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JOHANN GEORG HAMANN
Writings on Philosophy and Language

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JOHANN GEORG HAMANN

*Writings on Philosophy
and Language*

TRANSLATED AND EDITED BY

KENNETH HAYNES

Brown University



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Introduction

Johann Georg Hamann (1730–88) is prominent in the history of German literature, being known above all for an idiosyncratic and sometimes bizarre style that was intransigently at odds with the aesthetics of his time and which fascinated and sometimes influenced writers of the nineteenth century. He is one of the most innovative figures within Lutheran theology and arguably “the most profound Christian thinker of the eighteenth century”;¹ his insistence on the historical truth of the Bible led him to a radical rethinking of the nature of both history and truth. Finally, he is a philosopher who wrote penetrating criticisms of Herder, Jacobi, Kant, and Mendelssohn; who gave philosophical attention to language in a way that, at times, seems strikingly modern; but whose own philosophical positions and arguments remain elusive.

Hamann was a minor civil servant for most of his adult life, working in Königsberg as part of the widely hated tax administration of Frederick the Great. He never attained any sort of significant professional success; friends had to intervene to prevent the sale of his library and to fund the education of his children. On the other hand, he had the freedom of his failure inasmuch as he was not obliged to meet the expectations of any particular audience. He exercised his freedom in several respects: to develop a rebarbative and enigmatic style, to reject basic assumptions of his contemporaries, and to range freely across disciplines.

Hamann, however, was not merely moving across disciplines but finding his deepest themes reiterated in a variety of material: ancient and

¹ Hendrik Kraemer, as quoted by James C. O’Flaherty, “Some Major Emphases of Hamann’s Theology,” *Harvard Theological Review* 51:1 (January 1958), 39.

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contemporary; sacred and secular; historical, political, economic, theological, literary, and journalistic; and in a wide range of languages. Some of his most profound writing was composed at the intersection of philology, theology, and philosophy. Often he has been considered from only one of those perspectives, which is not only inadequate but also ironic insofar as his own emphasis was on unity. The powerful criticism which Hamann made in opposition to his age was at once stylistic, theological, and philosophical.

Hamann and literary style

Hamann formed his style after experiencing a religious crisis. In 1757, while working for a firm run by the family of a friend, he went on a business trip to England, where he was not successful, either professionally or personally. After some months he began to despair of the life he was leading; this led to a religious crisis in which he recovered and radicalized the Christian faith of his childhood. When he returned to Königsberg, his friends Kant and Johann Christoph Berens sought to redirect him toward his previous, more secular and Enlightened, orientation, suggesting that he translate articles from the *Encyclopédie*. After an initial effort, Hamann gave up and began his own writing career in earnest. The style he cultivated was the opposite of that of the *Encyclopédie*, obscure rather than perspicuous, personal and even private rather than disembodied and anonymous, erudite and sometimes obscene rather than polite and complaisant. The style was a reproach to the language used by Enlightenment writers; it was a critique of their language by means of his language.

For example, the first dedication of *Socratic Memorabilia* (1759) is addressed to the “public,” but it is far from ingratiating itself with a potential audience; rather, it presents the public as a phantom and an idol, a fraud perpetuated by the cultured elite and no different from the fraud attempted by the prophets of Baal or the priests of Bel. Throughout his career, Hamann had an extraordinary sensitivity to the keywords of his age – like “public” – which he found evasive, obsequious, and self-contradictory. The word “public” seems to imply the existence of such an entity, but who is the public, and how do the many voices of people become the single voice of the public? After parodying a flattering appeal

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to this putative public,² which concludes with a scatological classical allusion, Hamann adds a second dedication to two friends. From this book onwards, his style makes use of parody, local referents, biblical quotations, obscenity, and wide-ranging allusions. The style is not polite; Hamann writes that it is not made for taste.

Hamann's parody is motivated by a desire to refuse claims implicit in other ways of writing. He is never happier than when using it to show, or imply, that a reasonable position set out in a reasonable style is actually a fanatical and mystical one – where all three adjectives, “reasonable,” “fanatical,” and “mystical,” were strongly charged keywords of the time. In the dedication to *Socratic Memorabilia*, faith in a public is equated to faith in Baal. When Hamann began, in the last part of his life, to write about philosophical texts directly, he applied an analogous skepticism to philosophical terms. The term “metaphysics,” for example, is a linguistic accident that has infected the whole study.³ A preposition which should indicate, empirically and spatially, the standard position within his corpus of one book of Aristotle's relative to his *Physics* has come to mean, abstractly and transcendently, that something goes “beyond” physics and is sometimes alleged to secure the valid meaning of the merely physical. For Hamann this “beyond,” like the “public,” has become an object of superstitious veneration disguised as reasonableness.

Kant, for example, in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, refers to a “transcendental object,” which he glosses as “a something = x, of which we know, and with the present constitution of our understanding can know, nothing whatsoever.” In his *Metacritique on the Purism of Reason* (1784), Hamann responds to Kant's claim by presenting this equation as every bit as mystical and superstitious as the scholastic philosophy condemned by the *philosophe* Helvétius (see p. 210 below):

² More sophisticated discussions of public discourse had to wait twenty years; see the essays by Klein, Bahrdt, Moser, and Fichte on the public use of reason collected in James Schmidt, ed., *What is Enlightenment?: Eighteenth-Century Answers and Twentieth-Century Questions* (Berkeley, CA, 1996), as well as the more famous essays by Kant (on which see especially Onora O'Neill, “The Public Use of Reason,” *Constructions of Reason* (Cambridge, 1999), 28–50). Parodies of dedications to the public continued into the nineteenth century; cf. the dedication to E. T. A. Hoffmann's *Life and Opinions of the Tomcat Murr* (1819).

³ “The hereditary defect and leprosy of ambiguity adheres to the very name ‘metaphysics’ . . . the birthmark of its name spreads from its brow to the bowels of the whole science” (p. 209).

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Through this learned troublemaking it works the honest decency of language into such a meaningless, rutting, unstable, indefinite something = x that nothing is left but a windy sough, a magic shadow play, at most, as the wise Helvétius says, the talisman and rosary of a transcendental superstitious belief in *entia rationis*, their empty sacks and slogans.

Removed from their context and the system in which they make sense, Kant's words invite the scorn which Enlightenment figures had directed against their opponents. Hamann seeks to undercut the ground by which reason and faith are contrasted, so that neither receives a special status. Kant's arguments are not answered by Hamann (and may not have been understood by him). Parody does not make arguments or respect them; it proceeds by exaggeration, ironic juxtaposition, and misapplication. This serves Hamann's purpose since he is not interested in rebutting a philosophical stance with philosophical arguments, but rather in using mockery to deny a philosophical problem its status as a problem, to be freed from its grip.

From the early *Socratic Memorabilia* to the late *Metacritique*, a consistent target of Hamann's parodies is the contrast between reason on the one hand and mysticism, superstition, faith, and prejudice on the other. Another is the contrast between the abstract purity of philosophy and the embodied history of lived experience. In the *Metacritique*, Hamann objects to the threefold purism, as he sees it, of Kant's vain effort to make reason free from history, experience, and language. In the following example, he mocks first the mysticism and then the sexual sterility of the analysis of pure reason (see pp. 214–15 below):

I would open the eyes of the reader that he might perhaps see – hosts of intuitions ascend to the firmament of pure understanding and hosts of concepts descend to the depths of the most perceptible sensibility, on a ladder which no sleeper dreams – and the dance of the Mahanaim or two hosts of reason – the secret and vexing chronicle of their courtship and ravishing – and the whole theogony of all the giant and heroic forms of the Shulamite and muse, in the mythology of light and darkness – to the play in forms of an old Baubo with herself – *inaudita specie solaminis*, as Saint Arnobius says – and of a new immaculate virgin, who may not however be a Mother of God for which Saint Anselm took her – .

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The old woman Baubo, according to Arnobius, was able to cheer Demeter after a long period of mourning by exposing herself and causing the goddess to laugh, an “unusual form of consolation,” which Hamann compares to Kant’s philosophy. He then contrasts it with the Virgin Mary, whom Protestants do not believe was immaculately conceived; why should reason be more greatly privileged? Hamann delights in associating Kant with Jewish mysticism and Catholic sexuality. To complain that the mockery is unfair to Kant is to miss Hamann’s point: it is not that particular philosophical arguments need to be refuted but that the motivation behind them (a desire for mathematical certainty, Hamann alleges in Kant’s case) stands in need of scrutiny and exposure.

In the *Metacritique* as in all his parodies, Hamann cultivates a deliberate impurity. If philosophy desires to become independent of history and tradition, he writes with continual references to historical tradition; if it is concerned with truths that are independent of experience, he inserts the body and all its functions; if philosophy is to be reasonable, abstract, and transparent, his style will be obscure, weighted with concrete details, strange; in his prose the fact of language, especially in its non-representational aspects, is centrally obtruded.

Parody is parasitic, dependent on other people’s words to make its points, and so Hamann’s essays quote or allude to other texts with great frequency. In addition to these textual references, however, his essays also introduce many personal and local ones. The *Socratic Memorabilia*, for example, is prefaced by two dedications: the first parodies contemporary appeals to the “public” while the second is addressed to two specific friends, Kant and Berens. The motive for introducing contingent facts of his personal biography has been called “metaschematism” (a word Hamann derived from 1 Corinthians 4:6). James C. O’Flaherty discusses it in this way:⁴

For Hamann to metaschematize meant to substitute a set of objective relationships for an analogous set of personal or existential relationships or the reverse, in order to determine, through the insight born of faith, their common meaning . . . Thus Hamann’s literary method requires *direct* personal involvement and *indirect* communication . . . In the *Memorabilia* Hamann is in effect saying: my relationship to Berens and Kant as typical representatives of the

⁴ James C. O’Flaherty, *Hamann’s Socratic Memorabilia* (Baltimore, MD, 1967).

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present rationalistic age is essentially the same as that of Socrates to the Sophists of fifth-century Athens. Therefore, I will translate our personal relations into the objective historical relations of Socrates in order to bring my adversaries to a full awareness of their true situation.

Metaschematism is an extension of typology, the practice of reading the Bible in such a way that people and events of the New Testament are foreshadowed or figured by those of the Old. For Hamann, typology did not come to an end with the early Christian Church and is not limited to biblical sources; the present continues to be made legible by reference to the past, and only in this way. Past, present, and future are in this sense bound together and mutually illuminated by prophecy (a theme of *Aesthetica in Nuce* and the second *Cloverleaf*, more fully developed in the conclusion of the first version of *Disrobing and Transfiguration*).

Hamann's writings have a peculiar texture, being made up of sustained and parodic allusions to the particular texts he is investigating, biblical quotations, references to ancient history and literature, as well as items of recent history and personal biography. The style belongs in part to the "tradition of learned wit,"⁵ exuberant demonstrations of learning that had characterized prose of the early modern period. By Hamann's time, however, literary aesthetics abandoned the copia of such writing in favor of a transparent and perspicuous style. Literature that valued clarity and impersonal demonstration was not interested in the views of past authorities, and it disdained personal idiosyncrasy. Hamann's response to an aesthetic which made irrelevant the learning of the past, the authority of Scripture, and present biography was to write in a style in which these had continual – although indirect – relevance.

He has often been found obscure. He himself, metaschematically identifying his style with Socrates', described it as a group of islands lacking "the bridges and ferries of method necessary for their close association" (p. 8). The obscurity of the writing is not generally resolved only by providing further information, a necessary but not a sufficient step; to read Hamann means to consider the many possible ways by which this information is related to his text, whether by parody, irony, analogy, typology, or other means.

⁵ Cf. D. W. Jefferson, "The Tradition of Learned Wit," *Essays in Criticism* 1:3 (1951), 225–48.

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Hamann and theology

Hamann's style has theological and philosophical implications, just as his theology has stylistic and philosophical ones, and his philosophy stylistic and theological ones. Theology is grammar, according to Hamann, who took the equation from Luther.⁶ Two Lutheran emphases in particular are strongly marked in his writing. The first is a theme found in all his writings, kenosis, the self-renunciation, self-emptying of God. This is the paradox in Christianity whereby power manifests itself in powerlessness, as omnipotence in the helplessness of an infant or divinity tortured and killed as a criminal. The biblical support comes mainly from the Sermon on the Mount and other parables ("so the last shall be first, and the first last") and the kenotic hymn, so-called, of Philippians 2, one of Hamann's base-texts. It is one of the main currents of interpretation of Christ's crucifixion and marks especially the Lutheran (and Augustinian) tradition.

Hamann's own style is kenotic insofar as it cultivates despised forms, makes rude references, and places unreasonable demands on readers; at a period when good taste was very highly praised, to write in bad taste could be kenotic. Hamann takes as the preeminent example of a kenotic style that of the New Testament. In the first of the *Cloverleaf of Hellenistic Letters*, he defends the Greek of the New Testament for the same reasons it was a scandal to literary men of his time: its impurity, as in the traces of Aramaic audible in its idiom; its lack of ornament and rhetoric; its lowliness and even degenerate condition relative to Attic standards. In the *New Apology of the Letter h*, Hamann argues even about orthography in these terms, which give him grounds to defend a useless, redundant, and traditional element of spelling.

Moreover, for Hamann kenosis is a principle of critique quite generally. His was a unique voice insisting that Frederick the Great was a tyrant and that the philosophical activity of the Berlin Enlightenment was a way of justifying Frederick's despotism. The contrast between "Fritz in the purple cradle" (Frederick the Great) and "Fritz in *praesepio*" (Fritz, an average German, in a cradle) organizes his essays (see p. 102). *To the Solomon of*

⁶ See *Miscellaneous Notes on Word Order in the French Language*, p. 22, below; the quotation from Luther is mediated through an eighteenth-century Lutheran theologian. In a letter to Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi (*Briefe*, vol. VII, p. 169), Hamann asks, "Do you now understand my language-principle of reason and that with Luther I turn all philosophy into a grammar?" (Fritz Mauthner gives this passage as an epigraph to the first section of his *Beiträge zu einer Kritik der Sprache*, 1906).

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Prussia is an uncompromising indictment, and an occasionally scurrilous one, of Frederick the Great and the culture which supported and was supported by him. The title “Golgotha and Sheblimini!” (Hamann’s rebuttal to Moses Mendelssohn’s *Jerusalem*) sets up the same contrast: “Golgotha” is Calvary, where Christ was crucified, and “Sheblimini!” Hebrew for “Sit thou at my right hand” (see Psalms 110:1 and Hebrews 1:13), is taken as the command by which Christ was exalted. Hamann believes that Mendelssohn’s arguments for religious toleration and natural law were complicit with the machinery of Frederick’s absolutist state – and not just Mendelssohn’s arguments, but those of the Berlin Enlighteners generally, all of whom Hamann suspected of seeking to give a blank check to secular power.

Throughout his career language was Hamann’s great theme. On August 6, 1784, he wrote to Johann Gottfried Herder, “If I were only as eloquent as Demosthenes, I would need to do no more than repeat one phrase three times: reason is language, Λόγος; on this marrowbone I gnaw and will gnaw myself to death over it” (*Briefe*, vol. v, p. 177). Hamann’s understanding of language was always theological. In his earlier writings, he was concerned to emphasize the many and diverse phenomena involving language, denying primacy to its function of communicating propositions. He emphasized language, including the language of nature,⁷ as the means of God’s revelation to humankind. In his later writing, he began to understand language in sacramental terms that were closely informed by the Lutheran doctrine sometimes known as “consubstantiation” (though the term is contested). Unlike members of the Catholic and Calvinist confessions, Luther had insisted that both the body and blood of Christ *and* the bread and wine of the elements were present in the Eucharist, not only one or the other.⁸ For Hamann, this became a means of distinguishing

⁷ “Further underlying the subordination of philosophy to poetry is Hamann’s basic conviction . . . that from the beginnings of humanity ‘every phenomenon of nature was a word,’ a conviction canceling any philosophical pretensions to being able to distinguish between sign (spirit) and signified (nature),” Daniel O. Dahlstrom, “The Aesthetic Holism of Hamann, Herder, and Schiller,” in Karl Ameriks, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to German Idealism* (Cambridge, 2000), 81.

⁸ Although there were many gradations among the three positions, Catholics maintained the doctrine of transubstantiation (the substance of the Eucharist was wholly converted to the blood and body of Christ, though the appearance of bread and wine remained), Lutherans subscribed to what is commonly called “consubstantiation,” and Calvinists, at least of the Zwinglian variety, took the Eucharist to be symbolic and memorial. Despite attempts at rapprochement between Lutherans and Calvinists, Luther’s insistence on this position created a rupture between the confessions that was never bridged.

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kinds of writing. Letter and spirit must both be present, body and symbol must co-inhere, if an utterance is to be authoritative (that is, a *Machtwort*, which transforms elements into a sacrament).

Hamann is often seen as a proponent of holism,⁹ and this is an adequate description so long as it is seen in the appropriate context. At least since Augustine, Christianity has insisted on the value of the letter (in contrast to the allegorizing of the Greeks) and on the value of the spirit (in contrast to the legalism of the Jews). A peculiar richness resulted from the presence of two distinct systems of truth obligation, and Hamann sought to preserve this, insisting on the unity of letter and spirit against what he took to be the impoverishing discourse of Enlightenment philosophy. Furthermore, holism is present above all in the incarnation of Christ, who unites human and divine attributes. Hamann, like Luther, invokes the doctrine of the *communicatio idiomatum*, whereby the attributes of each of the two natures are shared by the other in Christ. Hamann extends the principle, seeing in language the interrelation of human and divine generally.¹⁰

Hamann's holism, then, has a primary theological orientation which lies behind his rejection of the opposition between, and even the dualism of, faith and reason, idealism and realism, objectivity and subjectivity, body and spirit. By the 1780s, Hamann formulates this rejection of opposites in another way, in "the one important exception to Hamann's general refusal to appeal to a metaphysical principle,"¹¹ the *coincidentia oppositorum*, the union of opposites (as they are experienced by us) in God. Hamann believes that human knowledge is piecemeal, contradictory, and not resolvable by philosophical analysis.

Holism motivates his attacks on Mendelssohn's and Kant's philosophies. To Mendelssohn's argument that actions and convictions must be treated independently, Hamann replies that "actions without convictions and convictions without actions are a cleaving of complete and living duties into two dead halves" (p. 179), resulting in the dead body of the state and a scarecrow-ghost of a church. Of Kant's distinction of the

⁹ In *Poetry and Truth* (1811–22), Goethe influentially characterized Hamann's writings: "The principle underlying all of Hamann's utterances is this: 'Everything a human being sets out to accomplish, whether produced by word or deed or otherwise, must arise from the sum of his combined powers; anything isolated is an abomination.'" In Goethe's account, however, Hamann is interested only in the unity of self, and the theological, political, and social dimensions of unity are overlooked.

¹⁰ Fully discussed in Friedemann Fritsch, *Communicatio Idiomatum: Zur Bedeutung einer christologischen Bestimmung für das Denken Johann Georg Hamanns* (Berlin, 1999).

¹¹ James C. O'Flaherty, *Johann Georg Hamann* (Boston, MA, 1979), 91.

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sensibility and the understanding, Hamann asks, “To what end is such a violent, unjustified, willful divorce of that which nature has joined together! Will not both branches wither and be dried up through a dichotomy and rupture of their common root?” (p. 212).

Hamann and philosophy

Hamann’s own philosophy has sometimes been called fideist or irrationalist. In particular, older scholarship often represented him as a member of a German Counter-Enlightenment, along with Herder, Jacobi, and sometimes Justus Möser, figures supposed to be united in rejecting the claims of reason and the methods of science.¹² However, as historians have become skeptical about the utility of the phrase “The Enlightenment,” the claims of “The Counter-Enlightenment” to a coherent program have come to seem even more exiguous.¹³ Hamann is perhaps the figure most uncompromisingly at odds with the Enlightenment, but even he has been described as radicalizing, rather than rejecting, the Enlightenment.¹⁴ Moreover, Hamann could be as absolute in his criticism of Herder or Jacobi as he was in dissenting from Kant or Mendelssohn, as demonstrated by his three essays translated below on Herder’s treatise on the origin of language (*The Last Will and Testament of the Knight of the Rose-Cross*, *Philological Ideas and Doubts*, and *To the Solomon of Prussia*).

The fundamental divide between Hamann and Jacobi makes clear how inadequate it is to regard Hamann as a philosopher of irrationalism or an advocate of faith opposed to reason. In *David Hume on Faith, or Idealism or Realism: A Dialogue* (1787), Jacobi defended himself against the charge of irrationalism by invoking Hume to insist on the necessary primacy of faith (or belief, as the same word in German, *Glaube*, can mean either). In a letter to Jacobi written from April 27 to May 3,

¹² Lewis White Beck, *Early German Philosophy* (Cambridge, MA, 1969), 361–92; Isaiah Berlin, “The Counter-Enlightenment,” in Philip P. Wiener, ed., *Dictionary of the History of Ideas* (New York, 1973), vol. II, pp. 100–12.

¹³ “Central elements usually identified with the counter-Enlightenment were in fact fundamental to the Enlightenment itself,” writes Jonathan B. Knudsen, *Justus Möser and the German Enlightenment* (Cambridge, 1996), 148. See also J. G. A. Pocock, “Enlightenment and Counter-Enlightenment, Revolution and Counter-Revolution: A Eurosceptical Enquiry,” *History of Political Thought* 20:1 (Spring 1999), 125–39 and the essays in Joseph Mali and Robert Wokler, eds., *Isaiah Berlin’s Counter-Enlightenment* (Philadelphia, PA, 2003). I have drawn on an unpublished paper of James Schmidt, “The Idea of Counter-Enlightenment: A Critique of Isaiah Berlin.”

¹⁴ See Oswald Bayer, *Zeitgenosse im Widerspruch: Johann Georg Hamann als radikaler Aufklärer* (Munich, 1988).

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1787,¹⁵ Hamann is relentless in attacking what he takes to be Jacobi's errors – reducing being to a property or an object rather than understanding it as the general relation in which we are enmeshed prior to cognitive acts; taking faith as a self-evident part of human experience but then attempting to defend it by arguments from Spinoza and Hume; distinguishing faith from reason and realism from idealism although those distinctions have no basis in experience. The irrationalist or fideist philosopher attempts to close the gulf (or, as Lessing called it, the “ugly broad ditch”) that has opened up between faith and reason, while the rationalist or skeptic philosopher is intent on preserving the distance between them, but both recognize the gulf. For Hamann, on the other hand, “it is pure idealism to separate faith and sensation from thought”;¹⁶ no special faculty for faith should be imputed, which could then be found in opposition to the faculty of reason. Jacobi, from Hamann's perspective, has been betrayed by his initial jargon into investing metaphysical wraiths with real substance. It makes no sense to isolate certain features from reality, combine them into a larger abstraction, and then attempt to infer reality from that abstraction. Jacobi's faith then becomes a desperate way out of “the impossible situation of having to retrieve existence in general out of thought in general”¹⁷ instead of a routine and ordinary part of daily existence.

Occasionally Western thinkers have launched linguistic critiques of philosophy (as done by Valla, Lichtenberg, Maimon, Mauthner, and Wittgenstein),¹⁸ and it is possible to see Hamann as such a figure. Yet he rarely engages with the details and implications of a specific vocabulary and is not interested to offer improvements or think through the consequences of an alternative vocabulary. For the most part Hamann prefers to offer a metacritique instead, that is, he seeks to isolate what he considers to

¹⁵ Hamann, *Briefe*, vol. VII, pp. 161–81. ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 174.

¹⁷ George di Giovanni, introduction to Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi, *The Main Philosophical Writings and the Novel Allwill* (Montreal, 1994), 115. In addition to di Giovanni's valuable discussion of this letter (see especially pp. 103–5 and 115–16 of his introduction), see Renate Knoll, “Hamanns Kritik an Jacobi mit Jacobis Briefen vom 1. 6. und 30. 4. 1787 und Hamanns Briefen vom 17., 22. und 27. 4. 1787,” in Bernhard Gajek, ed., *Johann Georg Hamann, Acta des Internationalen Hamann-Colloquiums in Lüneburg 1976* (Frankfurt, 1979), 214–76.

¹⁸ See Lorenzo Valla's attack on Aristotle in the *Dialecticae disputationes*, discussed for example by Brian P. Copenhaver and Charles B. Schmitt, *Renaissance Philosophy* (Oxford, 1992), 218–19; the aphorisms by Lichtenberg on language treated by J. P. Stern, *Lichtenberg: A Doctrine of Scattered Occasions* (Bloomington, IN, 1959), 156–68; Solomon Maimon, “The Philosophical Language-Confusion,” in Jere Paul Surber, ed. and tr., *Metacritique: The Linguistic Assault on German Idealism* (Amherst, NY, 2001), 71–84; and Fritz Mauthner, *Beiträge zu einer Kritik der Sprache*, discussed for example by Gershon Weiler, *Mauthner's Critique of Language* (Cambridge, 1970).

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be the *proton pseudos*, the initial and fundamental error, of a philosopher. He does so by using exaggeration and grotesque parody to render foolish what he takes to be the initial impulse behind a philosophical problem. In the case of Kant, for example, Hamann believes that what motivates the *Critique of Pure Reason* is no more than prejudice in favor of mathematics and a predilection for purity. Mathematics may yield certainty, but to favor it relegates human reason to a position inferior to the “infallible and unerring instinct of insects” (p. 211). Why should philosophy be concerned with certainty?

This linguistic assault on philosophy is carried out in Hamann’s distinctive style of parody. Hamann believes that philosophy deals with unreal problems created by the misapplication of language (“language is the centerpoint of reason’s misunderstanding with itself,” p. 211); his object, therefore, is not to refute a philosophical position but to expose and make ridiculous its pretensions. In this sense, his “metacritique” may have more in common with Aristophanes’ mockery of Socrates than with philosophical texts. It is possible, of course, to imagine fuller rebuttals of Kant and Mendelssohn and others along the lines which Hamann has sketched, by tracing more precisely and systematically the philosophical implications of what he saw as the impurities of human existence – that we speak a language we did not invent, inherit a history we did not make, and live in a body we did not create – and such rebuttals would soon be offered, and these would, in their turn, be subject to further refutations and restatements. However, Hamann always refrained from doing so.

Should Hamann then be considered a philosopher at all? He scarcely develops his suggestive remarks about reason, language, sociability, and history, and nowhere does he demonstrate a talent for consecutive logical thought. However, rather than take him as a confused precursor of philosophical themes and arguments to come, it does more justice to him to respect his antagonism to philosophical abstraction and argumentation. Jacobi, who introduced the term “nihilism” into the European languages, found skepticism¹⁹ philosophically threatening and attempted to rebut it. Hamann had no such anxiety; skepticism did not present worrisome

¹⁹ On eighteenth-century skepticism and its perception, see the essays in Richard H. Popkin, Ezequiel De Olaso, and Giorgio Tonelli, eds., *Scepticism in the Enlightenment* (Dordrecht, 1997). See also John Christian Laursen, “Swiss Anti-skeptics in Berlin,” in Martin Fontius and Helmut Holzhey, eds., *Schweizer im Berlin des 18. Jahrhunderts* (Berlin, 1996), 261–81, and the essay by Richard H. Popkin on skepticism in Knud Haakonssen, ed., *The Cambridge History of Eighteenth-Century Philosophy* (Cambridge, 2006), 426–50.

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arguments that needed to be rebutted. Hamann, after all, was not tempted to find first principles on which to ground knowledge with certainty, nor did faith and reason collide in his understanding. Since he did not see himself as confronted by philosophical difficulties, he was not tempted to find a way out of them, for example by making covert appeals to unavowed philosophies, as in giving to common sense an epistemological status it cannot easily bear, or in appealing to the authority of everyday experience that is taken to be incipiently or inherently philosophical, or in making a leap of faith. It is often difficult, especially when confronted with matters of great import, to refrain from making or implying philosophical statements, and Hamann is an unexcelled guide to this therapy.

The essays

This selection, emphasizing the essays on language, is made up of twelve of Hamann's writings, ten complete, and two in part, spanning more than twenty-five years of his life. His two most sustained philosophical essays (the *Metacritique on the Purism of Reason*, a response to Kant, and *Golgotha and Sheblimini!*, a response to Mendelssohn) have been included entire.

The twelve pieces fall broadly into three periods. The early period is represented by the two dedications to *Socratic Memorabilia* (1759) and several essays from his 1762 collection *Crusades of a Philologist* (the *Aesthetica in Nuce*, his most famous and influential work, and three essays tackling more narrowly linguistic topics which nonetheless provide him with an opportunity to begin his assault on fundamental assumptions of his contemporaries about the nature of language). A second period begins a decade later with the three essays he wrote in response to Herder's prize-winning essay on the origin of language (1772). In them, as also in an essay opposing a spelling reform, *New Apology of the Letter h* (1773), Hamann deepens his reflections on language, his central theme, and ties them more aggressively to politics; because of his mocking opposition to Frederick the Great, some of the essays could not be published. A final period can be dated from his intensive re-reading of Luther in 1780 and includes three works, his most profound: the *Metacritique* (1784), *Golgotha and Sheblimini!* (1784), and *Disrobing and Transfiguration* (1786). The last work exists in two versions; the conclusion of the first version has been translated here.

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The first extract in this selection comes from Hamann's *Socratic Memorabilia* of 1759, the work which inaugurated his career. In it he recovered Socrates' traditional role as defender of foolishness against the world's wisdom (Erasmus had aligned Socrates with Christ), pitting this image against one which many Enlightenment writers favored, Socrates as a supreme rationalist.²⁰ The two dedications to this work are translated, the first addressing and guying the "public" and the second metaschematically equating Hamann's friends Kant and Berens with the sophists of Socrates' Athens. Among the themes being developed in this work Hamann treats language, implicitly in his claim "to have written about Socrates in a Socratic way" (p. 7) and explicitly in his comparison of coins and words as things that have their value relationally rather than intrinsically (see, for example, *Werke*, vol. II, pp. 71–2). Hamann continues to ponder the relational nature of language in most of his subsequent writings.

In the years immediately after *Socratic Memorabilia*, he writes a number of short pieces on literary and philological topics, collecting them and adding a few more in *Crusades of the Philologist*, where the title refers "to the zigzag sallies of the Teutonic Knights past the megaliths scattered throughout the Baltic area in order that they might avoid participating in an actual crusade."²¹ The collection consisted of thirteen essays, four of which are translated here. The first of these, *Essay on an Academic Question*, was provoked by the topic which the Berlin Academy set for the prize essay of 1759, on the mutual influence of language and opinions (the contest was won by Johann David Michaelis, a philologist of Oriental languages who was to become Hamann's particular *bête noire*). Hamann objects to the evasiveness of the Academy's question, which he believes was set out in fashionable and vague terms in order to promote the influence of the French language and French opinion (the public language of the Academy, like that of Frederick the Great, was French). The next essay, *Miscellaneous Notes on Word Order in the French Language*, begins with an allusion to Friedrich Carl von Moser's *Master and Servant* (1759), a work of political theory much influenced by the French writers of the time. The bulk of the essay is devoted to a discussion of the relation between money and language and between word order and thought; the latter question was

²⁰ For the full range of the Socrates reception in the eighteenth century, see Benno Böhn, *Sokrates im achtzehnten Jahrhundert* (Neumünster, 1966 [1929]).

²¹ O'Flaherty, *Johann Georg Hamann*, 63–4; cf. Josef Nadler, *Johann Georg Hamann 1730–1788: Der Zeuge des Corpus Mysticum* (Salzburg, 1949), 126.

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part of a wide contemporary debate originating in France on the “natural order of thought.” Both essays are significant for their exploration of the political dimension of language, and in particular for introducing and scrutinizing the theoretical grounding of what would become linguistic nationalism.

The three letters that make up *Cloverleaf of Hellenistic Letters* are concerned, respectively, with the language of the New Testament, the value of Greek literature, and the language of the Hebrew Bible. The first letter revisits an old debate on the quality of the Greek of the New Testament, which in comparison with Attic Greek seems barbarous and debased. Hamann defends it for the same reasons others had condemned it; its lowliness is evidence of divine purpose. Moreover, its Greek bears traces of the languages of the Jews and the Romans, and its hybrid and impure state is superior to mere purity. The second letter considers the poets, philosophers, and historians of ancient Greece, finding that it is only through a kind of prophecy that they may be understood and enable the present to be understood, that is, only through understanding the connection of past, present, and future. The third letter responds to Michaelis’ *Opinion on the Means Used to Understand the Defunct Hebrew Language* (1757). Without venturing to contradict the book’s precise claims about Hebrew and Arabic, Hamann attacks its philology more broadly, denying its claim to read truthfully or in good faith. Hamann shares Nietzsche’s intense ambivalence toward philology as at once truth-denying and truth-giving.

The *Aesthetica in Nuce*, the last of the four works translated from the 1762 *Crusades*, continues to attack Michaelis, opposing to his rationalist criticism of the Bible a new aesthetics, elements of which would be found congenial by Romantic writers: poetry has a priority over prose, emotions and images lose their primordial force when they are subject to abstraction, the “oriental” style of the Bible is superior to the etiolated good taste of the French, mimesis has as its proper object the divine creative process and not mere created things, and so on. These propositions, as propositions, had been anticipated by other writers;²² Hamann’s originality lies elsewhere,

²² The poetic superiority of ancient languages over modern, derivative ones was emphasized by Jean-Baptiste Dubos in 1719 and became a commonplace; Homer’s primitive style had been praised by Thomas Blackwell and others on the grounds of its passionate superiority to later rules governing taste; the belief that the earliest stages of a language are the most vivid and come closest to bridging speech and action is found in several authors of the eighteenth century.

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in the weird originality of his style and in the status he gives to poetry and art as the primary mode of human and Christian existence.

In 1771, Johann Georg Herder won the prize offered by the Berlin Academy for the best answer to the question of the origin of language. The topic had been discussed since antiquity, and for much of the eighteenth century it was debated with a particular intensity.²³ Herder's answer was resolutely naturalist, which elicited several ripostes from Hamann, including the three that are translated here: *The Last Will and Testament of the Knight of the Rose-Cross*, *Philological Ideas and Doubts*, and *To the Solomon of Prussia*. Hamann, despite his friendship with Herder, thought that the debate was foolish and its terms (natural vs supernatural) hopelessly compromised. For him, the proponent of the supernatural version of the origin of language (viz., Süßmilch) hides under a blanket and shouts "Here's God!" while the naturalist Herder walks onto the stage and says, "Look, I am a man!" (*Werke*, vol. III, p. 17). *The Knight of the Rose-Cross* opens by rejecting this picture of the world in which natural and supernatural are divided and opposed to each other; it ends by uniting them, in a retelling of the biblical creation story in which Adam's discovery of language was "as natural, as close and easy, as a child's game" (p. 109). *Philological Ideas and Doubts* proceeds by parody and pays close attention to Herder's own words and arguments. (The "ideas" of the title translates *Einfälle* and could also be rendered "raids" or "incursions.") Hamann seizes on the weaknesses of Herder's account of the origin of language – the capacious role played by the ill-defined faculty of "reflection," the asocial and ahistorical anthropology which invokes "freedom" and "reason" as constant human qualities and which claims that language could be invented by a man in isolation – and makes them appear ridiculous. *To the Solomon of Prussia*, written in French, does not continue the polemic with Herder; instead, it addresses Frederick directly, calling on him to emulate Solomon, expel the French, recognize Herder's genius, and renew Prussia. Hamann's rage is carefully controlled and subordinated throughout this parodic address, which stood no chance of being published.

Hamann's and Herder's philosophies of language have been repeatedly examined in modern scholarship, but unfortunately no consensus about

²³ Allan Megill's unpublished Ph.D. thesis, "The Enlightenment Debate on the Origin of Language and its Historical Background" (Columbia University, 1975), is a valuable and comprehensive survey. See also Hans Aarsleff, "Philosophy of Language," in Haakonssen, ed., *The Cambridge History of Eighteenth-Century Philosophy*, 451–95.

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them has emerged.²⁴ Their differences have been described in diverse, and sometimes invidious, ways. Moreover, while some historians emphasize their continuity with previous thinkers, especially French, others largely assimilate them to the German Romantics of a subsequent generation. Finally, neither Hamann nor Herder is particularly consistent. The task of clarifying the “linguistic turn” in German philosophy at the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth century is obdurate.

The *New Apology of the Letter h* was written in response to an orthographic reform proposed in an appendix of Christian Tobias Damm’s *Observations on Religion* (1773). Damm, in common with a number of eighteenth-century writers, worried over the irrational spelling of German words, in which letters (especially the letter *h*) do not always correspond to sounds. Hamann reacts strenuously to the proposed rationalized spelling, attacking Damm’s confused arguments but also defending the letter on religious grounds (as Jakob Boehme had previously interpreted the letter); Hamann then adds a statement spoken in the voice of *h* itself, one of his most effective instances of a favored rhetorical device, prosopopoeia. The essay has been well described by Jonathan Sheehan:²⁵

Like other grammarians of the eighteenth century, Hamann viewed the *h* as a visual representation of the bodily expulsion of breath. Unlike these grammarians, however, Hamann cherished a language that did not exist for the clear expression of thoughts, and a writing exceeding its function as a mirror of speech. Rather, writing was to preserve the speech of God or, even more precisely, the breath of God . . . The *h*, furthermore, not only represented the breath but was itself the very sign of superabundance and overflow in human language that hearkened to God’s hidden hand . . . [F]or Hamann, the excess of God’s creation “still displays itself in nature,” and thus still was present in language and testified to this original act of creation . . . Rather than just reversing the terms of the reformers, then, Hamann’s theology of the *h* displaces the terms by asking the principal question at stake: what is language for?

²⁴ Ian Hacking has a witty account of some recent polemics in “How, Why, When, and Where Did Language Go Public?,” in *Historical Ontology* (Cambridge, MA, 2002), 121–39.

²⁵ Jonathan Sheehan, “Enlightenment Details: Theology, Natural History, and the Letter *h*,” *Representations* 61 (Winter 1998), 38–9.

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Golgotha and Sheblimini! (1784) is Hamann's response to Mendelssohn's *Jerusalem*, published the year before. Mendelssohn's plea for religious toleration is divided into two parts: in the first half he argues, from within the framework of social contract theory, that matters of conscience cannot be regulated either by church or by state; in the second he represents Jewish doctrine as the natural religion of eternal truths and interprets Jewish ceremonial law as a particularly vivid way of motivating right action in accordance with those truths. The careful distinctions of Mendelssohn's argument – between actions and convictions, eternal and historical truths, church and state – are rejected by Hamann, who sees in them “the serpent's deception of language” (p. 172), a “cleaving” of a complete whole “into two dead halves” (p. 179). In contrast to Mendelssohn, he insists on the temporal truths of history, unique and unrepeated, which become truths only by the authority of the tradition which has preserved them.

The *Metacritique on the Purism of Reason*, Hamann's response to Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* and *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics*, was written in 1784. Herder and Jacobi read it in manuscript; it was published posthumously in 1800. He objects to Kant's division of knowledge into sensibility and understanding, and more generally of his dualism of phenomenal and the noumenal, on the grounds that such a division cannot be overcome to correspond with the unity of experience. The dualism is arbitrarily made and then arbitrarily overcome. Moreover, it breaks the bond connecting reason and language, taking reason to be a priori whereas it is always found in language and history and can be represented as prior to them only by an ungrounded abstraction.²⁶

Disrobing and Transfiguration: A Flying Letter to Nobody, the Well Known (1786) is both a defense of his writing and a continuation of the disagreement with Mendelssohn, who died early in the year at the height of the “pantheism controversy” between Jacobi and himself.²⁷ It exists in two versions; in both, Hamann first recalls his *Socratic Memorabilia* and then defends *Golgotha and Sheblimini!* against a hostile review, indicating that he no longer needs to temper his remarks out of consideration for his

²⁶ Frederick C. Beiser, *The Fate of Reason: German Philosophy from Kant to Fichte* (Cambridge, MA, 1987), 40–3.

²⁷ Best represented in English by Gérard Vallée, *The Spinoza Conversations between Lessing and Jacobi* (Lanham, MD, 1988), which contains excerpts from Mendelssohn and Jacobi; the most famous contribution to the debate is Kant's essay “What is Orientation in Thinking?”

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friendship with Mendelssohn. The conclusions to the two versions differ more substantially, though both are critical of Mendelssohn's *Jerusalem* and his *Morning Hours* (1785). The conclusion of the less polemical first version has been translated here.

Hamann's striking and provocative sentences have always attracted attention, even when readers were stymied by the essays in which they appeared. Nor is it improper that individual statements by Hamann, read aphoristically, have aroused excitement; his style encourages and occasionally demands it. On the other hand, not all readings need to take this form, and my translation and commentary is intended to encourage further readings by removing some of the extrinsic obstacles to the essays. Acquiring the relevant information, however, is only the first step in understanding why Hamann writes what he writes, how he moves from one thought to another, what motivates particular references and allusions. That task is for readers.

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Chronology

- 1730 Johann Georg Hamann is born on August 27 in Königsberg, the capital of East Prussia, to parents of modest circumstances and Pietist orientation.
- 1740 Frederick II becomes King of Prussia, attacks Silesia, and begins the War of the Austrian Succession (1740–8).
- 1746 After being tutored at home and attending a few schools (including the Kneiphof Gymnasium), Hamann enrolls at the University of Königsberg to study theology, later switching to law.
- 1749 For over a year, Hamann collaborates with friends to produce *Daphne*, a weekly literary journal for women.
- 1752 Failing to take a degree, Hamann leaves the university and becomes a tutor to the sons of minor nobility in Livonia and Courland. He regularly visits his friend from the university, Johann Christoph Berens, in Riga.
- 1756 Undertakes a somewhat obscure mission to London as an agent of the Berens family's firm. En route to London, he visits Berlin (meeting Mendelssohn and other figures of the Berlin Enlightenment) and other cities in Germany and the Netherlands. Frederick II invades Saxony, and the Seven Years War begins.
- 1757 Arriving in London, he fails to deliver a message to the Russian Embassy. He spends the next months accumulating debt and, according to his subsequent account, lives a life of dissipation.
- 1758 Alone in London, Hamann undergoes a spiritual crisis and recovers his Christian faith in a radicalized form. He reads the

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- Bible in its entirety and in *Biblical Reflections* writes a commentary on its personal meaning for him. He returns to Riga in July, staying with the Berenses; he fell in love with but was refused permission to marry his friend's sister.
- 1759 Hamann returns to Königsberg, living in his father's house. *Socratic Memorabilia* is published.
- 1762 *Crusades of the Philologist* appears; it includes the essays *Essay on an Academic Question*, *Miscellaneous Notes on Word Order in the French Language*, *Cloverleaf of Hellenistic Letters*, and *Aesthetica in Nuce*, most of which were published previously.
- 1763 With the peasant woman Anna Regina Schumacher, who was caring for his father, Hamann begins a devoted and intimate relationship though they never marry. They have four children (the oldest in 1769 and the youngest in 1778). He works briefly for the municipality of Königsberg and then for the Department of War and Crown Lands for Prussia.
- 1764 Hamann resigns in order to care for his ailing father (who dies in 1766); he tutors and becomes the friend of Johann Gottfried Herder. From the summer and over the next years he travels and seeks employment outside of Prussia.
- 1766 To increase the efficiency of tax revenue, Frederick II creates a new financial ministry, the General Excise Administration, as a tax farming agency; it is run by a consortium of Frenchmen.
- 1767 Returning to Königsberg, Hamann finds a job as clerk and translator for the General Excise Administration.
- 1772 Herder's *Essay on the Origin of Language* is published; Hamann writes in response *The Last Will and Testament of the Knight of the Rose-Cross*, *Philological Ideas and Doubts*, and *To the Solomon of Prussia* (the latter two were not published). First partition of Poland.
- 1773 *New Apology of the Letter h*.
- 1774 Hamann responds to Herder's *Oldest Document of the Human Race* with *On the Most Recent Interpretation of the Oldest Document of the Human Race*.
- 1775 Hamann writes on mystery and religion in *Hierophantic Letters* and on marriage and sexuality in *Essay of a Sibyl on Marriage*.
- 1777 Hamann is promoted to Superintendent of the Customs Warehouse.

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- 1780 Hamann translates Hume's *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion*.
- 1781 Hamann reads Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* in proofs and writes, but does not publish, a review.
- 1782 Hamann's income is reduced after a reform of the perquisites of his job. He enters into correspondence with Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi.
- 1783 Mendelssohn's *Jerusalem, or on Religious Power and Judaism*.
- 1784 *Metacritique on the Purism of Reason* is written but not published; *Golgotha and Sheblimini!* is published.
- 1786 *Disrobing and Transfiguration*.
- 1787 Hamann is discharged by his employers after petitioning for a leave. He visits Münster at the invitation of Princess Gallitzin and also visits Jacobi and others.
- 1788 Hamann dies in Münster.

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Further reading

Standard editions and commentaries

Josef Nadler's edition of Hamann's writings (*Sämtliche Werke*, 6 vols., Vienna, 1949–57) and Walther Ziesemer and Arthur Henkel's edition of Hamann's letters (*Briefwechsel*, 7 vols., Wiesbaden/Frankfurt am Main, 1955–79) are the standard editions. Vol. vi of Nadler's *Werke* includes an index which also serves as a glossary and commentary. Of the five volumes that were published in the series *Hamanns Hauptschriften erklärt* (Gütersloh, 1956–63), three are relevant to essays included here: vol. ii, on the *Sokratische Denkwürdigkeiten* (ed. Fritz Blanke, 1959); vol. iv, covering Hamann's essays on the origin of language (ed. Elfriede Büchsel, 1963), and vol. vii, on *Golgatha und Scheblimini!* (ed. Lothar Schreiner, 1956). The commentary by Sven-Aage Jørgensen on the *Sokratische Denkwürdigkeiten* and the *Aesthetica in Nuce* is valuable (Stuttgart, 1968), as is the commentary on *Aesthetica in Nuce* by Hans-Martin Lumpp in *Philologia Crucis* (Tübingen, 1970). Three further editions give essential commentary on essays included in this selection: Karlheinz Löhner's *Kleeblatt hellenistischer Briefe* (Frankfurt am Main, 1994); Oswald Bayer's edition, commentary, and discussion of the *Metakritik über den Purismus der Vernunft* which appears in his *Vernunft ist Sprache* (Stuttgart, 2002); and Reiner Wild's "*Metacriticus Bonae Spei*": *Johann Georg Hamanns "Fliegender Brief"* (Frankfurt am Main, 1975).

Translations

Hamann seems to have made a single appearance in English in the nineteenth century; most of his early (pre-conversion) essay on the French

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political economist Plumard de Dangeul was published in Frederic H. Hedge, ed., *Prose Writers of Germany* (Philadelphia, 1848). A wide selection from both the writings and the letters of Hamann, mainly in the form of extracts, was translated by Ronald Gregor Smith in *J. G. Hamann: A Study in Christian Existentialism* (New York, 1960). A translation with a full commentary on the *Socratic Memorabilia* was made by James C. O’Flaherty in Hamann’s *Socratic Memorabilia: A Translation and Commentary* (Baltimore, MD, 1967). Stephen N. Dunning appends an unannotated translation of *Golgotha and Sheblimini!* to *The Tongues of Men: Hegel and Hamann on Religious Language and History* (Missoula, MT, 1979). Joyce P. Crick’s translation and annotation of *Aesthetica in Nuce* was first published in H. B. Nisbet, ed., *German Aesthetic and Literary Criticism* (Cambridge, 1985). Gwen Griffith Dickson translated, with explication as well as annotation, *Socratic Memorabilia, Aesthetica in Nuce, The Last Will and Testament of the Knight of the Rose-Cross, Philological Ideas and Doubts, Essay of a Sibyl on Marriage, Metacritique on the Purism of Reason*, and a few others in *Johann Georg Hamann’s Relational Metacriticism* (Berlin, 1995). James Schmidt edited *What is Enlightenment?: Eighteenth-Century Answers and Twentieth Century Questions* (Berkeley, CA, 1996), in which an earlier version of my translation of the *Metacritique on the Purism of Reason* appears; it also includes an annotated translation of Hamann’s letter of 1784 to Christian Jacob Kraus in which Hamann responds to Kant’s essay “What is Enlightenment?” Arnulf Zweig’s translation of Kant’s *Correspondence* (Cambridge, 1999) includes five letters from Hamann. Jere Paul Surber translates the *Metacritique* and discusses its genesis in *Metacritique: The Linguistic Assault on German Idealism* (Amherst, NY, 2001).

Angelo Pupi translated several of Hamann’s works into Italian (*Scritti cristiani*, 1975; *Scritti sul linguaggio: 1760–1773*, 1977); French translations have been made by Pierre Klossowski, Henry Corbin, and Romain Deygout (see the latter’s *Aesthetica in nuce, Métacritique du purisme de la raison pure, et autres textes*, 2001).

Secondary literature in English

James C. O’Flaherty’s introductory survey of Hamann’s life and writings (*Johann Georg Hamann*, Boston, MA, 1979) remains a good starting point from which to learn about Hamann. Two other works of his may be