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## ARTICLE IV.

JOHN GEORGE HAMANN.

BY REV. J. M. HOPPIN, NOW IN PARIS.

THERE are some men who have left behind them the reputation for transcendent abilities, that is not adequately shown by their works. Hamann was one of these. An author not much read even in his native land, and not much known out of Germany, he nevertheless exerted a great and beneficent, though silent and conservative, influence in his day, and deserves to be known wherever genius united with faith is honored. His memory should be precious to the church of Christ in all places and ages. We cull from German sources<sup>1</sup> the following brief account of his life.

John George Hamann was born Aug. 27, 1730, at Königsberg, in Prussia, of parents in good circumstances, his father being a surgeon of some note. He was reared in a faithful Christian manner. He was instructed in the liberal branches, the languages, the fine arts, and especially music. But his early education, notwithstanding these advantages, was very irregular. He was first in the hands of an ex-preacher named Hoffman, who taught him seven years, chiefly in Latin; he then came into the school of the pro-rector Köhl, a dull and pedantic man, who confined him entirely to the classics. "I obtained no knowledge of history," he himself says, "nor of geography, nor the least conception of style, nor any idea of poetry. I have never been able to make up the deficiency in the first two, and have acquired a taste for the latter too late; for I find it very difficult to arrange my thoughts in conversation or writing in an orderly manner, and to express them with ease." He next became the pupil of a neological tutor; and at last entered the government school, under the

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<sup>1</sup> Biographies by Friedrich Roth, and Ersch and Gruber.

learned and pious rector Salthenius, where he gained the first idea of philosophy and mathematics, of theology and the Hebrew language. "Here," he says, "a new field was open to me, and my brain was in a market-booth of entire new wares." In 1746, he entered the University of Königsberg, and studied philosophy with Knutzen, and for a time devoted himself to theology, and afterwards, in order to please his parents, to jurisprudence. But a strong inclination to the study of antiquity, criticism, and philology, turned his mind from the positive sciences. In order to live with more freedom, and to see somewhat of the world, he took the situation of a tutor in Liefland, but after a year and half gave it up, through his restless desire for independence. Thereupon he lived some months with a countryman of his father's in Riga without occupation, until necessity compelled him, in 1753, again to become a tutor in Curland. But impatient and unsatisfied, he went back in 1755 to Riga. One of his youthful friends, Berens by name, took him into the company of the commercial house of Berens. This relation led him to the study of mercantile science, and political economy. Aided by his friends in Königsberg, he undertook a commercial journey to England for the house of Berens. On this journey he was frequently in desponding mood regarding his whole purpose of life. In London he found himself entirely unfitted to execute his business commissions, and gave himself over in despair to much dissipation and excess, striving in vain for some other way to obtain a livelihood. Under the extreme pressure of necessity, brought on by his rash conduct, he was driven to seek higher aid. While reading the Bible, a light sprung up to him, revealing the life he had hitherto led, and a divine trust filled his soul. From this time he hung with the greatest fervor of faith upon the Christian revelation. He begins one of his books entitled 'Bible meditations,' with an affecting allusion to his reading of the Bible in London: "London: 19 March 1758. I have to-day with God's help commenced reading the Bible. As my circumstances compel to the strictest solitude, wherein I sit and watch like a sparrow upon the house-top, I have

sought a relief from the bitterness of my thoughts over past follies, and the abused mercies of God, in the society of my books. But scientific books seem now like Job's friends, better suited to task my patience, than to afford me comfort; to open my wounds, than to sooth their pain. I am justified in placing the strongest confidence in the grace of God. It has not been from any want of evil inclination, nor of sufficient opportunity, that I have not fallen into deeper misery, and more presumptuous sin, than I am now in. God! we are such poor creatures, that even a smaller degree of wickedness is a cause of thankfulness unto thee. God! we are such unworthy beings, that nothing but our own unbelief can shorten thine arm, and set bounds to thy generosity in blessing us."

Established in soul, he left England in the summer of 1758, and journeyed back to Riga. He lived in Riga in the home of his former friend Berens, occupying himself in various ways, until his religious bent and his free humor brought on a separation between himself and his commercial friends. Hamann now lived four years in literary freedom in his father's house at Königsberg, and devoted his intellectual activity to serious studies, especially to oriental and classical literature. In this period he composed many of his works. He says of this part of his life: "In these happy years, I first learned how to study, and I have lived on that harvest ever since." After the death of his father, he was in great straits, sometimes travelling as a business agent, and sometimes picking up a scanty living as a copyist, until, through the influence of Kant and other friends, he secured the situation of writer and translator in the excise department. "I live," he wrote to Herder, "all day long at the plough, and have a hard vocation, but some instinct, I know not what, makes it sweet to me." After ten years of severe service, he obtained, in 1777, the comfortable office of superintendent in the royal customs, with a salary of three hundred dollars, a free dwelling, and some perquisites affording additional income. But these being soon removed, he was reduced to live, with his four children, in the narrowest

circumstances. In 1784, a young man by the name of Buchholz, having heard through Lavater of the distressed condition of this excellent man, generously made him the present of a considerable sum of money. Hamann now desired to take a journey to his friends in Western Germany, and if possible to renovate his care-worn frame. He waited some years for permission to leave, and finally gave up his office in 1787. In the summer of this year he made his journey, and spent the time alternately with friends in Münster and Welbergen, and also visited Jacobi in Düsseldorf. On the 20th of June he fell sick in Münster, and died on the following day. His monument stands in the garden of the princess Galiczin, in Münster, with a Latin inscription. Much of his life was consumed in barren journeyings, finding no resting-place for foot or heart. He was another illustration of genius without practicality, and of the man of thought, mistaken in the start for the man of action.

Hamann's mature life comprises nearly the last half of the eighteenth century, the period that prepared and preceded the French revolution; when the mind of Europe was in unwonted ferment; when the modern sciences, now so tranquilly and powerfully working, had their birth; and when philosophy, rising from the death of old ideas, was manifesting an unnatural and excited energy to unsettle all foundations, false or true. In France, the evil reign of the sensual philosophy was universal, having no more of true religious antagonism to contend with than what is found in Jesuitism. In Germany, there was a brilliant intellectual awakening; but there was also a false source of life and power, from which her Lessings, Wielands, and Goethes drew, insensibly degrading and materializing, while professing to free, the mind, and levelling the way for more recent pantheistic and selfish philosophies. Immanuel Kant had put forth his mighty labors; but whatever of good may be considered to be in them, was not yet recognized, nor was even, perhaps, known to himself. Hamann was born in the same town with Kant, six years later, and they were personal friends, though the former was the fearless reviewer of the latter, and his de-

cided opponent on many matters of opinion. But to Hamann belongs the pure glory of having "*kept the faith*," amid the unsettlings of this convulsive period, and the temptations of his own free, wayward, and original mind.

Yet his faithful spirit, in order to preserve its trust, unfortunately thought it to be necessary to *hide* the faith that was in it, in enigmas, as Christians, in time of trouble, have hid the Bible in false wainscots, and holes of the earth. From his mystic and oracular style, he obtained the name of "the magician of the north," and thus he gleams, somewhat mysteriously and formidably, athwart the literature of that period; but this name implied nothing specious in his writings or character. For, while he was enveloped in a degree of mystery, and ill understood by his age, he was, nevertheless, deeply revered; and he appears to have exercised an unconscious, hidden, almost magical, influence over minds, even over such men as Herder, Jacobi, Mendelssohn, and Goethe himself. His Correspondence with these, is now perhaps the most readable, natural, and valuable portion of his writings. It is to be regretted that he did not write, always, with more clearness; but we can hardly, now, judge of the emergencies of a fearfully unbelieving age. Goethe, in this relation, speaks of Hamann with something of tenderness: "He was regarded, indeed, by those who ruled the literature of the day, as an abstruse enthusiast; but the upstriving youth of the country yielded itself, without resistance, to his attractions. Even 'the silent in the land,' as, half in jest and half in earnest they were called, those pious souls who, without confessing to any particular communion, formed an invisible church, turned their attention toward him." Hamann undoubtedly felt his influence upon the restless mind of his country; and, whether judging rightly or wrongly, did not wish to lose that influence at so critical a period, by too sharp a definiteness in his religious expressions; rather choosing to attract and lead on, into truth, by hint, and inference, and thoughts, half-seen through the mist of metaphor. He carried this idea so far that he seems, in some of his writings, willing literally to be a 'fool,' in order to preach Christ

to infidel minds. Yet the impression should not be made, that he either wrongly or timidly concealed his religious convictions; for, on the contrary, he has, in many ways, in the course of his writings, expressed a clear, feeling, and experimental belief in the great essentials of the Christian faith. In some of his works, it is true, we may perceive the beginnings of the modern philosophy of Germany; but these speculative views were modified, in him, by a reverent spirit, that would have cast them to the winds, had they been seen to tend to the injury of faith.

Hamann holds a peculiar relation to the religious world, not having been a professed preacher or writer upon religious truth, but rather an independent thinker, a regenerated mind exercising its birthright to study and speak on the greatest of themes. He had large views of theology, not confining it to one separate science, but considering all things as embraced in its science. He had a deep religious philosophy, while, at the same time, he was true to the simple faith of the gospel. He was a favorite author with Neander; and there is much ground for the opinion, that he contributed to form that historian's profound method of reasoning: that method which refers the outer truth to the inner principle, and seeks to develop the spiritual law in events. There is a striking similarity in the views of these two authors, in the grandeur and centralness which they give to the doctrine of the Incarnation. They both draw, believingly, from the truth of an inward union with God in Christ, in the human soul, as the great and infinite fact of our history.<sup>1</sup> One leading idea, upon which Hamann dwells in his writings, is this: "All that man undertakes, whether by word or deed, or however performed, should spring out of the union of all his powers; every partial effort is to be condemned." He took broad

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<sup>1</sup> The writer of this Article may perhaps be pardoned in alluding to a personal circumstance, which may possibly lend interest to the subject. Having had the privilege, with many other American students, of an acquaintance with Dr. Neander, he asked him one day while calling at his room, what religious German work he would recommend him to take home to America and study. He said at once, 'the works of John George Hamann.' A very imperfect reading of this author, since that time, has been the origin of this sketch.

views of the human powers, and aimed at a full development of our nature. He despised no attribute of humanity, whether physical or spiritual. He magnified human nature, not for itself, but as the manifestation of God through it. Like the earliest Christian fathers, Irenæus, Origen, and Tertullian, he never would dissociate man from God ; and while he held strongly to the facts of sin and depravity, he saw deeper and more encouraging truths than these, still left in nature. Hamann's views of Christ are marked by great feeling and depth ; and on this account he is a favorite author with German evangelical commentators, especially Ols-hausen ; and we notice that some American theological writers are beginning to quote Hamann. He has a future, we believe, more happy and powerful than the past. "The Word made flesh," he says, "is the only wonderful plan that reaches the inner relations, the limitless desires, and the infinite wants and sorrows, of our nature. It alone reveals the mystery of the divine nature, its Lord. It is the Tree of Life, in the midst of the garden. When all speculations fail, then the foundation-truth of the union of Divinity with humanity, and of humanity with Divinity, stands." His view of the depth of the work of Christ for us, would satisfy Augustine himself. He more than once quotes Luther's language : " a Christian does not behold his own virtue and holiness ; but sees, in himself, guilt and unholiness. In a word, his holiness is in heaven, where Christ is." " There is a voice," he says, " which sin drowns, but which God hears. That voice, in the depth of our heart, is the blood of the Redeemer, crying : The depth of our heart is sprinkled with the blood shed for the whole world."

Something of Hamann's religious philosophy might, perhaps, be thus expressed : All the works of God are the manifestations of his qualities ; and thus natural things are the images of spiritual things. God reveals himself, in Nature, in a more general manner. God reveals himself, in his word, in a more particular and secret manner, as it were, to the inmost soul of man. The unity of the authorship of both, is shown in the dialect of both ; in which there is the same



tone of immeasurable height and depth, the same infinite majesty.

Now *man* himself belongs to this natural creation of God, in which God manifests himself. God, therefore, reveals himself in the nature of man. Where, then, nature *truly* speaks in man (or where nature is restored to its original divine truth), there is God speaking. Religion is simply the restoration of divine truth in the nature of man. As the *life* itself is essential to a perfect working or speaking of nature, so the pure reason in man cannot be separated from the real experience, in any true philosophy. The revealed Word, therefore, as the instructor of human experience, is absolutely essential. The reason, alone, is an imperfect guide. The study and obedience of the word of God are the indispensable wings of the reason, without which it hobbles upon the ground. When the Godhead manifests himself *both* through nature and through his word, philosophy must confess this, and is bound to show their harmony.

Though this is a crude statement, yet we may perceive in this, glimpses of the modern German philosophy, in which this double idea of nature and experience, of the subject and the object, is more fully carried out. Whatever there is true in it, is here foreshadowed; but in Hamann's case, it was joined with, and modified by, the great and saving truth of a belief in the essentialness and supreme authority of the word of God; in fact, of the true manifestation of God in Christ. In one of Hamann's letters, he recommends to a young theologian, to throw away his proud scientific preparations, and to study but three books: the Bible, Schulzen's Hymn-book, and Luther's Abridgment of Doctrine.

Hamann's published works, issued from the three periods of 1759—63, 1772—76 and 1779—84, are numerous, but are fragmentary and impulsive. He seemed to write to relieve an active mind, and to unburden a soul thoroughly dissatisfied with his age. He did not write, like Goethe, to build a temple to his own genius. His largest works are "the Memorabilia of Socrates," "Golgotha and Schlebimini," and "Sybilline leaves." He wrote upon philology, especially on

the Hebrew and Greek languages; upon religion and philosophy; freedom and education; law and legislation; contracts and trade; history and poetry. Most of these writings have a polemic tone, and are directed with great power of satire against the materialism, imitativeness, and shallow negation of his times; and this circumstance now assists in destroying these works, because the best polemical writings, like shells that have battered error, have done their work. Jean Paul Richter says of Hamann's style: "Hamann is a deep sky full of telescopic stars, and many nebulae that no eye can resolve." And again he says: "His style is a stream which a storm drives back toward its source, so that Dutch market-tubs cannot navigate it." Another writer thus characterizes his writings: "The *kernel* contains great thoughts, but the *shell* is a hard compound of all sorts of things." Owing to his irregular education, his powerful and almost oriental but undisciplined imagination, and his mistaken cautiousness in the expression of religious truth, his style is dark, metaphoric, involved. It is wheel within wheel, though they be all living creatures, instinct with intelligence, and glowing with the love of God. In its most grotesque, ironical and weirdlike form, it is pregnant with great and good thoughts. Or, to put Richter's idea into another shape, his style is like an old Flemish painting, very dusky at first, but the more one looks at it, the more *interior* it has. The following short extract, though quite simple for Hamann, may give some slight idea of his singular and allegorical method of writing. It is from the introduction to a little book entitled "Fragments."

"A host is bountifully fed from five loaves; this small portion is so abundant for the multitude in the desert place, that more baskets full are left over, than there was bread originally. We see a similar miracle of divine grace in the multitude of wisdoms. What a vast collect is the history of sciences! And upon what is it all based? Upon the five loaves, upon the five senses, which we share with irrational creatures. Not only the whole store-house of the reason, but the treasure-house of faith, rests upon the same

foundation. Our reason is like that blind Theban seer, to whom his daughter delineated the flight of birds, and he prophesied from her report. 'Faith,' says the apostle, 'comes through hearing,' through hearing the word of God. 'Go and show John those things which ye do hear and see,' said our Lord. — Man enjoys infinitely more than he has need of, and wastes infinitely more than he enjoys. What a prodigal mother Nature is to her children, and how great her condescension, when she diminishes the scale and proportion of our wants, but sets herself to supply sumptuously the hunger and extravagance of our desires. Must she not be the daughter of a loving and benevolent Father? — The visible world may be ever so like a desert in the eye of a soul created for heaven; the bread which God gives us here may seem ever so inconsiderable and insufficient; the fishes may be ever so small, but they are blest, multiplied and glorified, by a wonder-working, mysterious God, whom we Christians call *ours*, because he has manifested himself to us in such great lowliness and love. — But our souls may be guilty of wasting that nutriment of their strength which God supplies in the desert of this life. Besides the moderation which our poverty should prescribe to us, a frugal care of the *fragments* which fall in the heat of our appetite, and which we do not take the pains to collect, because we see more before us, cannot be blamed. We live here upon fragments. Our thoughts are nothing but fragments. Yes, our wisdom is piecemeal."

Hamann's metaphors, which form the invariable clothing of his thoughts, are sometimes full of simple majesty and beauty. He says in one place: "Faith is like the pillar of cloud by day, but when the night of affliction comes, it turns into a pillar of fire." "What," he says again, "is that voice of our own heart, which we sometimes call conscience, sometimes the voice of reason, sometimes the whisper of our ministering angel? Ah, it is *more* than our own heart, or than any angel. It is the Spirit of God speaking in us."