

IS THEOLOGY POSSIBLE AFTER HAMANN?

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If *theology* is writing about God, Gods, or religion, or about the sacred texts of a religion, then Hamann's writings are theological. If theology is a study of religion undertaken by one of its members from the standpoint of an insider, then likewise, Hamann can be said to be engaged in a theological project. Yet for all of the God-talk and the scriptural testimonials, Hamann denies that he is doing theology and refuses the very designation as hubris, avowing it a conceit of human reason to think it can speak knowingly of divine being or divine attributes, and indicating that the production of a reasonable account of divinity is a contradiction in terms, rendering "theology" an oxymoron. But if Hamann doesn't consider his own project theological, does it remain open for theological appropriation? That is, for those who recognize in Hamann a kindred spirit or who take his work to be an incentive for their own, is the pursuit of theology in a Hamannian vein possible? For in fact, much of the literature that addresses Hamann does so with operative assumptions about the theological consequence of his work. In what follows, I would like to consider the most basic conditions for any theological enterprise, and to juxtapose these with the most critical features of Hamann's thought. This should allow for an evaluation of the degree to which Hamann is amenable to theological appropriation in general and an assessment of any such appropriation accordingly.

First a review of the key elements of Hamann's thought. The whole of Hamann's enterprise is animated by his recognition of the notion of divine *Herunterlassung*, God's condescension or self-limitation in creation. Rather than a sign or consequence of God's abundance, Being, such as we can know of it or be of it, results from a godly self-reduction which we can neither account for nor prevail over. As in the sixteenth century Kabbalistic articulation of *tzimtzum*, God's self-contraction is the conceptual condition for our modes of understanding and the apparent independence of the

world; God's inexplicable self-negation "makes way" or "makes space" for tangible and finite beings and for our world.¹

Divine kenosis and atonement, the abandonment of the world and its fallenness—these are not new concepts, neither for Luther nor Hamann; but what is characteristic of Hamann is the will to take the concept of divine condescension seriously as an epistemological starting point. If what can be known of the preconditions for the whole assembly of human discursive activities is described as divine self-limitation, then this limitation necessarily establishes the threshold of human reason: our form of knowing cannot be comprehensive, for it begins with and extends out of a condition of constraint. Though we can say something about the limitation of our knowledge, we can say nothing meaningful about what motivates it or exists before it.² As Hamann puts it in a personal letter, "since Adam's fall, all *gnosis* is suspicious to me, like a forbidden fruit."³ In other words, Hamann is prompted by a theological proposal to make a metacritical demand: his demand is that we ascertain whether and how our epistemological principles—and thus any of our claims to knowledge—can be coherently established. Hamann does not merely challenge his readers to incorporate more epistemological competence into our discourses about God or religion; rather, he challenges the ground of any theory of knowledge.

Following from the notion of divine condescension, Hamann finds that our cognitive activities cannot be secured by any transcendent or objective foundation. His *Metacritique of the Purism of Reason*, while aimed initially at Kant, is presented as an evaluation of any metaphysical system equivocal about its own grounding conditions. There, Hamann asserts that the very idea of epistemic procedures or rules requires justification, and that the need to ground such rules in an objective and authoritative manner immediately returns to the problem of a stable criterion, or the foundation on which any viable theory of knowledge is based. This is what Hegel identifies as Hamann's most powerful blow to the traditions of theology as well as philosophy, and what he therefore, by

following Hamann's lead, designs his system to overcome. Hegel recognizes in Hamann the petition to justify the principles according to which any epistemic inquiry can occur, and he acknowledges that in ensuing theological and philosophical attempts to deal with Hamann's insight, the very principles Hamann problematized were being assumed in order to begin answering Hamann's questions. As the last "fully systematic attempt to generate a rational theology,"⁴ it is no accident that Hegel's system attempts to incorporate Hamann's metacritical acumen, his holism, and his insistence that the "real" is known in and through human history and must be articulated in human language.

But well before Hegel attempts to appropriate Hamann's position, Hamann hones it to take on Kant's approach to the metacritical issue of epistemic principles. Hamann's confrontation with Kant's critical metaphysics is decisive for answering our more fundamental question about the very possibility of theology. As Hamann quickly discerned from his pre-publication proofs of the first *Critique*, Kant's phenomenology of subjective cognition—indeed, the architecture of the critical project itself—recognizes the metacritical demand and in response to it, attempts to base cognitive objectivity in the concept of subjective universality.⁵ Nevertheless, Hamann charges that this newly self-critiquing notion of reason claims unjustifiably to serve as an objective ground of epistemological principles. Hamann uses the *Metacritique* to argue that Kant inappropriately flushes out of his notion of reason all of reason's actual dependencies and entanglements. Hamann identifies three misguided "purifications" of reason in Kant's system: the first endeavors to locate reason outside of human tradition and custom; the second to remove reason from experience and "everyday inductions"; and the third and most extreme attempt to purify reason is found in Kant's excision of language from the operation of thought. Kant's efforts to show reason to be ultimately independent of language are especially incongruous because Kant must use linguistic figures to construct reason's ideal propositions (SW III, 286.9-13).⁶ Not only do linguistic symbols, analogies,

and metaphors attend Kantian reason's self-misunderstanding, but as ironically, where Kant can see that "our cognition springs from two fundamental sources of the mind" (A50/B74), he fails to notice that language, which belongs to both sensibility and intuition, is their shared root. Hamann asserts that language is "the only, first, and last organon and criterion of reason"; that language's "credentials" are "tradition and usage"; and that from the very ambiguity entailed in language's sensuous receptivity and conceptual spontaneity, Kant's critically-aware "reason" draws both its procedures and the self-assurance of its critical standing.

Hamann's metacritical position is thus a skeptical paradigm: it asserts that nothing outside of our natural languages can be shown to sustain transcendental procedures or epistemological categories. Hamann follows Hume in ridiculing philosophy's failure to establish the categories of causality, necessity, and relation, while each of these are nonetheless structural features of the natural language upon which we rely. In a perfectly saucy letter to Kant, Hamann agrees with Hume's sardonic proclamation that one cannot "eat an egg and drink a glass of water without faith [*Glaube*]," as he takes this to be an appropriate corollary of Hume's skepticism and of his own. Hamann only wonders why Hume does not go on to extend his admission of the need for faith to matters "higher than eating and drinking." "If only Hume were sincere, consistent with himself—," Hamann implies, he could admit that his skepticism supports a fideist reading.⁷ Hamann, in any case, asserts that he was "full of Hume" upon writing his first work, and he maintains a skeptical position thereafter—though not one than any but a fideistic Humean would recognize as fully consistent with Humean skepticism.

Thus, the metacritical assessment of reason's false propositions about reason, and the ensuing derivation of natural language as the source and index of those constructions, becomes the crux of Hamann's work. This turn to language, and the epistemological limitation that it acknowledges, is the distinguishing theme of Hamann's authorship. There is no Hamannian writing, no Hamannian

genius or obscurity, no paradigmatically Hamannian wit, and there can be no elucidation of Hamann's impact on the diverse traditions that follow him, without this insight into the primacy and irrevocable actuality of language. Language not only replaces ontology in Hamann, it explains why any attempt to transcend our linguistic conditions can only revert back to those conditions.

Hamann's inaugural linguistic turn cuts in two directions. The first entails the position I have just outlined on reason's cultural, experiential, and linguistic embeddedness, which Hamann directs against Kant. Hamann charges that any formal system which attempts to uphold a meta-language cleansed of its linguistic conditions, or a concept of human rationality unaffected by experience, history, and thus contingency, will necessarily fail to explain the conditions of knowledge and the compass of meaningful communication.⁸

The corollary of Hamann's linguistic criticism of Kant, or the other way his position cuts, takes on any account of, or allegedly on behalf of, a transcendent principle, entity, or otherwise indeterminate being, state of being, or source of being. Hamann not only rejects theology as a reckless attempt at rational mastery, he insists that all God-talk, including every terminological attempt to rename "transcendence," remains just that: talk, but not about God or God's activities. For in the difference between ourselves and the question of our cause, Hamann insists, we will find with certainty only our own reflections. Nonetheless, all that *is* does appear to the human thinker as a sign—as referring, representing, expressing, pointing—what can be thought, including everything we imagine, hope for, and desire in the divine, does not stand before us in unmediated presence, but it does appear as language and it can be addressed only as such. Hamann writes: "this *communicatio* of divine and human *idiomatum* is a fundamental law and principle key of all our knowledge" (SW III.27). And in a personal letter: "What is called Being in your language, I would rather name the Word."⁹

Because what *is* shows up only in human expression, and human expression remains bounded by the contingencies of tradition and usage, descriptions of God, his will, and his doings must have a metaphorical or a regulative function.¹⁰ To believe in God is not to assert that a set of properties belong to him, but to recognize one's own desire for connection with a force one can only imagine and attempt to describe. Hamann connects divine condescension to human epistemic limitation without fail; though his descriptions tend to be accompanied by a poetic or mythic imagining of the scene of divine condescension, the bottom line is always the same: we may be known by God, but we do not know him. The human tradition that asserts a continuity between humanity and divinity establishes that continuity in its recorded tradition; the tradition of seeing human Logos as akin to divine Logos posits and then discovers its own paradigm. Hamann thus depicts language and knowledge as translation "from a tongue of angels into a human tongue" (SW II.199, 4-6); we cannot know from what Being has been translated to appear to us as it does, but we affirm that it does appear and that this appearance is disposed to our thought and language.

Now, in order to answer the question about the possibility of theology after Hamann, I want to consider three approaches to theology, each of which has adherents who have had something to say about Hamann. I am not making the case that these three types exhaust the possibilities of theological doctrine, but neither am I presenting these three major types merely because one can find references to Hamann's work in each of them. Rather, my claim is that one or more of these approaches—the two broad classes of traditional theology and negative theology, along with Radical Orthodoxy in particular, which borrows from both—will be *essentially* related to any formal theological system, so that if one cannot both uphold Hamannian insights *and* one or more of these positions, then formal theology is incompatible with a just interpretation of Hamann.

The first, most traditional theological position with something to say about Hamann ascribes to him an embrace of transcendence, particularly as God's transcendence should be conveyed in

language's ability to point beyond itself.¹¹ This is the position most easily dismissed with reference to Hamann's own testimony, for the immanence of human knowledge is recorded in the animalistic derivation of language, the contingencies of culture and history, and the developmental, sensual nature of human thinking—and Hamann ceaselessly insists that following from the hard truth of condescension, all this is likewise God's immanence. Here again, Hamann's metacritical demand about epistemic criteria and his turn to language as the netting in which all statements about divinity become caught lead him to reject any commitment to a noumenal realm of objects of intelligible discourse as much as any position which claims the ability to "shoot beyond immanence."¹² As Hamann ceaselessly emphasizes, "creation [...] is a speech to creatures through creatures."¹³ Gwen Griffith Dickson has shrewdly warned that statements like this one should not be read as a declaration exclusively about human linguistic and epistemological capabilities; hence this is not a statement "from which to unfold an entire philosophy of language and epistemology."¹⁴ I agree that one cannot unpack a full philosophy of language and epistemology from this or any statement of Hamann's. My intention is rather to maintain that the stance Hamann expresses here is one that he maintains consistently, and that permanently disrupts the project of reading him as amenable to the transcendent knowledge claims made by traditional theology.

The second major type of theology Hamann would reject is negative theology. What all forms of negative theology hold in common is the assertion that God is "without being" insofar as being is a category of finitude. We speak the language of finitude, hence our God-talk must be in negative terms; any other—any positive—predication of God would be inapt for describing a being who transcends time and space. Negative theology from Pseudo-Dionysus to Jean-Luc Marion sports with various themes from the nature of human signification to the analysis of idolatry, artfully crafting a language to stand in for a God who is "unnamable" and unbound by "relation."¹⁵ But again, though Hamann insists that our accounts of being are translational and incomplete, he never

stops asserting that the approach to God happens in language and as language, and thus that it is an immanent encounter marked by our human particularity: our finitude. Rather than acknowledging the ever-sensuous divinity of nature, history, tradition, and language, negative theology, regardless of any new terms it may coin, repeats the time-honored move of pre-critical metaphysics: it argues on behalf of a God who is absolute, independent, and sovereign. Negative theology attempts to go to the wellspring of theology, to ensure that our discourses are about God and not about ourselves, and to do so, it plays at calling God “nothing” in order to emphasize that God is nothing that can be known by a finite being using finite language. Negative theology, then, shares only a surface reflection in common with Hamann, for while the God of the negative theologians is not, properly speaking, “known,” the position is justified in a way that ignores Hamann’s epistemic and linguistic enterprise.¹⁶

What is more difficult to face up to is the theological utilization of Hamann by the Radical Orthodoxy movement, whose most gifted theorist is John Milbank. Because of this difficulty, I would like to focus on Milbank’s reading of Hamann: not because I take Milbank’s “Radical Orthodoxy” to be a major “type” of theology; Milbank’s movement is in fact largely indebted to the traditional theology it reviles, as well as to certain familiar postmodern interpretative approaches.¹⁷ Rather, Radical Orthodoxy is both the only contemporary initiative that utilizes Hamann for the development of its core theological standpoint, and it is an excellent example of a hybridized theological attempt, which draws from a number of theologies to constitute its key claims and its methodology. As such, Milbank’s radically orthodox position provides the occasion to evaluate the appropriation of Hamann by a particular theological proposal that claims to depend upon him, as well as the opportunity to deepen our inquiry into the employment of Hamann by any theological initiative based upon claims about God’s transcendence and simultaneous compliance with human understanding.

Milbank mentions Hamann in a number of works, but affords him sustained treatment in his movement's manifesto: *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology*.¹⁸ Here, in introducing "the turn of Radical Orthodoxy," Milbank confesses that his interest in Hamann stems from the latter's theological critique of philosophy, a critique oriented by its refusal of the "modern dualism of reason and revelation." He also announces that Hamann plays an early but leading role in the "theological construction of an autonomous secular reason, operating 'within limits'"; Milbank and his colleagues declare that their shared undertaking is motivated by the intention to "undo" that paradoxical and dangerous misconception (6).

Hamann, in spite of himself it seems, gives into Kant's liberal partiality in granting to reason the domains of politics and the social order, with the subterranean but all the more insidious effect of allowing Hamann's best insights—into the linguisticity of reason, the priority of existence over essence, and into the value of dialogue and the sensuality of all human thought—to appear as if assimilated into the later modern, secular philosophical topography. While Hamann is implicated in the subsequent conundrum, the real fault is Kant's, for as Milbank tells us, Kant's "confinement of theoretical reason within limits," his whole assumption, which Milbank calls an "unquestioned assumption," that "it is possible to speak with ... certainty of merely finite being without raising the question of its relation to Being as such" (4), comes to haunt Kant, and thus to haunt philosophy, as the bloodless agreement to treat reality *an sich*, ontologically speaking, "as nothing."

Milbank and his fellows declare that what is most disturbing about Kant to their own Radical Orthodoxy is the idea that what can "be known with certainty need not have anything to do with the ultimately real." This is what Hamann is contesting, they maintain, when he insists that knowledge itself is guided by faith and that sensory experience is already the site of divine presence. But this is also where Hamann drops the ball, after refining his own position on the primacy of language, because insofar as Hamann's metacritical demand addresses the epistemological problem of criteria,

it allows that reason may function only within those criteria. In particular, for Hamann, reason should address its fundamentally sign-based nature; it should acknowledge the way in which it gains orientation by marking, and the way that in marking it necessarily redoubles upon its referent, both designating and erasing it. Hamann further argues that in its marking, reason records the sensuous demands and value-laden interests of an actually existing animal. So Hamann's metacritical position, as we saw, holds that nothing beyond our own natural languages ultimately undergirds epistemological categories and transcendental procedures, and it therefore occasions a turn away from traditional ontology and theology, and toward the study of human discursive practices. Hamann argues that human reason remains bound to linguistic acts, usage, tradition, and experience, and thus that if human history has a transcendent source which might authorize its claims, this cannot be rationally ascertained.

Where Hamann goes astray then, according to Radical Orthodoxy, is in too strictly applying his metacritical insight to his own epistemic assertions. Hamann's position is even more sober than Kant's, firstly because it tackles the linguistic dependencies of its own critical enterprise, and correspondingly because any gestures Hamann then makes toward the primacy of faith or the divinity emergent in sensory desire are themselves harnessed into the language within which they may be known and communicated. We will remember that Hamann so delighted in Hume's assertion that one cannot "eat an egg and drink a glass of water without faith" because, he finds, one *does* need faith or belief to eat an egg, or to decide on anything, insofar as *Glaube* must be understood as a cognitive impulse to *affirm* what appears to be present and to *desire* the absent context or otherwise innumerable conditions of any object's apparent presence. Language records that affirmation and desire in the way we name, study, and come to terms with things and their conditions, but language also stands in permanently as the sum and substance, delivering itself, not

its absent referents, however commandingly we may affirm them or fervently we may desire them. We cannot know if language delivers on God, only that it delivers on language.

The next ambivalent grievance Radical Orthodoxy has with Hamann is closely related. For if language harnesses our desires and claims about Being, then, as I have been maintaining, language replaces the idea of an unconditional, sovereign Idea or Being, freed of the constraints of time and space. In replacing the Unconditioned, language accepts its own place in space and time; it necessarily remains a sensuous phenomenon. In his encounter with Kant's first *Critique*, namely with its account of the Ideas of Reason, Hamann develops the argument that any "unconditioned" is not simply logically or transcendently deduced, but manifests in its linguistic context and as dependent upon its linguistic metaphors. Hamann contests the promise of a priori security altogether, but he does not contest—on the contrary, he upholds—the argument that cognitive categories function as rules for understanding, that conceptual orientation requires the utilization of analogy and regulative positing, and that any cognitive analogies we do use are figured from encounters with sensible phenomena. Hamann's ensuing problem with Kant's moral theology rests rather upon his rejection of the unconditioned certainty Kant claims for the moral law. For Hamann, what it means to encounter a transcendental condition, and to acknowledge that it can only be deduced, defended, and known *as* a linguistic enterprise, permanently undercuts the idea that we can prove, comprehend, or otherwise rationally master a sovereign instance, or a transcendence we have merely signified. But again, Hamann's concern with Kant is not a problem with the fact that we desire more than we see or can know, or that we may posit the existence of something more, or even that we may hope for and strive to act as if our positing has anchored down on some yet unseen ground. In this regard too, Hamann is at least as willing as Kant to explore the promise of our ability to put forward a regulative ideal and to orient ourselves toward it. And Hamann is even more willing than

Kant to trumpet the fact that when we do so, we do not ascertain the preexistence of the object we have posited, but the conditions and procedures of our cognitive powers.

For Hamann, it is because we have no access to transcendent verification or guidance that we can fully and freely develop our rational and moral agency. Milbank too sees in this Hamann's anticipation of existentialism, and regrets that it is formulated in a way that allows for equally secular and religious applications. But even more problematically for Radical Orthodoxy, Hamann's notion of human freedom, taken together with his metacritical position on epistemic criteria, positions Hamann to have to admit, with Kant, that his God, and all of his assertions about God's preferences and activities, have the status of humanly conceived regulative ideals. Indeed, Milbank's charge is well-founded, because Hamann is the first to appreciate that the very image of divine condescension, the vision on which he concentrates his whole epistemic enterprise, is itself a metaphor that describes, as well, the activity of metaphor. In other words, Hamann acknowledges that the formal work of metaphor mimics the primordial act of condescension as much as it proposes it. To say that God humbles himself for the sake of his creation is to use an analogy with the human world to understand something of the divine world, and the reason Hamann and others find it (or any Christological reading of kenosis) acceptable, despite its Catholic censure, is because it comes as close as possible to describing the level of otherwise unthinkable sacrifice which must attend any possibility of a God willfully dividing from a state of absolute fullness. And, once contracted, this image also helps to orient our (admittedly poetic) imagining of the ends for which such contraction was willfully enacted.

Hamann takes it to be neither accident nor blithely poetic irony that when metaphors do their work, they succeed with the same symbolic action of condescension. Successful analogies, allegories, and metaphors contract an otherwise ineffable richness into an explicable image; they thus deliver, in language, a salient insight, presenting a multitude of associations in a condensed form that both

makes them thinkable and obscures their points of connection. This is no accidental irony because Hamann affirms the full significance of the idea that *logos* as language, and as a necessarily linguistic reason, is *the* mode of human existence, *the* interminable route between beings and Being. Where Kant's critical turn, as Milbank knows, intentionally exchanges ontology for exposition, Hamann's metacritical approach to reason and language entails the insight that "revelation" can add nothing to a world that already "speaks" to us as language, nature, and history, and likewise that "faith" can add no content to knowledge claims, but is a description of our given, conceptual inclination to deal with appearances and to anticipate their conditions.

The holism which Radical Orthodoxy otherwise extols in Hamann is contingent upon Hamann's uncompromising use of the regulative. Hamann rejects Kant's purifications of reason, just as he refutes Herder's account of the origin of language, because they reify the process of cognition with a pretense of objectivity, while the process itself remains dynamic and actively bound to bodies and languages. Hamann's holism involves sensuous experience, the demands of culture and tradition, the saturation of the thinking mind with the unique conditions of its embodied existence—and emphatically for Hamann, in also involves the desire to grasp the source of existence and the knowledge of its full scope, registering that desire at every level of experience. But Hamann is too scrupulous in his metacritical demands, which are turned always on his own assertions, to claim that history and tradition, as the text through which we read a divine happening, disclose anything that transcends their own, humanly written, imagined, and communicated chronicle. It is only by positing the image of a divine and human meeting point in language, by positing the simultaneous divine production and human revelation of language, that Hamann can treat language as if this is really the case, while maintaining his commitment to the epistemic limitations he has revealed at the heart of all thinking. Hamann never cedes the problem of criteria; he never accepts that he, or anyone, can produce the rational ground of objective, functional epistemological principles. Instead, he produces

a regulative account of the fact of human freedom, and he ties it to the regulative ideal of language as the site of divine and human engagement.

Hamann proclaims our dependence upon language, culture, and nature, and he orients his explanations with a regulative posit about God's speaking through them. Radical Orthodoxy wants to borrow from Hamann to develop what Milbank calls a "grammar of superabundance," which understands that while the ambiguities of language stem from its references to an indeterminate absence, we need not suppress or erase that absence in order to communicate meaningfully. But since Milbank rejects Hamann's use of the regulative as nihilistic, Milbank allows his own theological conservatism to stand in the way of realizing what he says he urgently desires. The ability to posit a regulative idea, such as the embeddedness of divinity in language, is for Hamann both an act of human autonomy and a recognition of human limitation. I have been arguing that the notion of desire Hamann connects with faith or belief is fundamentally related to the desire he sees at play in regulative positing, which opens the way for our ongoing rational pursuits and the full articulation of our freedom. Hamann learns, following Hume, that one can never be certain about absent things or the connections between things; he also holds, following his own critique of Kant, that all conceptual objects depend upon linguistic mediation.

For Milbank and Radical Orthodoxy, conversely, the preeminent menace in our modern or postmodern world is nihilism, and nihilism is a direct result of allowing an independent, secular reason to "reserve a territory independent of God" (3). Milbank and his colleagues announce Radical Orthodoxy with this declaration: "underpinning [these] essays is the idea that every discipline must be framed by a theological perspective; otherwise these disciplines will define a zone apart from God, grounded literally in nothing" (3). The problem with grounding disciplines on nothing is that it leaves them unstable, and in their instability, incapable of studying the world in a way that can help us to find meaning in it. With such instability comes cynicism, nihilism, and outright anarchy, if not

in the political world, then in the world of values, Milbank and company tell us. They continue: “without an appeal to eternal stability, one has to define a purely immanent security [...] a static schema [...] but] since this schema is only transcendental, and grounded in nothing, one has to assume [...] that this essential structure is only an illusion thrown up by the void” (3).

In sum then, while Radical Orthodoxy appreciates Hamann for clearing space for theology and revelation against the encroachment of philosophy, its theorists find that Hamann’s metacritical position ultimately helps establish the autonomy of reason. As terribly, Hamann’s willingness to identify religious *Glaube* with the desire that animates regulative positing in fact facilitates the enshrinement of the free posit itself, geared toward the abysmal void.

However, in spite of Radical Orthodoxy’s angst, in Hamann there is no void, and thus unlike in the work of his friend Jacobi, no need for defensive posturing against nihilism; there is the idea of divine condescension, the ability to conjecture regulative images, and in the combination of the two, the conditions for human autonomy and agency. Milbank and company repeat the clichéd straw man about the untenability of the Kantian *Ding an sich*, blame Hamann for failing to recognize its direness, and then merely rephrase the old dilemma about the impossibility of its participation in the phenomenal realm. Hamann read Kant more carefully and was more honest about his significance: for even while Hamann insists that our ability to utilize the regulative as an act of human freedom or an orienting mark in the inventory of cognition remains dependent on language, he does not attempt to skirt the critical discovery of human finitude, contingency, and epistemic limitation.¹⁹ Though Hamann ruthlessly challenges Kant’s apodictic certainty, and though he is resolute about the sensuous and linguistic entailments of Kant’s cognitive schematism, he accepts and even deepens the basic thrust of the critical project, particularly where it handles the analogical schematism with which we make senses of the world.

Radical Orthodoxy, on the other hand, makes clear that the very possibility of cognitive schematism, along with the critical need to regulatively posit what cannot be rationally attained or unquestioningly believed, “reserves a territory independent of God [which] can only lead to nihilism.” The theoreticians of Radical Orthodoxy exhort us to refuse to reserve any territory from God and from theology; they assure us that this is the only way to “allow finite things their integrity”; and they tell us that only from a theological perspective are appearances really saved, namely by “exceeding them.” But on what epistemic grounds are appearances being saved and transcended? What form of self-certainty is required to claim that the integrity of finite things entails the contradictory guarantee of their place in eternity? Hamann teaches us to suspect these sorts of promises at the root: in our own yearning to have the weight of our freedom lifted and the demands of our epistemic limitation soothed—as well as in the presumption of those who vie to be our teachers and who aspire to reconfigure our world on their own insights into divine will.

The theologians of Radical Orthodoxy tell us plainly that every discipline must be reframed from a theological perspective; they encourage us to defend the “positive autonomy of theology [which] renders philosophical concerns a matter of indifference.” Yet this is precisely the conceit that Hamann rejected in theology and that his epistemological position disallows. Furthermore, when the theologians of Radical Orthodoxy make their positive theological proposals, their focus is on the “mediating participatory sphere” which they claim is the only way to God, but which requires their careful interpretation, in a series of projects aimed at aesthetic works, politics, cities, and social relationships, to name a few. To wit, the mediating participatory sphere they uncover will require its mediators, its spokespeople and experts, or precisely that class of knowers most often pinned by Hamann’s wit. Moreover, the framers of Radical Orthodoxy define their movement as “a project *made possible* by the self-conscious superficiality of today’s secularism”; they declare that the “nihilistic drift of postmodernism is a supreme opportunity” to resituate, theologically, the postmodern world

in toto. Yet in defining itself as a reaction against contemporary cultural phenomena and a redemption from their dangers, and in priding itself on an indifference to epistemic criteria even while it authorizes itself to criticize other systems and expressions of meaning, Radical Orthodoxy reveals that far from being radical, it is by definition reactionary and ultraconservative.

But why quibble over words? It doesn't really matter if Milbank and company covet the more glamorous title; since there are so many "radicals," that qualifier tends to fade in the wash. What does matter is that Hamann gives good reason to reject every major type of theology, if we allow that the types can be categorized by either 1) their open commitment to a transcendent deity and to knowledge claims about it. Traditional theology therefore studies God's existence and attributes from an internal perspective; 2) open commitment to the concept of a transcendent deity who, as the condition of all existence, nevertheless exists outside of space, time, as well as outside any further constraints that would allow it to be apprehended by a finite being. Negative theology therefore tries to ensure that our discourses about God are not merely about human images; or 3) some amalgamation of these positions, such as Radical Orthodoxy, which is the theological form most reliant on Hamann to date.

But if Hamann candidly rejects the possibility of theology, and if his work inherently opposes theological appropriation, why does he so appeal to the theologically intentioned? Surely it cannot be that Hamann's allure is solely explained by his literary or rhetorical reliance on scripture, as pervasive as that reliance is. Nor can it be the case that a mystical attraction to a world of divine illumination accounts for the interest in Hamann, since Hamann is so clear, if about nothing else, then about the fact that revelation happens exclusively in and through tradition and language. Perhaps it is rather the enormous strain of Hamann's outwardly opposed tendencies, his brash humility in demanding epistemic constraint and indulging in enthusiastic reverence. Perhaps the theologically minded hear in Hamann the siren song which tells a hard truth about the object of their passion, and which tells

apocalyptically, in a bitter scroll about the end of an era. Perhaps, to use a different imagery, it is intellectual conscience which brings God-knowers to Hamann, where enveloped in the language of their sacred texts, they will hear that there is no way out of language back to their presumed object of knowledge. Or perhaps those who want to utilize elements of Hamann's *disjecta membra* without their Hamannian context hope to hear this siren song while safely mast-tied to a notion of Hamann's later relevance for their projects. I have argued that if we take Hamann seriously as a model, theology in its traditional, negative, and radically orthodox manifestations becomes impossible, which is to say impossible to practice with consistency, good conscience, and epistemic authority. Judgments like these may tempt theologians to exile philosophers, along with Hamann, from their domain, but we ought rather to hold ourselves to his standard. This does not mean that we cannot send our flying letters, but where they are headed, we can only posit, in language, as language, through the creature to the creature.

Notes

1. I am grateful to Gwen Griffith Dickson for pointing out (in a personal conversation) that my association of *tzimtzum* and *Herunterlassung* may homogenize the former. While the pursuit of Griffith Dickson's intervention might be necessary for a more sustained comparison of the two concepts, here I mean only to indicate an important resemblance shared by both views of divine "constriction."
2. For Hamann's handling of divine condescension, see for example his *Biblical Meditations*: "'Come,' says God, 'we will come down from heaven. Let us go down.' This is the means by which we have come closer to heaven: the condescension of God to earth." See also the description of Apollo's condescension throughout Hamann's *Socratic Memorabilia* (e.g., at 68.32-35; 71.4-7; 71.15-18), along

with Hamann's connection of the ignorance that therefore characterizes the human mode of being with the wisdom of the Socratic claim of ignorance, in *Hamann's Socratic Memorabilia: A Translation and Commentary*. Edited and translated by James C. O'Flaherty. (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1967). See too Hamann's reference to Job 36:26: "Behold, God is great, and we know him not," in *Disrobing and Transfiguration: A Flying Letter to Nobody, the Well Known*, in *Hamann: Writings on Philosophy and Language*. Edited and translated by Kenneth Haynes. (Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p.230.

3. The quote is from Hamann's letter to Bucholz of June 26, 1785, in *Briefwechsel*. Edited by Arthur Henkel and Walter Ziesemer. (Frankfurt am Main: Insel Verlag, 1955-79). My translation.

4. I am indebted to Brian Schroeder for drawing this to my attention. The quote comes from Schroeder's Preface ("Forward to a Future Thinking") to *Thinking Through the Death of God: A Critical Companion to Thomas J.J. Altizer*. Edited by Lissa McCullough and Brian Schroeder. (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004), viii.

5. See Hamann's *Metacritique of the Purism of Reason* (SW III, 283-289). English translations are available in Gwen Griffith Dickson's *Johann Georg Hamann's Relational Metacriticism*. (Berlin, New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1995), and in Kenneth Haynes' *Hamann: Writings on Philosophy and Language*. (Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007). See also *Metacritique: The Linguistic Assault on German Idealism*. Edited and translated by Jere Paul Surber. (Amherst: Humanity Books, 2001). Hamann's metacritical position is succinctly described in James R. Walker's review of Daniel Dahlstrom's *Philosophical Legacies: Essays on the Thought of Kant, Hegel, and Their Contemporaries*, for *Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews* (<http://ndpr.nd.edu/review.cfm?id=15006>, January 2009). Walker also handles the metacritical position in his 2004 dissertation, *Hegel's Response to Meta-critical Skepticism in the "Phenomenology of Spirit"* (n.p.: ProQuest).

6. *Sämtliche Werke*. Historisch-Kritische Ausgabe. Edited by Josef Nadler. (Vienna: Herder Verlag, 1949-1957). (Hereafter SW in text).
7. The quotes are from Hamann's letter to Kant of July 27, 1759, in *Immanuel Kant: Philosophical Correspondence 1759-99*. Edited and translated by Arnulf Zweig. (University of Chicago Press, 1967). Hamann concludes: "Reason is given to you not that you may become wise, but that you may recognize your foolishness and ignorance."
8. Elsewhere, I have explained the consequence of Hamann's charge against critical idealism, and have considered its impact on Hamann's linguistic position as well as its relevance for Kant's actual project. See Terezakis "Language and Immanence in Hamann" *Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal* Vol.27:2, November 2006 and *The Immanent Word: The Turn to Language in German Philosophy 1759-1801*. (New York: Routledge, 2007).
9. Hamann to Jacobi (1787). In *Briefwechsel*. Edited by Arthur Henkel and Walter Zieseemer. (Frankfurt am Main: Insel Verlag, 1955-79), p. 175. My translation.
10. Hamann argues vehemently for the exclusively human derivation of language, and thus for language's dependence on tradition and usage, in his *Herderschriften* (see Hayes and Dickson) as well as in his personal letters to Herder. For example, see the letter Hamann writes Herder after reading a pre-press copy of Herder's *Treatise on the Origin of Language*: "God throws language *through* people—who doubts it? Who has? ... That he does not throw mystically, but through nature, animals, a pantheon of speaking lutes; that he speaks through the urgency of human needs or wishes—who has taken this up more than I?" Hamann to Herder, August 1, 1772, in *Briefwechsel*, *ibid*, pp.10-11. My translation.
11. See for example Rudolph Unger's "Hamann und die Aufklärung" in *Studien zur Vorgeschichte des romantischen Geistes in 18. Jahrhundert*. (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1963), as well as Peter Meinhold's

“Hamanns Theologie der Sprache” in *Johann Georg Hamann. Acta des Internationalen Hamann-Colloquiums*. Edited by Bernhard Gajek. (Frankfurt Am Main: Klostermann, 1979/1987).

12. The phrase “shoots beyond immanence,” and the claim that it is the “word” which does so is Meinhold’s, *ibid* .

13. *Aesthetica in nuce*, Haynes edition, p.65.

14. Gwen Griffith Dickson, p.93.

15. As Marion has it: the inadequacies of human thought and language falter before “what passes beyond every name.” See, e.g., *In Excess: Studies of Saturated Phenomena*. Translated by Robyn Horner and Vincent Berraud. (New York: Fordham University Press, 2002).

16. My discussion of negative theology is indebted to Martin Hägglund’s *Radical Atheism: Derrida and the Time of Life*. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008). Though Hägglund treats the attempted appropriation of Derrida’s thought by negative theologians, his management of negative theology as such is pertinent to my discussion of Hamann. I take from Hägglund the insight that all forms of negative theology inevitably repeat the most conventional epistemological move of pre-critical metaphysics.

17. Radical Orthodoxy’s misappropriation of tradition (theological and philosophical) and lack of a clear theological doctrine is detailed in *Deconstructing Radical Orthodoxy: Postmodern Theology, Rhetoric and Truth*. Edited by Wayne J. Hankey and Douglas Hedley. (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005). It is also handled in “Should Divinity Overcome Metaphysics? Reflections on John Milbank’s Theology Beyond Secular Reason and Confessions of a Cambridge Platonist,” by Douglas Hedley, *The Journal of Religion* Vol.80. No.2 (April 2000), pp.271-298; in “Radical Orthodoxy and the New Culture of Obscurantism,” by Paul D. Janz, *Modern Theology* 20 (2004) pp.362-405; in “Radical Orthodoxy’s Poiesis: Ideological Historiography and Anti-Modern Polemic” by Wayne J. Hankey, *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 80:1 (2006) pp.1-21; and in the Editor’s Introduction for *After the Postsecular and*

the Postmodern: New Essays in Continental Philosophy of Religion (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2010). Edited by Anthony Paul Smith and Daniel Whistler. In “J.G. Hamann and the Self-Refutation of Radical Orthodoxy,” a companion to the present essay, I make the case that Milbank’s position collapses in a way which belies its claim to being “theology” altogether, and I examine in more detail the nature of Milbank’s avowed reliance on Hamann. See *The Poverty of Radical Orthodoxy*. Edited by Lisa Isherwood and Marko Zlomislac. (Oregon: Wipf and Stick/Pickwick Publishers, forthcoming 2011).

18. *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology*. Edited by John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock, and Graham Ward. (London, New York: Routledge, 1999, 2001). Hereafter, all quotes of Milbank et al. are from the Introduction to this work (“Suspending the Material: The Turn of Radical Orthodoxy”) unless otherwise noted. Milbank mentions Hamann in a manner that attests to the reading he offers in the *Radical Orthodoxy* volume in *Being Reconciled: Ontology and Pardon*. (London and New York: Routledge, 2003); in *The Word Made Strange: Theology, Language, Culture*. (Cambridge: Blackwell Publishers, 1997); and in *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*. (Oxford and Cambridge: Blackwell Publishers, 1990).

19. In Hamann’s words, “everything that is in our understanding has previously been in our senses” and “the stamina and menstrea of our reason are [...] revelations and traditions” (SW III, 39). See *Philological Ideas and Doubts* in Griffith Dickson, p.479 and Haynes, p.116.