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Author

Pan, D

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Language and Metaphysics in Johann Georg Hamann's *Aesthetica in Nuce* and *Philologische Einfälle und Zweifel*¹

DAVID PAN

University of California, Irvine

Recent discussions of the work of Johann Georg Hamann have set theologians against literary critics in the attempt to define the significance of his work as either primarily sacred or secular. Theologians such as Oswald Bayer, John Milbank, and John Betz have placed the relation to God at the center of Hamann's thought. Milbank, for example, attempts to set up a notion of sacred culture that, in presenting an opposite to secular culture, forms the basis for criticizing the banality or evilness of the secular. This approach defends the metaphysical against the purely physical and criticizes secular culture for being without values, that is, a submission to materiality as such. In contrast, literary critics such as Manfred Geier and Carol Jacobs have emphasized Hamann's focus on the play of language. This post-structuralist approach to Hamann builds upon a Derridean framework that emphasizes the play of signs within an immanent symbolic field and rejects the attempt to read the sign as an expression of a sacred depth.

The contrast between these two approaches conforms to the terms of a conflict between theology and philology that has gone on since the time Hamann was writing. As Robert Sparling has argued, hidden within this debate lies a political theological discussion of the relationship between representational language and political form that underlies much of Hamann's work. For the debate is not just one between sacred and secular readings of Hamann. At stake is an understanding of the fundamental relationship between language and metaphysics on the one hand and representation and sovereignty on the other. But if the most recent manifestation of this discussion in the debate between radical orthodoxy and post-structuralism revolves around whether the word should be seen as an emanation of the sacred or as an immanent sign, Hamann in fact presents a third alternative. His work is significant because of how he shows that it is precisely the immanent unfolding of language that provides the basis for its metaphysical significance. It is from this perspective that he can argue that secular culture is not in fact secular at

all, but rather that it contains within itself a particular metaphysical conception in spite of its own claims to the contrary. This conception of the metaphysical and theological implications of all language means that Hamann's theories go beyond Christological approaches to culture to consider both the multiplicity of human languages and the relations between different theological conceptions of the world. Though he is clearly working within a Christian framework, he is also developing a general theory of the relationship between language and metaphysics that is not exclusive to Christianity. Moreover, this emphasis on the metaphysical implications of all language also provides a sense of the political theological consequences of language in both religious and secular cultural contexts.

Hamann on Language

As opposed to attempts to cast Hamann as an "irrationalist" (as Isaiah Berlin argues), an Enlightenment thinker (as Robert Norton suggests (641–44)), or as Christological exegete (as Jonathan Betz contends (*After* 135)), Sparling shows that Hamann provides the Archimedean point from which one can begin a thorough-going critique of Enlightenment rationality (Sparling, *Johann Georg Hamann* 13–24). Though Sparling claims that Hamann's argument is based on the tenets of a particular religious tradition, it may also be possible to read his approach as one that is not necessarily a Christological one, but rather attempts to establish an aesthetic perspective toward language that is grounded in the methodologies of a critical philology. In this reading, Hamann's theory of language forms the basis for seeing all language as part of revelation and thus as linked to a metaphysical context.

His work is able to demonstrate this priority of the word because, although his discussion of tradition is framed within his Christian perspective, he does not justify the subordination of human and nature to the word through a recourse to the Bible or Christology as authorities for this insight. Rather, he uses a philosophical argument borrowed from David Hume about the priority of empirical reality before reason for thought and perception. "Everything that is in our understanding has previously been in our senses" (*Writings* 116). ["Nichts ist also in unserm *Verstande* ohne vorher in unsern *Sinnen* gewesen zu seyn" (SW 3:39).] This priority of the senses as the basis of all knowledge leads Hamann to a theory of language that emphasizes both its particularity and the ways in which it structures human thought. From his starting point with Hume, Hamann's perspective presumes that neither a universal ideal nor God can be the direct referent of any sign. The word is neither a secondary representation of an original object nor a metaphysical universal that presents the truth that would underlie things. Instead, both words and things exist on the same level: impenetrable givens for human consciousness, providing the irrational and irreducible fabric for the development of thoughts

and actions. The dependence of the understanding on sense data means that every experience is completely particular. Because every object and event is unique, there is no way to objectively abstract from this uniqueness, and sense data are irreducible to any law or universal, even a divine universality. Hamann concludes from this impossibility of universals, not that revelation is also impossible, but that all of nature in its particularity is itself divine revelation, understood here not as a divine truth that supersedes particulars, but as the unfolding of the unique events of the world in their ineffable particularity, or, as Dickson argues, within a set of concrete relationships (71–75).

Within this context of unique events, words become significant, not as secondary representations nor as universals, but as figures: a set of symbolic constellations whose patterns and references create a relational context within which people, nature, and events can gain meaning. Words remain concrete through the figures that they form as part of a tradition that forms the fabric of revelation. Hamann therefore understands the context of figural relationships constructed by words as that which constitutes a tradition of discourse, not as an expression of a hidden depth, but as itself the face of a continual revelation that proliferates on the symbolic plane:

The *stamina* and the *menstrua* of our reason are thus in the truest understanding revelations and traditions which we accept as our property, transform into our fluids and powers, and by this means we become equal to our destiny, both to reveal the critical and archontic office of a political animal and to transmit it. (*Writings* 116) [Die *stamina* und *menstrua* unsrer *Vernunft* sind daher im eigentlichsten Verstande *Offenbarungen* und *Ueberlieferungen*, die wir zu unser Eigenthum aufnehmen, in unsre Säfte und Kräfte verwandeln und dadurch unsrer Bestimmung gewachsen werden, die *kritische* und *archontische* Würde eines *politischen Thiers* theils zu *offenbaren* theils zu *überliefern*. (SW 3:39)]

The two images he uses here of the *stamina*, a Latin expression referring originally to the warp threads of a loom, and the *menstrua*, designating monthly events, indicate that reason for Hamann functions on the model of both developing threads and periodic (bodily) cycles, which together constitute the revelations and traditions that we receive “as our property.” Reason does not produce fixed truths but participates in a developing fabric and a rhythmic bodily cycle, which, through transformation into “our fluids and powers,” constitute our existence in terms of a proliferating tradition. The processes of revelation and tradition delineate the human as a specifically political animal for which bodily senses are the basis of revelation, but only to the extent that they are organized within the unfolding threads of rhythmic sequence. Revelation occurs in the process whereby the senses and the body are figured into the specific symbolic forms that consist of an emerging revelatory fabric of signification.

Clothing as Figure

Hamann's use of the image of threads and fabric is key to his conception of reason and language. His focus on the figurative aspect of language must be differentiated from both the approach to revelation taken by the radical orthodoxy perspective and the post-structuralist focus on figures as autonomous structures. Milbank finds in Hamann an approach to revelation based on the idea of depth. He takes this approach in the volume *Radical Orthodoxy*, where he explains the meaning of images in a discussion of a passage in Hamann's *Aesthetica in Nuce* about the perception of images:

Speak, that I may see you! This wish was fulfilled by Creation, which is a speech to creatures through creatures; for day unto day utters speech, and night unto night shows knowledge. Its watchword traverses every clime to the end of the world, and its voice can be heard in every dialect. (*Writings* 65) [Rede, daß ich Dich sehe!—Dieser Wunsch wurde durch die Schöpfung erfüllt, die eine Rede an die Kreatur durch die Kreatur ist; denn ein Tag sagt dem andern, eine Nacht thut kund der andern. Ihre Losung läuft über jedes Klima bis an der Welt Ende und in jeder Mundart hört man ihre Stimme. (SW 2:198)]

Milbank goes on to read this passage as a demonstration of how “Hamann always links the ‘depth’ in things with the depth in the human subject which images the creative power of God” (“Theological” 27). The point that Milbank ultimately makes is that “the solidity of things derives from an eternal permanence” and that we must “trust the depth, and appearance as the gift of depth, and history as the restoration of the loss of this depth in Christ” (27, 32). By concentrating on the issue of depth and seeing the content of this depth as an eternal permanence guaranteed by Christ, Milbank ignores the central image of the passage and thereby discounts the authority of the appearances as such in their contingency. Not only do his attempts to invest specificity with its own truth generally seem forced, as when he feels obliged to “allow for” cultural specificity (“Theological” 28), but this reading of Hamann misses the tradition-oriented element that does not focus so much on depth as on the coherence and specificity of a cultural tradition. For the passage cited is not primarily about depth but about the role of a developing tradition in constituting human vision. By linking speech to vision in the phrase, “Speak, that I may see you,” Hamann emphasizes that language works through figures and images and then goes on to point to the way in which language forms a chain of signification. Creation does not set up a link between God and the world; rather it “is a speech to creatures through creatures.” There is no depth here, only an unfolding within the single plane of the creaturely. Accordingly, the form of revelation is not of an eternal permanence underlying mere appearances, but of a chain of speech, in which “day unto day utters speech, and night unto night shows knowledge.” This chain

of speech creates the movement of tradition and, by means of tradition, revelation, not just in a privileged divine language, but “in every dialect.”

The centrality of specific traditions becomes even clearer when one looks at the immediately preceding passage, which focuses on the figure of clothing as the basis of human experience. Hamann’s continuing use of the figure of textiles is central to his argument in both content and method. If the key to Hamann’s unique perspective is his emphasis on figuration as the basis of revelation, he demonstrates this insight through the particular method by which his texts are woven together through a series of metaphors that turn out to be more than arbitrary analogies and in fact build the very structure of his argument. In order to explain why humans invented clothing Hamann suggests that clothing originated

in the universal persistence of animal characters which became known to Adam through his association with the ancient poet (called Abaddon in the language of Canaan but Apollyon in the Hellenistic language)—This moved this first man under his borrowed pelt to transmit an intuitive knowledge of past and future events to posterity——. (*Writings* 65) [Ich setze das Herkommen dieser Tracht, in der dem Adam durch den Umgang mit dem alten Dichter, (der in der Sprache Kanaans Abaddon, auf hellenistisch aber Apollyon heist,) bekannt gewordenen allgemeinen Bestandheit thierischer Charaktere,—die den ersten Menschen bewog unter dem gelehten Balg eine anschauende Erkenntnis vergangener und künftiger Begebenheiten auf die Nachwelt fortzupflanzen——. (SW 2:198)]

For Hamann, clothing was not invented out of an instrumental necessity to keep warm (*Writings* 65; SW 2:198), but rather the reason for clothing was to create the possibility of history as “an intuitive knowledge of past and future events,” thus setting humans apart from animals. Where animals’ characters demonstrate a “universal persistence,” just as their costumes are unchanging, the first humans created with clothing a figurative framework that imbeds human events within a symbolic and historical trajectory. Clothing becomes the first indication of human history and the human ability to place the world and themselves into a set of symbolic relationships, thereby creating a specific tradition. As a consequence, we can see things only if they speak to us, that is to say, the image will not have meaning for us unless it is embedded within a tradition to which it refers, and the image that clothing creates is one that links the present image with a past tradition and an imagined future. Clothing transforms humans themselves into something other than animals because it embeds humans into a symbolic field of development. Once humans place themselves within the symbolic system that clothing establishes, they do not merely see, but in seeing are caught up in a process of figuration. The issue then is not to uncover a hidden depth behind appearances that stretches back to the eternal, but rather to understand the exterior covering as the single possible plane of existence and itself the mode of revelation.

Because Hamann does not focus on clothing as a functional piece of equipment, nor as an index of cultural heritage or of social status, and instead treats clothing as an element in an historical chain, he emphasizes clothing as word, as a figuration that exists within its own system of relationships to other clothing and consequently has a structuring effect on its wearers.

Yet, this focus on figuration must be distinguished from the post-structuralist idea that words exist solely as autonomous figures. When Derrida criticizes the idea that writing would be an “artificial exteriority: a clothing,” and consequently argues that “[t]he outside bears with the inside a relationship that is, as usual, anything but simple exteriority” (*Of Grammatology* 35), the exterior figure becomes released from a subordination to the interior. While Hamann also does not work with a separation of interior and exterior and, instead, foregrounds the centrality of figures, he sees these figures, not just as play, but also as the basis for a subordination of experience. As opposed to focusing only on the emancipatory aspect of signs, Hamann describes how clothing precedes the human body and provides the framework within which the body becomes human through the relation to a figure. Sense experience does not fall away in favor of the play of signification. Instead of acting to “muffle the immediacy of sense experience” (Sparling, “Transfiguring” 20), clothing, as a kind of language, both subordinates sense experience to its structures and creates the very possibility of such experience.

Clothing forms the same type of distinguishing mark for the human body as the sign is for the thing and is able to grant humanity to the human just as the sign grants thingness to the thing. Hamann explains this idea by arguing that the naming of the thing occludes it and thereby opens up a relation to the eternal as a negative consequence of the relation between sign and thing. As an example, Hamann describes how clothing’s marking of the human opens up an invisibility that does not obscure the human, but rather enables humanness by linking the human to the divine.

Blind heathens acknowledged the invisibility which man has in common with GOD. The veiled figure of the body, the countenance of the head, and the extremities of the arms are the visible schema in which we move along; yet in truth they are nothing but a finger pointing to the hidden man within us. (*Writings* 64) [Blinde Heyden haben die Unsichtbarkeit erkannt, die der Mensch mit GOTT gemein hat. Die verhüllte Figur des Leibes, das Antlitz des Hauptes, und das Äußerste der Arme sind das sichtbare Schema, in dem wir einher gehn; doch eigentlich nichts als ein Zeigefinger des verborgenen Menschen in uns (SW 2: 198).]

Clothing acts as a sign that occludes the body, leaving only the head and extremities exposed. But in hiding the body, clothing’s veil creates an invisibility effect that does not exist without the marking. With clothing, the human figure consists of an image that creates a relationship, not to an inner substance, but to other images within a tradition, and this establishment of figural

relationships is the process that links the human to the divine by creating the divine invisibility of the human. The hidden man within us can only appear with the sign of clothing, whose occlusion of the body behind a cultural tradition creates an invisibility of the human that is not an emptiness but rather a projection from out of the concreteness of this tradition. Tradition, as embodied here in the naming effect of clothing then becomes the condition and conduit for a relation to the divine. By integrating the body into a tradition, clothing at once subordinates the body to an ongoing process of figural determination and provides the possibility of interacting with this tradition into the future.

Hamann's use of the image of clothing also illustrates his point in the very approach to figuration that he demonstrates. For the reference to clothing is not just an analogy in the sense of an explanatory figure that can then be dispensed with once we understand the "underlying" idea. Rather, clothing enacts as an original figure the very process that Hamann describes, and our explanations of the figure do not in fact attain anything that lies beyond it. Rather, the explanations take place as an unfolding of the original figure and its continuing proliferation. The invention of clothing is for Hamann the original move that inaugurates human language as an extension of the process of figuration.

Abstraction and Names

By imagining the image, not as an object with a sacred depth, but rather as an element in a tradition, Hamann focusses his critique against abstraction rather than against secularism, as in this passage that affirms the value of the senses over abstractions:

Oh for a muse like a refiner's fire, and like a fuller's soap!—She will dare to purify the natural use of the senses from the unnatural use of abstractions, by which our concepts of things are as maimed as the name of the Creator is suppressed and blasphemed. (*Writings* 79) [O eine Muse wie das Feuer eines Goldschmieds, und wie die Seife der Wäscher!—Sie wird es wagen, den natürlichen Gebrauch der Sinne von dem unnatürlichen Gebrauch der Abstraktionen zu läutern, wodurch unsere Begriffe von den Dingen eben so sehr verstückelt werden, als der Name des Schöpfers unterdrückt und gelästert wird. (SW 2:207)]

With the figures of the refiner's fire and the fuller's soap, Hamann imagines a natural use of the senses that has been purified of all abstractions. Yet, the key here is that the burning off of abstractions returns us to more immediate concepts of things at the same time as it returns us to the "name of the Creator." Hamann's critique of abstraction coincides here with his defense of the "name of the Creator" in a move that links theology with philology.

Because the target of the critique is abstraction, Hamann does not end up defending the sacred as such, as Betz and Milbank presume. Instead, Hamann defends nature in its particularity, and Isaiah Berlin rightly refers to Hamann as a precursor to theorists of reification (44). Indeed, Hamann's vindication of an unfettered nature that "works through the senses and the passions" (*Writings* 77) [würkt durch Sinne und Leidenschaften" (SW 2:206)] can be read as an early example of critiques of Enlightenment one finds again in the 20th century. Hamann even cites passages from Francis Bacon's *New Organon* about reason "injuring" nature with its abstractions that Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno would later refer to in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (*Writings* 77; SW 2:206; Horkheimer and Adorno 1–2; Sparling, *Johann Georg Hamann*, 14). Like them, Hamann argues that abstraction is the result when the world is considered exclusively from the point of view of utility. Once utility becomes the principle of organization, it takes over all relationships to things: "If the belly is your god, even the hairs on your head are under his guardianship." [„Ist der Bauch euer Gott: so stehen selbst die Haare eures Hauptes unter seiner Vormundschaft.“] Moreover, if for Horkheimer and Adorno utility as a guiding principle leads to both a reification and a fetishization of objects, Hamann similarly continues: "Every creature will alternately become your sacrifice and your idol" (*Writings* 78). ["Jede Kreatur wird wechselsweise euer Schlachtopfer und euer Götze" (SW 2:206).] As with Horkheimer and Adorno, the antidote to this universalization of utility is an aesthetic attitude, and Hamann calls out to a "muse" as she who "will dare to purify the natural use of the senses from the unnatural use of abstractions" (*Writings* 79; SW 2:207).

Yet, Hamann's vindication of nature against abstraction is linked to his focus on nature as revelation. While Horkheimer and Adorno cite Bacon as a forerunner of a natural scientific abstraction, Hamann, as Rudolf Unger points out, neglects this aspect of Bacon's thinking (1:244), and he focuses instead on a vindication of Bacon's "double revelation of God: in Scripture and Nature" (Dickson 79). This shift in emphasis leads to a distinction between Adorno's and Hamann's approaches to the relationship between the useful and the sacred. Adorno's only alternative to reification is an imagined "return of nature" to itself (197), and he consequently must reject all utility as something that participates in reification. By contrast, Hamann refuses to accept utility as a realm apart from God. The final point for Hamann is not to imagine a utopia free of all subordination, but to invoke the "name of the Creator" as that which is being suppressed along with nature (*Writings* 79; SW 2:207). We see in this phrase the core of Hamann's specific version of a critique of Enlightenment abstraction. In suppressing the sensual aspect of nature, reason for Hamann is not simply distorting nature away from an ideal and unfettered state of pure freedom, i.e. that which Adorno refers to as non-identity. Rather, because he sees the mutilation of nature as inseparable from

a suppression of the “name of the Creator,” Hamann is indicating that nature’s particularity is linked to the particularity of a tradition and that this tradition is based on the particularity of language in names.

Subject against its will—but in hope, it [every creature] groans beneath your yoke or at your vain conduct; it does its best to escape your tyranny, and longs even in the most passionate embrace for that freedom with which the beasts paid Adam homage, when GOD brought them unto man to see what he would call them; for whatsoever man would call them, that was the name thereof. (*Writings* 78) [Wider ihren Willen—aber auf Hoffnung—unterworfen, seufzet sie unter dem Dienst oder über die Eitelkeit; sie thut ihr Bestes eurer Tyranny zu entwischen, und sehnt sich unter den brünstigen Umarmungen nach derjenigen Freyheit, womit die Thiere Adam huldigten, da GOTT sie zu dem Menschen brachte, daß er sähe, wie er sie nennte; denn wie der Mensch sie nennen würde, so sollten sie heißen. (SW 2:206)]

As Sven-Aage Jørgensen (43) and James O’Flaherty (68–69) have pointed out, Hamann describes the aesthetic emancipation of nature as a result of a naming process in which beasts, in being granted names, attain freedom through their integration into the symbolic context that comes with names. Nature does not attain freedom by achieving a non-identical, “pre-lapsarian” state before all order, but through a process of naming that subordinates nature to a particular tradition.

The relation between God and human that is created by clothing is repeated when the human, in naming things, also subordinates them to the word, but in so doing grants objects their freedom. If every sensual experience is unique, a particular creature would not have the unity and dignity of an entity until its various manifestations are related to the single figure that is the name. The disparate sensual experiences of the creature are summed up as a unified development through their relation to the particular name. As with the phenomenon of clothing for humans, the creature’s relationship to the name on the one hand subordinates the creature to the figure and on the other hand turns the creature into a mystery. For every experience of the creature is now both revealed and hidden by the name. The figure creates a common referent for disparate experiences, enabling a constant relational quality in all experiences. But this relational quality also creates an ineffable new dynamism in the creature, whose every moment of existence now becomes a mystery through the relation to the figure. The newly named creature is released from its given situation and enters into new relations both to its own name and with other names. The naming process, by linking creatures to figures, grants them their freedom.

But as Hamann emphasizes, the naming process begins with the “name of the Creator,” and the freedom of creatures is a consequence of the original naming of God that establishes the entire process of figuration. Human freedom then enters into Hamann’s thinking, not as a mastery of human reason

over concepts and things, but as a participation in divinity. There are two aspects to human freedom, both of which link humans to God. First, humans participate in freedom in the same way that objects and divinity do: by being clothed in a figure and thus achieving a self-bifurcation that allows them to be both image and mystery. Second, humans have authority over the naming process. If God alone is responsible for the revelation that is the creation of nature, humans are nevertheless allowed to engage in the analogous creation that takes place in the unfolding of a cultural tradition. The possibility of receiving nature through naming allows humans to participate in the revelatory merging of nature and tradition. Names embody this freedom that humans have over the given facts of their environment, but also of the subordination of the human to the symbolic tradition that the naming process establishes.

If the naming process for Hamann avoids reducing nature to abstract concepts by linking them to a symbolic revelation, the way he describes the link between naming and freedom distinguishes his approach from radical orthodoxy's theological one. Because the relationship to God is mediated through the specific figures of language, Hamann does not imagine a relation to God as depth nor as an analogy to Christ. By mediating the link to God through Adam's naming of things, Hamann invokes God only through the kind of particularity that arises through the integration into the figural relationships given by a system of names. Consequently, his affirmation of poetry against abstraction takes the place of Milbank's defense of the sacred against the secular.

The difference between these two approaches expresses itself practically in two different understandings of the meaning of human freedom in relation to the world. For Milbank, the issue of human freedom boils down to a choice of whether or not to accept Christianity. He writes, for instance, that "it is indeed for radical orthodoxy an either/or: philosophy (Western or Eastern) as a purely autonomous discipline, or theology: Herod or the magi, Pilate or the God-man" ("Theological" 32). Betz delineates a similar either/or choice by arguing that "for Hamann, Christ [. . .] is the philological and exegetical key to the 'language' of nature and Scripture" and that "what was at stake in Hamann's debate with his contemporaries all along" was "a radical choice between illumination and nihilism (as the respective destinies of faith and reason)" (*After* 135, 338). Because Milbank's and Betz's critique of secularization consists of opposing philosophy as an autonomous discipline, the key to its critique is the replacement of secular concepts with sacred ones. Yet, the focus on a universality underlying all things remains in fact constant. The point for radical orthodoxy is to replace a secular universality with a sacred one.

Hamann attacks philosophy as well, not in order to replace it with theology, but in order to establish an aesthetic attitude toward the world. Milbank's either/or choice in some ways simply substitutes God for the concept,

for instance when he writes in another context that “[e]verything is sacramental, everything tells of the glory of Christ, and therefore every economy is part of the economy of salvation and every process of production and exchange prepares the elements of the cosmic eucharist” (“Liberality” 19). By contrast, Hamann conceives of freedom as inseparable from a naming process in which nature is linked to figures that offer relationality and development. Freedom here is not simply an either/or choice, modeled on the voting box of representative democracy. Instead, Hamann insists on the participatory character of freedom:

Freedom involves not only undetermined powers but also the republican privilege of being able to *contribute* to their determination. These conditions were indispensable to human nature. The sphere of animals determines by instinct, it is said, the orientation of all their powers and their drives in a particular and inclusive way; the perspective of men, in precise contrast, extends to the universal and almost becomes lost in the infinite. (*Writings* 116) [Zur Freyheit gehören aber nicht nur unbestimmte Kräfte sondern auch das republicanische Vorrecht zu ihrer Bestimmung *mitwirken* zu können. Diese Bedingungen waren zur Natur des Menschen unumgänglich. Die Sphäre der Thiere bestimmt daher, wie man sagt, die Richtung aller ihrer Kräfte und Triebe durch den Instinct eben so individual und eingeschloßen, als sich im Gegentheil der Gesichtspunct des Menschen auf das Allgemeine ausdehnt und gleichsam ins Unendliche verliert. (SW 3: 38–39)]

Hamann refers in this passage to Herder’s argument that humans can be distinguished from animals based on the ability of humans to adapt themselves to their environment. In accepting Herder’s argument, Hamann adds here that a consequence of this human indefiniteness as compared with the determinateness of animal instincts is that humans also have the privilege and responsibility to *participate* in creation. The relationship to God is not confined to an either/or of faith, but is intimately connected to the figurative quality of language that allows for such continual creative input. The use of language that distinguishes humanity is not a technical achievement but an aesthetic one involving creativity. The exercise of freedom that comes with human language is on the one hand specific to the extent that it involves participation in a tradition as a chain of signification yet on the other hand “extends to the universal” to the extent that the naming process is also a creative, figurative one.

For the incorporation of things into the symbolic chain locates these things within a metaphysical framework. In establishing a system of understanding that subordinates the relation between humans and their environment to the word, humans simultaneously construct a relationship to the totality and the infinite. This relationship is not one in which appearances are the emanations of an eternal permanence but rather in which the human capacity for language is itself creative and thus constitutive for a metaphysical frame-

work. Revelation is a consequence of the incorporation and subordination of both humans and nature into a system of words understood as figures rather than concepts.

Hamann's focus on the naming process means that he also avoids the kind of Christology that Betz attributes to him when he argues that for Hamann "all the works of God, from the 'book' of nature, to the book of Scripture, to the continuing 'book' of history—are so many revelations, so many tongues, whose interpretation is found in Christ (cf. 1 Cor. 12: 10; 14: 10f.)" (*After* 136). Instead, because Hamann is so committed to the importance of language as figuration, he must make room in his linking of particularity to divinity for a continuing creative process that will engender new figures. Though he, as a Christian, focuses this process on the one specific figurative relation to Christ as the provider of the divine perspective from which nature and tradition can gain meaning, his model also provides a general description of the workings of language. While Hamann defends a Christian perspective, his aesthetic theory is itself not founded specifically on the model of Christ as the mediator of creation, as Betz, following Oswald Bayer, argues (Betz, *After* 126; Bayer, *Schöpfung* 16–18; Bayer, *Zeitgenosse* 98). Even if Hamann asserts that Christ is the mediator of creation, this assertion is based on a more general theory of language that could be applied in an alternative religious context. The idea of Christ does not have a substantive role to play in Hamann's argument about the figurative quality of language, and the mediating role of Christ for Hamann is simply an example of the general argument that all of creation and all words participate in some way in divinity to the extent that they are understood in terms of a naming process and a specific tradition. As Gwen Griffith Dickson writes, "the communication and revelation of God is for the whole of creation to share in—even day and night 'tell forth', as Hamann's use of Ps. 19 shows" (91). Rather than having his argument depend upon Christ as a mediator, Hamann in the first place addresses the structure of the world itself, in which things will always depend upon a process of naming in order to attain their particularity.

In a later commentary on Hamann, Milbank moves toward this reading by adjusting his interpretation away from the notion of a "depth" and in order to take account of the importance of the word as a part of a tradition.

Hamann reinvokes an 'oral' non-identical repetition—including a 'written' moment—which is not pure postponement (and hence again the sheerly indeterminate) but rather a particular tradition, a repetition with a particular concrete shape according to the series of specifically embodied speakers and the spatial (but not closed) circles of circumstance which embrace them along with their listeners. (*Word* 77)

Milbank brings back the word within a series of speakers and moves toward Hamann's privileging of tradition in this interpretation. Yet, Milbank's ac-

count still retains the marks of his previous orientation toward a “depth” behind the world. His focus on creation as a “non-identical repetition” curiously recalls the Adornian “non-identical” while at the same time affirming the repetition that the non-identical would exclude, being itself outside of concepts and the regularity they would impose. Non-identical repetition involves for Milbank, borrowing from Catherine Pickstock, an adherence to liturgy on the one hand and the recognition that every oral manifestation of the liturgy is a new event. The question, however, is whether only the repetition of the liturgy would constitute a moment of creation or whether even a divergence from the liturgy could also constitute a legitimate moment of creation. Is non-identity to be contained within the continual repetition of the liturgy by new speakers, or does Hamann’s framework allow for a subsequent sacred speaking that would have the same creative and revelatory character as the liturgy itself? The answer to this question determines Milbank’s approach to secular culture.

Related to this question is Milbank’s interpretation of the relation between nature and culture. He insists that “the real” does not influence language from without:

this is not to invoke ‘a real’ which constrains language from without, and to which there could be an appeal outside a specific faith, reason, or desire. On the contrary, Hamann’s entire philosophy of language disallows this contrast, since the creature is in itself ‘a speaking’, and nature always manifests itself in the conventionality and bewilderment of cultural sign-systems. (*Word 77*)

Though he begins with a rejection of nature as an originally real event as opposed to the “copy” which is culture and he continues on to argue that “the creature is in itself a ‘speaking,’” and thus a revelatory language, he ends this passage by stating that culture is still a “manifestation” of, and thus a direct expression of an original nature. In spite of his attempt to grant language and culture a revelatory status, he still must describe culture in terms of the fall into the “conventionality and bewilderment of cultural sign-systems.” Rather than conceiving of nature as constituting itself through its relations to figures, Milbank’s conception sees a more static kind of nature that then runs into confusion as it manifests itself in the bewilderment of cultural sign-systems.

Consequently, the either/or framework still motivates his thinking, and the point here is to emphasize the spoken word over the written word:

if the sign if [*sic*] not oral, if it is not also an embodied event with a certain concrete ‘expression’ of what it conveys, if it is not also something which dies, can be wiped out, forgotten, but is defined (as Derrida explicitly defines it) by its survival of the death of the speaker, or of any empirical existence, then, as Catherine Pickstock has argued, it *is* death, *is* ‘the impossible’, is absolute deferral, is no-thing: the ideal. (*Word 70*)

Following Pickstock's analysis of liturgy in *After Writing*, Milbank defends orality over the written sign because the latter has a petrified permanence as opposed to the former's fluidity. But it is precisely the permanence of the written word that allows it, like clothing for the body, to become a figure that can integrate things into a metaphysical system of relationships within which the things can attain meaning. In setting the spoken against the written word, Milbank separates out the two linked aspects of language that together create the possibility of its revelatory character. As he emphasizes, a proper speaking depends for Hamann upon the "sensibility" that comes with a particular embodied situation and the passions that arise from this situation. But this sensibility is not the only source of revelation. Revelation involves the relation between figure and sensible experience that can only arise when the word as figure establishes itself for the future. "Survival of the death of the speaker" is not just "death," "no-thing," and "the ideal." A survival of language into the future is also what makes the naming process into a releasing of things into their freedom through their relation to the development of figures. But when Hamann emphasizes the naming process, his focus is not on the repetition of a liturgy, but on the continual process of naming and thus of creation in language. It is in this continuing possibility of creation that a tradition becomes something dynamic for Hamann, not as a continual repetition of a standing liturgy or a constant nature (however non-identical each repetition might be), but as the constantly recurring, but never guaranteed, possibility of revelation. The moment of revelation coincides with the moment of a naming that establishes a textual tradition for the future out of the successful overcoming of the bewilderment of language in the present. What is important here is that both aspects, the sensibility connected to orality and the permanence of the written sign, are contingent possibilities whose simultaneous fulfillment results in those moments of a truly revelatory and thus creative language. Hamann recognizes the possibility of such moments, not as the prerogative of an Adamic or angelic language or of an original nature, but as the miraculous potential hidden within every utterance.

The difficulty with this interpretation of the word for Milbank is that, according to this logic, the revelatory word does not have to be the word of a Christian god, suggesting that even a secular approach to the world could still harbor the possibility of revelation and some form of divinity. But how would the name create a relationship, not just to other signs, but to the infinite, even without any reference to Christ? In order to understand this process, we will have to take another look at the theory of language that is implied in Hamann's writings.

Word as Tradition

The coming into existence of both the human and of nature in the word has both a subordinating and an emancipatory moment. Hamann criticized

Herder's account of the origin of language for downplaying the subordinating element in language (*Writings* 106), but Herder nevertheless does adequately explain the emancipatory aspect by comparing the human use of language to adapt to an environment with the animal's determination through instinct. For Herder, freedom is what allows humans to concentrate attention on particular aspects that they deem to be important in their environment. The key here is that humans, alone amongst the species of the planet, are able to make decisions about what is important and not important depending upon their situation and their environment. Herder calls this freedom the capacity for reflection. In picking out particular sensations and singling them out as distinguishing marks, humans create language as a mechanism that sums up the specific determinations made by a culture concerning what is and is not important in the world (Herder 116).

But this freedom of the human only occurs at the level of the community. For the individual, this freedom is experienced as subordination. Hamann's conception of a fundamental heteronomy of the individual is not just a reflection of his desire to base human relations on a pact with God, as Marcus Twellmann argues (23), but also a consequence of a conception of language in which it cannot be autonomously developed but must in the first place be received:

how then could the idea come into anyone's head to regard language, *cet art legere, volage, demoniacle* (to speak with Montaigne out of Plato) as an autonomous invention of human art and wisdom? (*Writings* 106) [wie kann es jemanden einfallen die Sprache, *cet art leger, volage, demoniacle*, (mit Montaigne aus dem Plato zu reden) als eine selbständige Erfindung menschlicher Kunst und Weisheit anzusehen? (Hamann, SW 3:31)]

While Hamann seems to put himself here on the side of those who argue for the divine rather than the human invention of language, his arguments concerning human participation in the naming process, cited above, make clear that he does not argue that language is simply a gift of God. His argument in this passage is more precisely that language is not "an autonomous invention of human art and wisdom." Just as the things of the world only attain their status as things through the intervention of language, without a language passed down from their ancestors, humans would be unable to relate to their environment and would have no way of constituting their consciousness in such a way that it could make sense of the world around them. The consequence is that all human thoughts are determined by a prior language that cannot have been consciously invented and can only be received from a tradition.

Hamann's theory of language is consequently directed at the logocentrism of the Enlightenment and serves to undermine the conception that a set of ideas might exist objectively and independently of their expression in

language (Dickson 94, Sparling, *Johann Georg Hamann*, 22–23). The point of Hamann’s critique of rationality is to undermine claims to be able to grasp a fixed truth behind language. Words for Hamann are not expressions of a prior and objective meaning, but are to be taken in their specificity.

For me the question is not so much “What is reason?” but rather “What is language?” And here I perceive the basis for all of the paralogisms and antinomies that one attributes to the former. It is for that reason that one takes *words for concepts* and *concepts for the things themselves*. (My translation, cited in Berlin 40) [Bey mir ist nicht so wol die Frage: was ist Vernunft? Sondern vielmehr: was ist Sprache? Und hier vermuthe ich den Grund aller Paralogismen und Antinomien, die man jener zur Last legt. Daher komt es, daß man *Wörter für Begriffe*, und *Begriffe für die Dinge selbst* hält. (*Briefwechsel* 5:264)]

Rather than discussing reason as a capacity that is able to penetrate to the heart of things, Hamann insists on focusing on language and words in their relation to experience. In this way, one avoids confusing the words with concepts or even with the things themselves. In contrast to a post-structuralist perspective that would also focus on language rather than reason, however, Hamann theorizes the primacy of language, not in order to deconstruct metaphysics, but to insist on the divine specificity of the world. If things themselves are signs, this does not indicate for Hamann a disappearance of things, but rather a relation of things to words in which both are rescued from abstraction and understood as irreducible. Neither things nor words are to be seen as expressions of some prior idea or concept, but are to be taken both as caught within a symbolic movement and as ineffable.

Every phenomenon of nature was a word,—the sign, symbol, and pledge of a new, secret, inexpressible but all the more fervent union, fellowship, and communion of divine energies and ideas. All that man heard at the beginning, saw with his eyes, looked upon, and his hands handled was a living word, for God was the Word. With this word in his mouth and in his heart the origin of language was as natural, as close and easy, as a child’s game. For human nature is from the beginning until the end of days as like unto the kingdom of heaven as leaven, with whose smallness every woman can make ferment three measures of meal. (*Writings* 108–109) [Jede Erscheinung der Natur war ein Wort,—das Zeichen, Sinnbild und Unterpfand einer neuen, geheimen, unaussprechlichen, aber desto innigern Vereinigung, Mittheilung und Gemeinschaft göttlicher Energien und Ideen. Alles, was der Mensch am Anfange hörte, mit Augen sah, beschaute und seine Hände betasteten, war ein lebendiges Wort; denn Gott war das Wort. Mit diesem Worte im Mund und im Herzen war der Ursprung der Sprache so natürlich, so nahe und leicht, wie ein Kinderspiel; denn die menschliche Natur bleibt vom Anfange bis zum Ende der Tage, eben so gleich dem Himmelreiche als einem Sauerteige, mit dessen Wenigkeit jedes Weib drey Scheffel Mehls zu durchgähren im Stande ist. (*SW* 3:32)]

If “every phenomenon of nature was a word,” even for the Adamic world of the first humans that Hamann is describing here, then there is no fundamental

conflict between words and things, concept and nature. Hamann's linking of word and thing allows both to exist within a chain of signification that is also a chain of creation and proliferation. This proliferation, for which Hamann presents a chain of images that link heavenly creation to the expansion of leavened meal (referring to Luke 13: 20–21) and, by an oblique intimation, to the fecundity of women, seems to be similar to Derrida's notion of the play of signification. By insisting on the absence of a ground of signification, he would escape the charge of "universal Christocentrism" leveled at him by Manfred Geier's post-structuralist interpretation (86–88), but at the same time favorably imputed to him by Betz's radical orthodoxy reading (*After* 136–40). Yet, Hamann also maintains, against a Derridean reduction of signs to mere play, that words have a metaphysical character that is based on their figurative aspect. Words are revelations, not just because they arbitrarily proliferate, but because they also establish the figurative relationships that provide a metaphysical structure for reality. The proliferation of words does not develop as a pure play, but as an orientation around sense experience understood as "sensible *revelations*" ["*sinnlicher Offenbarungen*"] on the one hand and "human *testimonies*" ["*menschlicher Zeugnisse*"] on the other hand (*Writings* 117; *SW* 3:39–40) Both the empirical world and the symbolic tradition merge in a process of revelation that is irreducible to any universality or essence, and the figuration carried out by the naming process constitutes both the symbolic starting point and the horizon of possibilities for nature itself and its future development.

Revelation and Aesthetics

Within Hamann's writing, both revelation and tradition exist as dynamic processes rather than stable universals. Revelation can only occur through the process of the empirical unfolding of the world through the word, understood not as nature's obeying of laws, but as nature's particularity. Likewise, the human relationship to God is mediated through the process of naming, which implicates the human in a structure that creates invisibility and also allows the unfolding of a specific tradition whose proliferation constitutes the hidden writing that structures human activity. Sensual revelation and creative tradition are linked in their unfolding within an aesthetic reception process rather than a conceptual one.

As with his theory of language, Hamann's idea of aesthetic reception is not fully systematized, but fragments in his work give some indications about the key forces that determine his aesthetics. He indicates at one point that

notwithstanding the fact that every apprentice contributes to his instruction to learn in keeping with inclination, talent, and opportunities, learning in the true

understanding is not invention any more than it is sheer recollection. (*Writings* 119, translation modified) [Ohngeachtet aber jeder Lehrling zu seinem Unterrichte mitwirkt nach Verhältnis seiner Neigung, Fähigkeit und Gelegenheiten zu lernen: so ist doch *lernen* im eigentlichen Verstande eben so wenig *Erfindung* als bloße *Wiedererinnerung*. (SW 3:41)]

Learning is neither pure invention nor simple recollection because it depends upon a tradition, yet involves an affective engagement with this tradition. Essential to this engagement is a mimetic relation to tradition that is based on freedom rather than subordination.

Without the perfect law of freedom man would not even be capable of imitation, the basis of all education and invention. For man by nature is the greatest pantomime among all the animals. (*Writings* 115) [Ohne das *vollkommene Gesetz der Freyheit* würde der Mensch gar keiner *Nachahmung* fähig sein, auf die gleichwol alle *Erziehung* und *Erfindung* beruht; denn der Mensch ist von Natur unter allen Thieren der größte *Pantomim*. (SW 3:38)]

Jørgensen notes that Hamann's notion of *mimesis* of nature must be distinguished from *imitatio* of ancient texts (44–49), and in this passage Hamann's focus on pantomime links imitation to creation through a translation process. In the pantomime, humans must free themselves from their previous habits in order to translate a received image into a new medium. Consequently, one cannot become that which is imitated. Rather, one must express that which is imitated using a new language composed of the means at one's disposal, creating thereby an entirely new expression. Imitation allows humans to interact with both nature and the tradition in a translation process, modulating received elements according to one's sensibilities.

In this process, the word is not just a sign for the understanding but an image for aesthetic reception, and the origins of the tradition for Hamann are consequently in poetry as a linking of symbol and passion.

Poetry is the mother-tongue of the human race, as the garden is older than the ploughed field; painting, than writing; song, than declamation; parables, than logical deduction; barter, than commerce. A deeper sleep was the repose of our most distant ancestors, and their movement a frenzied dance. Seven days they would sit in the silence of thought or wonder;—and would open their mouths—to winged sentences.

The senses and passions speak and understand nothing but images. (*Writings* 63)

[Poesie ist die Muttersprache des menschlichen Geschlechts; wie der Gartenbau, älter als der Acker: Malerey,—als Schrift: Gesang,—als Deklamation: Gleichnisse,—als Schlüsse: Tausch,—als Handel. Ein tieferer Schlaf war die Ruhe unserer Urahnen; und ihre Bewegung, ein taumelnder Tanz. Sieben Tage im Stillschweigen des Nachsinns oder Erstaunens saßen sie;—und thaten ihren Mund auf—zu geflügelten Sprüchen.

Sinne und Leidenschaften reden und verstehen nichts als Bilder. (SW 2:197)]

Hamann insists here on the aesthetic origins of tradition in images and figures rather than correspondences as well as the link between aesthetics and passion. If the tradition consists first and foremost in gardens, paintings, songs, parables, and barter, the aesthetic reception of these figures includes the elements of sensuality and passion that provide a means to create a modulation in the network of figures that constitutes the tradition. Because the reception of figures and thus the proliferation of the tradition depend on feeling, the imitation that is at the basis of reception and learning will be filtered through an emotional sensibility (Kocziszky 169). This sensibility becomes the key for gauging the value of a particular perspective, and, in defending Socrates against the Sophists who imitated him, Hamann invokes such a sensibility as that which replaces theoretical proofs as a guarantor of truth.

The ignorance of Socrates was *sensibility*. But between sensibility and a theoretical proposition is a greater difference than between a living animal and its anatomical skeleton. (*Hamann's Socratic* 167) [Die Unwissenheit des Sokrates war *Empfindung*. Zwischen Empfindung aber und einen Lehrsatz ist ein grösserer Unterschied als zwischen einem lebenden Their und anatomischen Gerippe desselben. (SW 2:73)]

Sensibility determines the present reaction to the received figure, and sensibility thus works in the present to establish the proper interpretation of both textual figures from the past and from other cultural contexts. Sensibility consequently encompasses the oral aspect of language in which it is linked to a particular situation, and it is what allows humans to selectively interpret the tradition to adapt it to present needs.

Hamann's recasting of Socrates from the prototypical Enlightenment rationalist into a precursor of Christ presents an example of the role of sensibility in interpretation. For Hamann "all of history becomes christocentric" (Jørgensen 32), and his Christian sensibility establishes the framework within which all texts and all of creation can be recast (Sparling, "Transfiguring" 17). This process of interpreting and ordering texts and nature creates a complete translation of the world into a specific Christian context. Yet, if Hamann describes this "typological" method in his reading of Socrates as a kind of prophet of Christianity, this method is not an exclusively Christian undertaking. Though he does not participate in such a project, Hamann's framework outlines the possibility for translating history and nature into the terms of another context of tradition within which one might be operating. Indeed, his emphatic notion of speaking as translation and his method of interspersing his texts with untranslated passages that function as "keyhole" views into alternative traditions maintains a constant consciousness of the possibility of multiple traditions, each one presenting all of reality anew.

“To Speak is to Translate”

Hamann’s respect for alternative traditions is anchored theoretically in his view of translation as the essential moment of the naming process, which is only creative in the sense that it is a translation of a prior language of images into another language of signs. As Hamann emphasizes, speaking is always translation:

To speak is to translate—from an angelic language into a human language, that is, to translate thoughts into words,—things into names—images into signs, which can be poetic or curiologal, historic or symbolic or hieroglyphic—and philosophical or characteristic. This kind of translation (that is, speech) resembles more than anything else the wrong side of a tapestry: ‚And shews the Stuff, but not the Workman’s skill,‘ or it can be compared with an eclipse of the sun, which can be looked at in a vessel of water. (*Writings* 66–67) [Reden ist übersetzen—aus einer Engelsprache in eine Menschensprache, das heist, Gedanken in Worte—Sachen in Namen,—Bilder in Zeichen; die poetisch oder kyriologisch, historisch, oder symbolisch oder hieroglyphisch—und philosophisch oder charakteristisch seyn können. Diese Art der Übersetzung (verstehe Reden) kommt mehr, als irgend eine andere, mit der verkehrten Seite von Tapeten überein, And shews the stuff, but not the workman’s skill; oder mit einer Sonnenfinsternis, die einem Gefäße voll Wassers in Augenschein genommen wird. (SW 2:198–99)]

Betz (127–28) and Hans-Martin Lumpff (56–58) read the translation of angelic language into human language, or thoughts into words, as a fall from divinity to humanity in which a divine essence must express itself in the fallen form of human language and only the original poet, God, can provide an adequate rendering. But as Dickson emphasizes, following Xavier Tilliette (72–75), “both sides of the equation are a ‘language’” (94), and the translation of the angelic language into human language is not an exclusively divine activity but a description of the speaking process itself as a process of figuration. All speaking and all understanding rely on figures of speech in which there is no question of an “objective” faithfulness but only of an aesthetically satisfying figural relationship – one that speaks to the sensibility. On this reading, Hamann’s images of the underside of the carpet or the viewing of the solar eclipse through the water’s reflection illustrate both the relationship and the distance of the translation to the original language. Every translation must bridge a fundamental divide between two comprehensive systems of representation, each of which presents the world in its entirety. Consequently, the translation, like the underside of the carpet or the reflection of the sun, cannot be appreciated as a direct expression of an underlying essence but only within its own plane of existence and as a reality in itself to be deciphered by looking at the relationships that it establishes within its own language. Similarly, if speech is a form of translation, it cannot be understood as the

outward appearance of an underlying thought or image but as its own system of relationships and figurations. Though Betz and Sparling (“Transfiguring” 20) highlight the fallen character of speech and of clothing, Hamann does not, as we have seen for instance in the centrality of the figure of clothing for his thought. Because they are confined to creaturely existence, texts can only participate in divinity through the process of tradition itself. As Dickson points out, “[t]he Bible is not in a peculiar position in this respect; all attempts at articulation are in some sense derivative of a more ‘divine’ original; this is not the sign of a problematic text, but is rather the nature of human experience and speaking” (94–95). But if even the original thought, image, or thing is not an essence but itself a language and if all speaking and in effect all of creation is a figurative translation, then Hamann is not establishing a fundamental dichotomy between sacred and secular texts. Instead, the focus is on figuration, and Hamann leaves it to the poet to imitate the “jumbled verses” [“Turbatverse”] of nature and even “to bring them into right order” [“sie in Geschick zu bringen”] (*Writings* 65–66; SW 2:199). Though Lumppp insists that this poet can only be God (56), Hamann’s statement that “poetry is the mother-tongue of the human race” is an attempt to link this poetic task to human endeavor, and Eva Kocziszky argues that Hamann’s main concern is to highlight the prophetic potential of human poetry (184–85). In pointing toward the revelatory character of human poetic language, Hamann defends the figurational process of naming against abstraction’s implicit denigration of figuration as an accident that can be dispensed with in a conceptual reformulation.

If all speech is translation, then there is no original language that could provide the ground against which all other languages would be mere imitations, and all language is equivalent in its capacity for revelation. At the same time, though, every language also establishes its own sovereignty through the translation process. Carol Jacobs provides a view of Hamann’s consciousness of the way that each separate tradition recasts the world anew in her reading of the epigraph of *Aesthetica in nuce* from *The Book of Judges* 5:30 (cited by Hamann in the original Hebrew): “A prey of divers colours of needlework, of divers colours of needlework on both sides, meet for the necks of them that take the spoil” (*Writings* 60). These words are spoken by the mother of Sisera, who has gone to battle against the Jews and who, the reader knows, has already lost the battle and been treacherously killed by Jael. Sisera’s mother, anticipating his return, looks forward to the textiles that he will bring back as the spoils of his victory. As Jacobs lays out (118–21), this passage is too fraught with ambiguity to be read as Hamann’s triumphant claim of victory. Rather, this passage must be taken as a comment on the process of appropriating textiles, and thus texts, as the spoils of a military, and then of a resulting interpretive, victory. Recalling both the clothing that fits humans into a specific history of figuration and the tapestry that can only be seen

from one side at a time, the textiles that Sisera's mother longs for as a sign of victory, even in a moment when her son lies dead in defeat, indicate to the reader a sense of the alternative ways in which a single text or textile might be integrated into one or the other opposing context. Moreover, the victory of one reading over another in this passage does not depend on some rational determiner of legitimacy but purely on the military victory that leads to the control of spoils and thus the figuration of text or textile within one tradition as opposed to another. This dependence of meaning on political conquest provides an indication of the political theological import of Hamann's approach to tradition.

Beyond Secularization

The story of Sisera's mother indicates a kind of equivalency between two opposing traditions in which political conquest can lead to the recasting of a particular figure into a new tradition. This possibility leads to a new perspective on the question posed at the beginning: what would constitute a traditionalist response to Milbank's attempt to oppose secularization with a sacred fullness? To answer this question, we must note that, in contrast to Milbank, Hamann does not even mention a contrast between secular and sacred culture, even though one might say that he is facing precisely the same process of secularization that Milbank bewails. Instead, Hamann focusses on defending particularity against abstraction and aesthetic sensibility against theoretical constructs. Secularization for Hamann is simply not an issue. Here, he prefigures Gershom Scholem's words in a 1926 letter to Franz Rosenzweig, in which he states: "The secularization of language is only a *façon de parler*, a ready-made phrase. It is absolutely impossible to empty out words filled to bursting, unless one does so at the expense of language itself" (226). Scholem states here that which Hamann implies in his approach to tradition. Language, because it can only exist as a chain of signifiers that structures our relation to the world, can not be secularized because it cannot be de-particularized. The only way to secularize language would be to deny language in favor of an ideal universal lying behind it. But as Scholem indicates, such a life in abstraction is only possible in the secularist's fantasy world, and even the newly "secularized" Hebrew spoken in the streets of Israel can only point to, but not really be, the "expressionless linguistic world in which the 'secularization' of language could alone be possible" (226). Here, the arrival of a "living" Hebrew of the streets brings us back to the question of how to reanimate the dead Hebrew language that provided the first impetus for Hamann's polemic against Johann David Michaelis (Unger 1:241–44; Lump 28–33).

Derrida's commentary on Scholem's letter is similar to Milbank's approach in that it invokes the possibility of secularization in order to condemn

it, designating it as a language that is “inexpressive, vacant, degraded, and corrupted” (*Acts* 216). One wonders if Derrida, in taking over this Heideggerian trope of a vacant and corrupted language, is not establishing the same kind of condemnatory fervour that Milbank uses to berate modern secular culture. He goes on to write, “[t]he empty expression ‘secularization’ brings about the emptying out of meaning of which the would-be, the so-called, the inconsistent secularization consists” (*Acts* 217). Against this condemnation of a degraded language emptied of meaning, Hamann’s emphasis on tradition is in fact much less fundamentalist. For he valorizes every existing language as one that, by virtue of its inheritance through time, already establishes a history of figuration and thereby sets up a relationship to the metaphysical. Hamann’s focus on figuration implies that every language consists of a tradition that is singular and thus potentially divine. Even a non-Biblical language maintains a relation to the divine through its particular figural relationships, and if a literature exists, then it would be possible to investigate its particular way of relating to the infinite. In this approach, language would be considered in its aesthetic manifestation in which both overtly religious forms and putatively secular literary forms might have similar functions by virtue of their common participation in aesthetic processes. A “post-secular” study of literature would not necessarily consist of “Biblical” readings of literary texts but also of attempts to understand how literary texts themselves construct an aesthetic totality within which a particular relation to the divine has been set up. Secularization, if it were to have a meaning in this context, would have to be understood as a process in which Judeo-Christian symbolic traditions have further split, bifurcated and proliferated in order to create a set of new literary traditions. The issue here would not be an absconding of the sacred or an evacuation of meaning, but a proliferation of, and resulting conflict between, traditions. The study of literature would in effect be an attempt to take into account this divine aspect of literature (e.g. from Baudelaire through Bataille or from Goethe to Kafka) that has hitherto gone under the name of secularization. This approach would focus on traditions and rituals to account for the multiplicity of human cultures, while also emphasizing the metaphysical component of each one. The evaluation of literature would be a part of the analysis of the parameters of particular cultures and the metaphysical choices embedded in their texts. By comparing varying cultures’ figurative structures, philology simultaneously provides an insight into the ways in which each culture establishes a relation to the divine in its texts.

As opposed to an interpretive practice that attempts to deconstruct the metaphysical, Hamann’s work outlines the essential relationship between figures of speech and metaphysics. But instead of treating the question of the metaphysical as an issue of a depth behind things that reaches back to an eternal permanence, Hamann conceives of depth as an effect of a social relationship to the past and the future as established in a cultural tradition. In

this context the structure of transcendence for a particular tradition must be extrapolated out of the constraints and freedoms mediated by this tradition. Rather than relying on philosophy or theology as the foundation of tradition, literary theory relies on figurative relationships as the conduit for revelation, thereby following Hamann to establish “revelations and traditions” [“Offenbarungen und Überlieferungen”] not as the hidden substance of the sacred but as those figures that we must translate into our daily lives and pass on as our legacies to the future (*Writings* 116; SW 3:39). Such a vision of literary criticism does not let it off the metaphysical hook, but rather raises the stakes for it in forcing it to engaging with the kind of theological issues that Milbank rightfully raises, but in terms of the primacy, not of Christianity per se, but of poetry as “the mother tongue of the human race.”

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David Pan
Dept. of European Studies and Languages
University of California, Irvine
Irvine, CA 92697
dtpan@uci.edu