me as little as I about him. I grant him his business; and he should grant me my leisure ...<sup>50</sup>

### HAMANN’S RELATIONSHIP WITH KANT

That Hamann’s falling out with Berens was not the end of their friendship is clear from the fact that in June Berens no sooner returned to Riga from Petersburg than he set out for Königsberg to check on him. As Nadler puts it, for Berens it was no longer a question about Catharina or the family firm, but about a friend he clearly loved and did not want to lose.<sup>51</sup> And in his noble attempt to “save” his friend he recruited none other than the distinguished professor, Immanuel Kant. Berens was acquainted with Kant, as was Hamann, and he calculated that Hamann’s respect for the elder professor could be of use.<sup>52</sup> Indeed, it seems that Kant was the ace in the hole in his plan to bring Hamann back to his senses, to curb his unfortunate “enthusiasm,” and to re-employ him in the service of the Enlightenment. Thus he arranged that they all meet one evening in early July for supper at the “Windmill,” a rural inn outside of Königsberg. The evening was by all accounts awkward. Kant scarcely knew what he was getting involved in (which was something approximating a lovers’ quarrel), and Hamann, for his part, was in no way prepared to abandon his faith, which could not be squared with the fundamental principles of the Enlightenment (of which Kant was its philosophical, and Berens its commercial representative). Afterwards he described the occasion to his brother as follows:

At the beginning of the week I was in the company of Herr B. and Master Kant at the inn at the Windmill, where we had a rustic meal together. We have not seen each other since. Confidentially – our relationship still does not have the intimacy it once did, and we impose upon ourselves the greatest restraint in order to avoid the appearance of it.

<sup>48</sup> ZH, p. 307.

<sup>49</sup> ZH, p. 309.

<sup>50</sup> ZH I, pp. 303f. That Hamann refers to his leisure is significant as a reaction to the purely commercial aims of his friend. It is also reflected in the subtitle of his first major publication, the *Socratic Memorabilia*, and in the fact that, after returning to Königsberg to care for his ailing father, he did not have a steady job for four years. At the same time, as O’Flaherty points out, there were other factors contributing to Hamann’s unemployment, most notably the Russian occupation of Königsberg throughout this four-year period. See *SM*, p. 30.

<sup>51</sup> NB, p. 95.

<sup>52</sup> As early as April, 1756, Hamann calls Kant “a man of superior intellect” (*ein fürtrefflicher Kopf*), and in a letter to Lindner written shortly thereafter speaks of Kant’s dissertation with evident approval. See ZH I, pp. 191, 198. That Hamann knew Kant personally at this point is clear from other letters written at this time. See ZH I, pp. 224, 226, where on two different occasions he mentions meeting him in the company of other friends. See NB, p. 96.

I commend the development of this game to God, whose providence I trust, and ask and hope [to receive] from him the necessary wisdom and patience.<sup>53</sup>

A few weeks later, Berens and Kant, later simply “the two,” made another attempt, this time dropping by Hamann’s house. Kant proposed that Hamann translate part of Diderot’s *Encyclopédie*, and they agreed to take up matters again at Kant’s house a few days later. The scheduled meeting never took place, however. Instead Hamann penned a letter to Kant that Nadler calls a “historical moment” in the intellectual life of the eighteenth century.<sup>54</sup> Hamann begins the letter by excusing Kant for his unwitting involvement in the whole affair. He then says that Berens is to blame; that he should not have tempted him to unleash his feelings – of irritability, rage, and envy – upon Kant as well, indeed, for having exposed Kant “to the danger of coming so close to a man invested by the sickness of his passions with a power to think and to feel that a healthy person does not possess.”<sup>55</sup> “This,” he says, “is what I wanted to whisper in your suitor’s [Berens’s] ear, when I thanked you for the honor of your first visit.”<sup>56</sup>

Thus began Hamann’s from the start awkward relationship with Kant; and it is from this initial correspondence that the Socratic motif would arise. In the letter Hamann dares to suggest that if Kant is Socrates, and Berens is Alcibiades, then Kant would need the voice of a genius (i.e., a Socratic *daimon*) for his instruction, namely, Hamann himself. Hamann admits that this role suits him, thereby showing a remarkable degree of confidence in his intellectual powers, given the stature of his correspondent. At the same time, he wishes to dispel any suspicion of pride, asking Kant to bear with him for the duration of the letter and to hear him “as a genius speaking out of a cloud.” Undoubtedly, Kant’s patience was being put to the test, especially given the impertinence of Hamann’s language: “I write epically because you are not yet able to read lyric language.”<sup>57</sup> Moreover, Hamann ridicules the very articles Kant had suggested he translate, making it clear that he had no interest in providing this kind of service for the cause of the Enlightenment in the future. Finally, dismissing Kant’s role in the whole affair, he says, “I have to laugh at the *choice of a philosopher* for the purpose of bringing about a conversion in me. I view the best demonstration the way a reasonable girl views a love letter; and a Baumgartian explanation as an amusing *fleurette*.”<sup>58</sup>

One can only wonder how Kant received such comments; indeed, one must see it as a testament to Kant’s generous and magnanimous character that they remained lifelong friends. But if Kant had managed to get involved in a quarrel between friends, it was not without intellectual benefit for Kant himself. For in his emotionally-driven letter Hamann not only raised pertinent questions about the unreliability of reason but, most importantly, he provided Kant with what may have been his first exposure to Hume. In fact, Hamann draws upon Hume precisely to defend the embattled principle of faith: “The Attic philosopher Hume has faith necessary if he should

<sup>53</sup> ZH I, p. 362. See SM, p. 56.

<sup>54</sup> ZH I, p. 373.

<sup>55</sup> ZH I, p. 373. As Nadler points out, priding himself over his new friendship with Kant (with whom he spent a great deal of time in between visits with Hamann), Berens undoubtedly provoked Hamann’s envy. See NB, p. 99.

<sup>56</sup> ZH I, p. 373.

<sup>57</sup> ZH I, p. 374.

<sup>58</sup> ZH I, p. 378.

[merely] eat an egg and drink a glass of water.”<sup>59</sup> Furthermore, he uses Hume to draw a radical Pauline (and Lutheran) parallel between the purpose of reason and the purpose of the law. “Reason,” he says, “is not given to make us wise, but to convince us of our folly and ignorance; just as the Mosaic law was given to the Jews not to make them righteous, but to make them more conscious of their sins.”<sup>60</sup> Finally, he adduces a quotation from Hume’s *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* in which Hume, a “Saul among the prophets,” unwittingly speaks the truth:

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.<sup>61</sup>

One can only assume that such observations made an impression on the pre-critical Kant, including Hamann’s off-hand remark that he has to arm the “feeble eyes” of his reason with the glasses of an “aesthetic imagination.”<sup>62</sup> Indeed, inasmuch as he mediated Hume, Hamann may have proved to be the genius behind Kant’s critical philosophy after all, with its critical assessment of reason’s limits. That being said, such skepticism regarding the capacities of reason is about the extent of any similarity between them: whereas Hamann views Hume’s skepticism as an opportunity for faith, along the lines of Philo at the conclusion of the *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, Kant redoubles his efforts to ground the postulates of faith in practical reason. But for all their intellectual differences, they remained on friendly terms (as did Hamann and Berens), and so, towards the end of October, it was Kant himself who stopped by Hamann’s home to convey the news of Berens’s departure. As Hamann put it to Lindner, “From the way things stand between me and [Kant], I expect soon to have either a very close or a very distant relationship with him.”<sup>63</sup>

It was in the middle of all this, during the last two weeks of August, 1759, that Hamann issued his response to Kant and Berens in the form of his first major work, the *Socratic Memorabilia*. Given the lack of an in-town publisher, however, it would not appear for several months, and in the meantime Kant had proposed that he and Hamann write a physics book for children. The suggestion could not have been more suited to Hamann’s sense of humor: the distinguished professor, who writes for the learned, now wishes to write for children; and so he took the opportunity to write to Kant about his own views concerning pedagogy and the proper way to

<sup>59</sup> ZH I, p. 379.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> ZH I, p. 180. David Hume, *Enquiries Concerning Human Understanding and Concerning the Principles of Morals*, ed. P. H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), p. 131.

<sup>62</sup> ZH I, p. 380. Cf. Hamann’s remark to Lindner about Kant from October, 1759 (ZH I, p. 425): “He appeals to the *whole* in order to make judgments about the world. But this requires a knowledge that is no longer *patchwork*. To deduce the fragments from the whole is like deducing the known from the unknown. A philosopher who asks me to see the *whole* makes as difficult a request as one who would ask me to see the *heart* with which he writes. The whole is precisely hidden to me, as is your heart. Or do you suppose that I am a god?” And, true enough, as Kant’s thought matured into its “critical” phase, he came to adopt precisely Hamann’s view of the limits of theoretical knowledge.

<sup>63</sup> See ZH I, pp. 425, 440. As a further gesture of good will, Kant also began sending Hamann some of his lecture notes.

communicate a theory of nature.<sup>64</sup> Specifically, he reminds Kant of the necessity of condescending to the level of children if one wishes to be their teacher, and points directly to divine condescension in nature and Scripture – the theme of his London Writings – as an appropriate model. Nothing came of the project, however. For one thing, Kant was undoubtedly tired of being lectured to; for another thing, he must have realized that Hamann was, in worldly terms, useless.

In the meantime the *Socratic Memorabilia* appeared, “compiled” by an anonymous “lover of boredom for the boredom of the public,” and dedicated, curiously, both to “nobody” and to “two.” By “nobody” Hamann meant the “no particular person” of the public, for whom, the work was, in a sense, written, but which would undoubtedly get nothing out of it and hence be bored with it. The real addressees of the work, however, were Kant and Berens; and at least they, Hamann hoped, might get his message (which, as he rightly calculated and even intended, would be more or less inscrutable and stupefying to the anonymous public). And his message to them, wrapped behind many veils and symbolic allusions was simple: he was not to be reconverted to the ideals of the Enlightenment. On the contrary, he held out the hope that his friends would experience a similar conversion to orthodox Christianity, which would “liberate” them from their unwitting “bondage” to the ideology of the age.

Needless to say, Kant never recanted his allegiance to the Enlightenment (nor, so far as we know, did Berens), and to this extent, aside from having powerfully defended the principle of faith, the *Socratic Memorabilia* was a failure. But for all that, it had a *Wirkungsgeschichte*, having been reviewed by none other than Mendelssohn in Nicolai’s and Mendelssohn’s influential journal, *Briefe, die neueste Literatur betreffend*. Aside from the review, which was largely positive, Nicolai and Mendelssohn subsequently tried to recruit Hamann as a contributing editor for their journal.<sup>65</sup> The offer must have been tempting, for Hamann desperately needed employment and would have enjoyed the stimulating intellectual company. On the other hand, it would have meant moving to Berlin, the hated center of the German Enlightenment and the seat of Frederick the Great, the philosopher king of Sans Souci, which he symbolically identified with Babel and against which his budding authorship was directed. As he put it to Jacobi years later, “My hatred of Babel – that is the true key of my authorship ...”<sup>66</sup> As a matter of principle, therefore, he turned down the offer and stayed in Königsberg, whose publishing capacities were for the time being limited to a modest weekly called the *Wochentliche Königsbergische Frag- und Anzeigungs-Nachrichten*.

<sup>64</sup> ZH I, pp. 444–53.

<sup>65</sup> See Thomas Abbt’s letter to Mendelssohn (April 28 [July 21], 1762): “Your idea that he [Hamann] should be employed is excellent. In one of H[amann’s] letters there are ideas suitable to at least ten letters [i.e., *Briefe die neueste Litteratur betreffend*].”

<sup>66</sup> ZH VI, p. 235. Similarly, around the same time, he speaks of Berlin as a “French Bedlam or Chaldean Babel,” and says that he would not exchange all the glory of Solomon for the lot of Lazarus” (ZH VI, p. 259); cf. ZH III, p. 124. More generally, for Hamann’s understanding of Berlin as Babel, see Gildemeister, *Johann Georg Hamann*, vol. 1, p. 199, and *JGH*, p. 136.