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Hamann's Conversion

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ON April 16, 1757, the packet from Rotterdam disgorged on the shores of England at Harwich a young German from Königsberg in East Prussia. Rather less than a year later, on March 13, 1758, the same young man began to read the Bible. On March 19 he began to write down his thoughts on what he read. By April 21 he had reached the Revelation of St. John the Divine, and the "Biblical Reflections of a Christian" were complete. The literary career of Johann Georg Hamann had begun; and, in the remarkable phrase of his biographer Josef Nadler, "with this experience of Hamann in London the new intellectual Germany of his century had been born."

I give notice that from now on it will be a necessary part of the equipment of every promising young theologian to be able to talk intelligently about Hamann. Kierkegaard has had a wonderfully good run for his money. When I first became interested in Kierkegaard in 1928, none of his works, I think, had been translated into English; and the only thing readily available was the (for its period) astonishingly excellent article by Principal Grieve in Hastings' *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*. (The name of Hamann does not occur in the Index to *E.R.E.*) Then followed the great flood of translations and studies; and for nearly a generation Kierkegaard has been definitely "U," especially if one manages to quote those bits of him where the eminent and diligent translators were not quite sure of the meaning of the Danish, and so managed to redouble the obscurity of the original. But now that day is coming to its end. Almost all the possible doctoral theses on S.K. have been written, and he tends to become *vieux jeu*. P. T. Forsyth has had his innings. But in any case he had the misfortune to write in English, and intelligibly, so that he will never attain to the very highest level of "U-ness." And now, in our moment of need, comes Hamann. There has been of late years a widespread revival of Hamann-studies in Germany, and the results of this are just beginning to splash over to the English-speaking world. Now is the time to get ahead of the market. And how glorious are the possibilities! Nothing of Hamann has yet been translated into English; I do not think it likely that much ever will be. Even the Germans admit that he can hardly be read without a commentary; and most of what he wrote seems to me completely untranslatable. Where obscurity is concerned, Hamann's little finger is thicker than Kierkegaard's loins. What could be more "U" than that?

If that was all, I would not be writing about him. There is nothing that I loathe more than the habit of re-discovering some quite insignificant theologian or poet of the seventeenth or eighteenth century, and giving him a

temporary and artificial vogue. But this is not that. Dr. Nadler is an intelligent man. His remark that exactly two centuries ago a new intellectual Germany came into being, and that the man who single-handed brought it into being was Hamann, demands to be taken with careful seriousness. Who was this man, who was the close friend and shepherd of Herder; whom Kant knew and took seriously as an intellectual force; who was the sharpest and most effective critic that Lessing ever had to meet; of whom Goethe said that he owed more to him than to any other writer; the first intensive study of whose writings was produced by no less a genius than Hegel; who is seen at point after point to have been the master of Kierkegaard? It is by way of Kierkegaard that most British and American scholars who have interested themselves in Hamann have come to him.

We must go back a little in our story. The mission on which Hamann had come to London remains a little mysterious, but it is clear that, whatever it was, it had failed. He passed some months in great restlessness of spirit, not unaccompanied by dissipation. Now, sick at heart and with his money almost all spent, he settled down in his lodgings to work through the great pile of books on which he had spent probably more money than he could afford. The pile included the books of the deists and of the rationalists. But there was also a Bible. Hamann had already read the Bible during his stay in London, the Old Testament once and the New Testament twice, but the Word had said little or nothing to him. Now, as he read, he seemed to be seeing and hearing it for the first time—it spoke to him directly in a new way, in the language of personal encounter. And, in the course of his reading, he was converted.

The conversion took place on March 31, 1758. Among all the records of conversion that I have ever read, none is more remarkable than that which Hamann himself has set down for us in "Thoughts on the Course of my Life":

On the evening of March 31, as I was reading Deuteronomy 5, I fell into a state of profound meditation. I thought of Abel, of whom God said, "The earth hath opened her mouth to receive thy brother's blood." I felt my heart beat; in the depths of my heart I heard a voice sobbing and lamenting, like the voice of blood, the voice of the murdered brother, who demands vengeance for his blood . . . that voice which made Cain ever restless and a fugitive. I felt my heart swell at once; I burst into tears. I could bear it no longer. I could no longer hide from my God that I was the fratricide, the murderer of my brother, His only-begotten Son. The Holy Spirit continued, in spite of my weakness, in spite of the long-continued resistance that I had maintained against His testimony and His touch, to reveal to me ever more and more the mystery of the divine love, and the benefit of faith in our gracious and only Saviour.

What is perhaps most interesting of all in this confession is that the sin of which Hamann particularly accuses himself is not the irregularities of his time of unsettlement and despair, but the sin of *Vernunft*, reason—the belief that man by searching can find out God, and that the infinite God can be reduced to the compass of the syllogisms and definitions of the human

intellect. This is most significant for the future development of Hamann and his thought.

What, then, are these "Reflections of a Christian" on the Bible? They run right through the Bible from Genesis to Revelation, with very unequal emphasis on the various parts. They are not to be understood in terms of exegesis—a task for which Hamann at that time had neither the theological equipment nor the inclination. They are as accurate a transcript as an ardent and intelligent young man could make of a dialogue between God and his own soul, which lasted for more than a month. They were obviously written extremely rapidly, without premeditation, and almost *currente calamo*. Dr. Nadler writes of them that they display "that mysterious insight, which we cannot explain, whether we have recourse to the play of the brain-cells or to the idea of divine illumination . . . They are a work of the highest merit, from the literary point of view, written in a style and language of which no one else in Germany at the time was capable, or had for a long time been capable." Hamann had made a deep study of French and of the French literary tradition, and this no doubt had its effect on his handling of the German language. But the literary aspect was far from being the most important. The "Reflections" are the story of the action and inter-action of the Word of God and the mind of a genius, with hardly any help at all other than that which the Word of God itself provides. Hamann never arranged for the publication of this work. It never saw the light, until it appeared after his death in the first edition of his collected works. He hardly ever refers to it; it was almost a private memorandum for his own use only. Yet those who know Hamann best affirm that all his later thought was there in germ—in this book written in one month by a young man twenty-seven years old. He was like one of those mathematical geniuses, who make all their great discoveries by some inexplicable process of intuition before the age of thirty, and spend the rest of their lives working out the significance of these early discoveries.

What, then, had Hamann discovered?

This was the high age of the Enlightenment. Voltaire was its king—and was Hamann's chief *bête noire*. The leaders of this great movement did not all wish entirely to banish religion; but true religion appeared to them to consist primarily of general ideas—the more general the truer—such as the human intellect ought to be able unaided to attain to. Revelation, therefore, if the idea was to be retained at all, could not be other than a crutch, an aid to weaker intellects in an adolescent stage of development, which they must hasten to outgrow. So Lessing says expressly, in § 76 of his tract on the *Education of the Human Race*: "When these [sc. truths of the intellect] were revealed, certainly they were not as yet truths of the intellect, but they were revealed, in order that they might become such truths." The teachings of Jesus and of the Bible were given only to bring us to awareness of certain truths, which our own intellect would in time have been capable of discovering. But, once such truths have been revealed, it is our business to strip

them of their historical garments, and to lift them to the level of pure intellectual truths. It was against this idea that Hamann was to fight tirelessly for the next thirty years, with learning, with passion, and with wit.

In that cool Age of Reason Hamann had re-discovered the meaning and the scandal of Revelation. His primary discoveries can conveniently be summarized under five heads:

1. He was never tired of affirming the *condescension* of God in revelation. When God reveals Himself, He always reveals Himself in the form of a Servant. (I wonder whether Fr. Lionel Thornton has read Hamann.) This was true when God appeared in Jesus Christ; He came as the meanest among men, He became in the strictest sense of the term our neighbour. But so it is with the Scriptures. "God reveals Himself; the Creator of the world becomes an author. What kind of a fate will await the books that He has written?" It is easy to foresee the answer. The critics fasten on these books. They are offended by the form of the Servant, just as His contemporaries were offended in Jesus Christ. God ought to have spoken in far more philosophical language and paid far stricter attention to the rules of taste. Such is the vanity and arrogance of the judgment that human wisdom passes on the Scriptures.

But God knew very well what He was doing. Such critics are the whole who have no need of a physician. But the Word of God is intended for the sick and it exactly suits their condition. By coming in this guise God puts to flight the proud and the self-confident. He insists that it is only as we approach His Word with humility that we shall be able to understand what it is all about. So, whereas even Christian expositors in the period of the Enlightenment tended to tone down the less attractive elements in the Scriptures—the crudities of the Old Testament histories, the roughness and occasional violence of the prophetic style, Hamann rather insists on them; this is the way in which God has been pleased to reveal Himself; this is the form in which we must be content to accept His revelation.

2. Hamann's second great principle is that of the "body-soulness" of created things, and of all human beings. The Enlightenment had tended to identify man with his intellect, and to regard the body as an inconvenient weight which has somehow become attached to the mind. Hamann will have none of this. Every intellectual experience of man comes to him primarily from without, through sight or hearing; that is to say, it takes to itself a *bodily* form. "Body," of course, must here be understood in the broadest sense. Under Hamann's rubric "body" are to be included such diverse realms as speech, history and nature; but surely he is right—all these three have this in common, that they are existence in the concrete, three-dimensional world of reality, and not in the abstract realm of pure intellectual apprehension.

This leads Hamann on to another observation of the greatest significance. Man, he says, has not only a brain; he also has sense and passion, and the senses and the passions "speak and understand nothing other than pictures."

This was an observation which generations later Sigmund Freud extended to the unconscious or the sub-conscious. We can see here how Hamann stood behind Herder, behind the reaction against the classic forms and the beginnings of the later Romantic movement. But this links up once again with Hamann's concept of revelation and of the appropriateness to it of the richly concrete, pictorial Hebrew idiom. God always approaches man as man—that is, as body and spirit, through the humble doors of sight and hearing. "When God had exhausted Himself, and talked Himself out of breath, through nature and Scripture, through created things and seers, through arguments and figures, through poets and prophets, then in the evening of the day He spoke to us through His Son—yesterday and today—until the promise of His future shall be fulfilled, no longer in the form of a Servant."

3. This second point has already illustrated something that is central in the thought of Hamann—the place that he attributed in the human make-up to the faculty of speech. If he had been asked for a brief definition of man, he might well have replied that man is a talking animal, or perhaps rather that man is an animal which can listen to articulate speech and apprehend it as meaning. For, in his view, the Word of God is always prevenient, and the attitude of man must be that of a listener, attent to hearken to the voice of God.

In the eighteenth century there was much discussion of the origin of speech. Herder among others wrote on it. Was it simply the result of a natural unfolding of an innate human capacity? Or did it rest on a divine self-impartment? Hamann comes down firmly on the side of the divine origin of speech, at the same time, however, asserting that everything that is divine is also human.

More important for our theme is his denial of the possibility of thought without speech, and his still more emphatic denial that, if wordless thought were possible, it would be superior to the thought that operates in words and pictures and concrete forms. This is the ground of his running controversy with Kant, and in particular with the *Critique of Pure Reason*. For, according to Hamann, there can be no such thing as pure reason. Kant has written a book, and a book is made up of words, and in words it is impossible to separate that which is directed to the senses from that which is directed to the intellect. This union Hamann ventures to describe as *unio sacramentalis*; the two factors in speech cannot be distinguished, any more than in the Eucharist the Body and Blood of Christ can be distinguished from the elements of bread and wine. Not even a Kant can do it. Hamann accuses Kant, therefore, of having tried to escape from the necessary limits of our creatureliness. But to attempt to rise above our creaturely estate is certainly to fall below it.

4. Fourthly, Hamann had come to an apprehension of the significance of *the event*. The Enlightenment was unhistorical in its way of thinking. Lessing had indeed tried to give a significance to history in his picture of God as the Educator of the human race—the one who through the centuries

brings the human spirit to its full development. But this is only pseudo-history. This God never *does* anything; He never introduces anything *new* into history; His function is limited to helping the evolution of those faculties which are innate in the race. This will not do at all for Hamann. For him the Word is action; the whole drama of the divine self-communication takes place in a history of redemption, a *Heilsgeschichte*, which began with Creation and the fall of the angels, reached its lowest point in the Cross of Christ, and will reach its consummation when Christ comes again to set up His reign upon the earth.

The eighteenth century was afflicted by the scandal of particularity, as metaphysicians tend to be in any age. Hamann did not merely tolerate this scandal; he leaped upon it, he gloried in it, he rubbed the noses of his opponents in it. The believer sees the same God at work today; it is the Holy Spirit Who gives to him the clue to the understanding of the history of the past.

5. Hamann's final principle is that of the *coincidentia oppositorum*, which he had learned from Nicolas of Cusa (though in one passage he wrongly attributes it to Giordano Bruno). The intellect attempts to bring all things under general rules, and is frustrated by that which will not accommodate itself to this classifying zeal. The limits of its possibilities are given by the law of contradiction. But intuition, or faith, if we prefer to call it by this name, sees beyond the contradictions to the point of their reconciliation in God. Truth is to be attained not by simplification, or by the attenuation of one of the contradictories, but by the patient waiting to which in the end is granted the revelation of the unity which lies beyond difference. The natural man is offended by the poor and beggarly elements of the Gospel; faith can see at once the heights and the depths, the heavenly and the earthly—and is not offended.

This concept is epigrammatically expressed in the title of Hamann's most famous work, *Golgotha und Scheblimini*. Even the learned might be excused for not jumping at once to the meaning of the title. *Scheblimini* is the "Sit thou at my right hand" of the 110th Psalm. Humiliation and exaltation, hiddenness and manifestation, are united in a single phrase. Technically the little book is a review of Moses Mendelssohn's *Jerusalem*, a typical Enlightenment plea for tolerance and peace between the confessions. But Hamann goes far beyond his immediate brief, and the conclusion is a meditation on the nature of truth and peace and a prayer that the God of peace, Who is higher than all reason (*höher ist denn alle Vernunft*) may sanctify us wholly through and through.

It is clear that Hamann can be cited as one of the champions of "the flight from reason." He fled from the *Vernunft* of the Enlightenment, that hard, clear intellect that wished to make all things the objects of intellectual understanding, that failed to notice the element of mystery and wonder in nature and in man, that regarded poetry as on the whole an inferior form of expression and the need for revelation as a mark of a lower level of human development. In the same way, in the nineteenth century, Kierkegaard was

to flee from the Hegelian reason—that brilliant creative intellect that would reduce everything to a system, and had no place for the exceptional, the obstinately individual, the irreducible. And so in the twentieth century Karl Barth was to revolt against his own early liberalism, against the reduction of revelation to the categories of human discovery, against a theology that had lost the dimensions of redemption, and did not know what to do with the blood of Christ that speaketh better things than that of Abel.

But, if we flee *from* reason, what do we flee *into*? “Into the irrational” say some foolish spirits. If that were what was meant, I would join my liberal friends in pronouncing a solemn curse on the whole tribe of the “irrationationalists” from Hamann onwards. But that is certainly not what Hamann meant.

The problem, of course, is partly in the words that we use. Trying to explain to a German what an Englishman means by “reason” is like trying to explain cricket to an American who has never seen it played. If an Englishman fled from reason, in the sense in which that word is properly used in the English language, he would have rebelled against the God Who made him, and have brought upon himself the mournful doom pronounced by Dante over those who had lost *il ben dell' intelletto*, that capacity for the apprehension of the Truth that had once made them different from the brute beasts. But the same would not necessarily follow if he fled from *Vernunft*. So once again the question has to be posed—what did Hamann suppose himself to be fleeing *into*, when he fled from *Vernunft*?

The answer is that he believed himself to be fleeing into *reality*, the rich, glorious, concrete, varied reality, which God has created and given to man for his enjoyment and his illumination. So far from the particular being a scandal, it is the specially divine. Things can be subsumed under general laws only when they are drained of their life-blood; and this applies even more to persons than to things. A quotation from that other great apostle of the concrete, Baron von Hügel, may here serve to illustrate Hamann's meaning:

Such [mystical] souls will not only find the contingent in *religion*, the historical, and the institutional, the *hic et nunc*, the spatial and temporal, an irritation and an (apparent) oppression and limitation; they will also tend to find . . . all the *other non-religious contingencies and activities of man's life*, a weariness and an irritation. Why the Hebrew articles—with God ever present? Why the Greek accents with His Spirit ever speaking? Why the geography of the Holy Land? Why particular prayers, why any oral prayers at all? Yet, look you, please, all the feeling can only be *one* element, *one* movement, *one* side of the full truth. For God is an immense *concretion*, not an abstraction. He is a *multiplicity* (for our apprehension) *in unity*. . . . He has made my body and its senses, He has made my love of the historical, social, institutional, even the legal; I am to *incarnate*, in my turn, the *incarnate* God . . . No floating, no drifting, no dreaming above the body, the family, society, history, institutions, but a penetrating into them, and a retiring out from them, again to return, Antaeus-like, to earth.¹

1. Letter of January 11, 1911 (M. de la Bedoyère, *Life of Baron von Hügel*, p. 254).

With all of this Hamann would heartily have agreed, as a repudiation of an other-worldly pietism, no less than of the over-intellectualism of his opponents of the Enlightenment. We can now see why Hamann holds so firmly to the trinity of God's revelations—in Scripture, in history, and in nature. He did not believe in the equality of these revelations, or suppose that man can climb from one to the other by the use of his own unaided faculties. As we have seen, it is the Holy Spirit Who gives to man the clue, through which history becomes to him no longer a dead past with which he has no concern, but a living reality in which the same God of providence is always operative. Similarly, when a man has come to know the Creator, he can recognize His hand at work in the created thing; and thus the created thing too becomes a genuine, though a subordinate, revelation. For here too God takes on the form of a Servant, and, since He is approaching man, approaches him by means of things that man can understand.

All this sounds extraordinarily modern. It is easy to see why there has been such a revival of Hamann-studies in Germany, and why so many feel that here is a prophet who can speak with special force to a generation that is facing again so many of the same fundamental problems in a rather altered form. Within the last ten years a complete and critical edition of all the works of Hamann has at last become available to the world, and a complete edition of his correspondence is on the way. Hamann was never a systematic thinker; his writings, as has been said, rather resemble a shower of sparks. But those who have had the time and the patience to study these works in detail assure us that a pattern is beginning to emerge—the gradual working-out over a lifetime of that rich flood of insights that poured in upon Hamann, when he lived in loneliness in London in 1758.

All great men are one-sided. Hamann saw very plainly one side—the totality of being and the necessary totality of man's response to it. But there is also a place for the critical, the generalizing, intellect. To live is necessarily to be immersed in life. When D. H. Lawrence spoke of thinking with the blood, he was giving a rather crude symbolic expression to something that is vital in the life of the artist. But there is also a place for reflection, for standing back a little from life and looking at it dispassionately—provided that this process is not confused with that of living, and is not supposed to be in some way a substitute for life. Theology moves ever a little uneasily between these two poles. For a generation the tendency has been towards "the flight from reason" in the true Hamannian sense of the word. Signs are not lacking that the next movement in theology will be in the direction of a rediscovery of the place of the critical intellect, of liberalism, in the true and noble, not the reduced and Enlightenment, sense of that much misused word.²

2. The *Biblische Betrachtungen eines Christen* occupy pp. 7–249 of Vol. I of Hamann's *Sämtliche Werke*, edited by Josef Nadler (Vienna, 1950). In writing this study I have drawn on *Johann Georg Hamann, der Zeuge des Corpus Mysticum* (Salzburg, 1949), also by Josef Nadler, on the *Hamannstudien* of that admirable scholar Fritz Blanke (Zürich, 1956), and on the excellent critical edition of *Golgatha und Scheblimini* (Gütersloh, 1956) by my friend Dr. Lothar Schreiner, now a missionary in Indonesia.