

Hamann, Herder, and Heidegger's Hermeneutics of Being

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From his first forays into it, Johann Georg Hamann is troubled by Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*. He spends four years attempting to put his finger on the reason why. Here, in his letters, we follow his attempts until, with the encouragement--and apparently the help--of his younger friend Johann Gottfried Herder, the reason dawns.

Hamann's comments on Kant's *Critique*, on the one hand, and Herder's replies, on the other, suggest a specific link--not heretofore noted--between Heidegger's hermeneutics of Being and the two eighteenth-century thinkers named. Why "thinkers"? Hamann explicitly refuses the designation philosopher, and for reasons that Herder and Heidegger share. All three find the purism of metaphysics, so closely aligned with the word philosophy, misguided, and Herder lights Hamann's way to recognizing what it is that so troubles him about metaphysics and thus philosophy. This, once articulated, appears to point the way to *Being and Time*.

Hamann's and Herder's thought marked Heidegger's own. He mentions them together in his lectures of 1919 (Van Buren 278). He teaches a course on Herder's *Essay on Language* (Heidegger 2004). He quotes from Hamann's correspondence (Heidegger 1971, 191). But the edition he cites does not contain the letter to Herder of June 1785, around which the present paper turns. Did Heidegger have access to an edition that included this letter? We do not know.

Nonetheless, noting that Heidegger makes a point early in his magnum opus arrestingly similar to that in Hamann's letter, I focus on Hamann's comments there and in other of his letters as he struggles to arrive at a revelation resembling the insight noted, foundational for Heidegger's great deconstructive edifice.

I emphasize Hamann's struggle as a runup to his revelation, underscoring the challenge with which the *Critique* confronted him--for four years and many readings--before his breakthrough. Both Hamann and Herder, after the *Critique* reached print, set about writing refutations. Hamann's--his tiny *Metakritik*--would wait long for publication. Herder's, eventually a great anti-Kantian campaign, began to appear immediately. Still, only Heidegger's *Being and Time* would make headway against Kant.

When Heidegger introduces the observation resembling Hamann's idea, he does so without attribution. The point perhaps seemed to require none. What he notes may have been available vaguely in Herder, to whom Heidegger had already referred in his earliest lectures. But the incisive statement is Hamann's. Before examining his letters, let us note familiar early contents of *Being and Time* pertinent to the present account.

Heidegger inaugurates his magnum opus by observing Plato's perplexity concerning the word Being and notes that even today we have no answer to the question of what we mean by this word (19). Heidegger pursues this meaning, a pursuit he reveals as long regarded as unnecessary (21). But when he points to those whose thought exemplifies the tradition's longstanding inattention to Being, he mentions the Greeks and the medieval Christian theologians only in passing, and focuses instead on two moderns, Descartes and Kant. Descartes "contribut[ed] to the forgottenness of man's Being," he writes, and Kant, taking over Descartes' position "quite dogmatically," "altogether neglected the problem of Being" (45). "With the '*cogito sum*' Descartes had claimed that he was putting philosophy on a new and firm footing. But what he left undetermined... was the kind of Being that belongs to the *res cogitans*, or--more precisely--the meaning of the Being of the '*sum*'" (46). It is toward seeing that Kant, following Descartes, prioritizes not the *sum* but the *cogito*, that Hamann struggles. Here we trace his struggle to reveal this to himself.

On April 6, 1781, Hamann receives the first galleys of Kant's *Critique* and a request to review the work--these from Kant's publisher, J. F. Hartknoch (Hamann 1949-57, 3:454). Hamann intends to write the review.

On April 27, 1781, he writes Herder: "I've received the first thirty pages of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* and I await the beginning [an explanatory introduction] and end with every arrival of the post. You, as a longstanding member of his audience, will understand him better" [i.e., better than I] (Hamann 1955-79 [for all further letters] 4:376).

He then generalizes his own difficulties with the *Critique* as potentially universal ones, prophesying widespread misunderstanding: "[Kant] will be as short on readers as [Klopstock's] *Gelehrtenrepublik* [a fantasy treating contemporary literary and intellectual life] is on subscribers, but he'll be equally short on any who will understand him" (4, 283).

Hamann's own uncertainty about his understanding of Kant is accentuated in his continuation of this same letter two days later (April 29), after he again expresses curiosity about Herder's response to the *Critique* (Herder will be unable to secure a copy until August). Hamann now reports himself at the point of exasperation with Kant and his *Critique*:

I'm really curious, dear kinsman, to learn how you'll react to a reading of the Kantian *Critique*. I've had enough of this transcendental twaddle about this supposedly "pure" reason, for it ultimately seems to depend on schoolbook nonsense and empty odds and ends. I'm about to read Locke, and Hume's *Treatise on Human Nature*...they seem to be two sources and the best documents in this field. Please do, soon, fulfill my impatient longing for your letters. (4, 285)

The urgency of this request extends beyond the usual "write soon" formulae of the period and even of this correspondence. Moreover, this request does not come at the end of the letter, where such formulae conventionally appear. Indeed, at this long letter's end Hamann will again ask Herder to write very soon.

As a means of further overcoming his uncertainty in the face of Kant's *Critique*, Hamann continues in this same letter to seek a means of assimilating Kant's argument (or possibly refuting it, although Hamann's negative reaction to the work is still just setting in). A reference he has seen to Monboddo's work seems pertinent. He asks if Herder knows it, mentions Plato's archetypes and the material ideas [*materielle Ideen*] of Reimarus as potentially helpful (4, 286-87), then adds that perhaps the principle of the *coincidentia oppositorum*, which he erroneously attributes to Giordano Bruno, will provide him insight. He requests information on Bruno from Herder, and closes: "This coincidence [*Coincidenz*]...seems to me the only adequate basis for putting an end to the feud between healthy reason and pure unreason" (4, 287).

Hamann's uncertainty remains a theme in his correspondence with Herder throughout their written exchanges regarding the *Critique*. Hamann's "you...will understand him better" suggests awareness that Herder is familiar with Kant's metaphysical theories in a university lecture-hall version (Herder's student notes appear in Kant 1964). Herder cannot answer Hamann about the *Critique* itself, which he has yet to see, but he does respond about Kant, and his statements are not tentative. They come as capstones to a disquisition on a topic that concerns Herder vitally--the extent of

the belief in magic still afflicting Europe in the enlightened late eighteenth century and furthered by even its most enlightened thinkers. This phenomenon, he argues, can be attributed to the anarchy of a reason that regards itself as pure. Herder identifies the phenomenon with the noxious gases emitted from the lower intestine: "...the sulfur flowers of pure reason, about which," he adds, "Kant writes the rule book" (4, 273).

In Herder's statements here are already contained those views of Kant's metaphysics that will characterize Herder's anti-Kantian pages in Part Two of his *Ideas Toward the Philosophy of the History of Mankind* (henceforth *Philosophy*), of 1785. Reason, regarding itself as transcendent, generates a variety of dangerous and preposterous beliefs, he argues. Operating *apriori*, it fails to anchor itself in experience, in the evidence afforded it by the senses. It is not difficult to recognize Heidegger's accordance with this view.

It was argued early in the nineteenth century that, regarding Kant, Herder had plagiarized Hamann. But their letters, and Herder's *Philosophy*, Parts One and Two, suggest that Herder will have had little to learn from his older friend. It is Hamann who requests Herder's help.

Hamann writes Herder on the subject of Kant again May 10, 1781. He has not yet received Herder's above-mentioned response and is replying here to a note from Herder of April 23. Both sections of Hamann's two-part letter devote much space to Kant's *Critique*. Hamann is impatient with it, and focuses on his uncertain understanding of it. At six p.m. he writes,

Eighteen more sections of Kant here--but not yet at an end, which end can scarcely be expected with even ten more, in which case the book will be thicker than both parts of Lambert's architectonic in one volume, which is already the most monstrous in my library. Such a corpulent [*corpulentes*] book is suited neither to its author's stature nor to the concept of pure reason. I started reading this [part] yesterday because the first part, the basic transcendental teaching, is at an end. The second begins on page 700....I'm reading Hume on human nature for the second time with renewed understanding and pleasure--Locke awaits me--and so on from one feast to another. Unfortunately, though, I know and feel how greatly my digestion and intestines suffer. (4, 292-93)

At ten p.m. Hamann asks again about Herder's opinion of the *Critique*, noting that as Kant's former student Herder will more readily see through him: "I'm curious to hear your opinion of Kant's masterpiece. As a former student of his you'll be able to arrive at a view of it much faster than I" (4, 293). He speaks of his need to outline the *Critique* "in order, perhaps, to be able to review it, but not judge it--not, at least, from the point of view of philosophical core ideas" (4, 294).

In a letter to Hartknoch the following day he again notes his need to outline the *Critique*. Seven weeks later, on July 1, apparently still suspended in the perplexities of his Kantian deliberations, he finishes his review. Little more than a handful of pages, and not especially negative, it does, though, object to "purifiers" of reason. Hamann never posts the review.

His letter to Herder of August 5, 1781 explains why: "I haven't sent it because I look on its author as an old friend, and, I almost have to say, benefactor, because it's

him almost alone that I have to thank for my first employment. I don't want to knock him in the head. But should my Hume translation see the light of day, I won't muffle my mouth..." (4, 317). That he has yet settled on even a provisionally satisfactory assessment of Kant is doubtful, for, in his letter to Herder December 9, 1781, he mentions floundering: "In [now] my third reading of Kant's work, I'm stuck [*im Stecken gerathen*]; I'll probably have to go through it a fourth time. But I'll hear him out and wait for his next work, which is supposed to be a summary or a reader" (4, 400).

With this the subject of Kant ceases for an extended period. Hamann refers to it again eight months later, in a letter to Herder April 22, 1782, suggesting that Kant's next work may bring a solution to Hamann's problems with this one: "Maybe in a while his Prolegomena to a yet to be written metaphysics as the kernel of the great system he's supposed to be working on now will come" (4, 376). But in his next letter to Herder, July 7, 1782, he appears to have given up on Kant, at least until such time as the Prolegomena might appear: "About Hume and Kant everything's gone sour in my head. I'll just have to wait until I see the Prolegomena to the metaphysics, which is yet to be written, before I bring out my metacritique" (4, 400).

Herder apparently urges him not to abandon his project, for a year and a half later, December 8, 1783, Hamann writes: "Your encouragement has given me a bit of heart again for thinking about my metacritique of the purism of reason" (5, 107). (Hamann's full intended title for his metacritical study appears here for the first time.) But Hamann has only doubts about what he might have to say. And his hopes for his study of Kant have narrowed:

Whether I'll ever get beyond this point I doubt. Now [just] finding and revealing the first mistake [*das proton pseudos*] would be enough for me. But exactly here's the knot. The first review I drafted is from July first, 1781 [a year and a half before]. I hope, though, to have gotten a little farther with the book, but not so far as I'd need to, to undo its knot. Up against Kant, though, my poor head is a shattered pot--clay against iron [*mein armer Kopf ist gegen Kant ein zerbrochener Topf—thon gegen Eisen*]. (5, 107-8)

Muchscholarly ingenuity has been marshaled in attempts to maintain Hamann's high reputation as a thinker by demonstrating that the arresting metaphor in this last sentence is not an admission of intellectual defeat--that it does not mean that reading Kant breaks Hamann's head. I can refer to these attempts here only in passing.

Herder replies shortly, January 26, 1784, apparently with further encouragement, for Hamann does continue his efforts with Kant, and though he looks on his progress as inadequate, he attributes his being able to proceed to a tip from Herder: "Following a hint in your last letter, I've tormented myself with a metacritique of the purism of reason. It comes to little more than a few pages. The whole idea has gone wrong [*ist mir verunglückt*] and I've just tried to bring the thing to an end so that I can rid myself of the thought of it" (5, 120).

Throughout almost all of 1784 Hamann remains convinced of his failure in his study of Kant. Unable to bring himself to work farther on his metacritical project, he puts it aside--only temporarily, he believes, but he will never again take up the metacritique. He refers to it often, during the course of this and the following year, as still viable, but statements of postponement become characteristic. On February 8, 1784

(letter of January 25-February 9), little more than a week after he has set down the contents of his metacritical paper, he writes Herder that further work on it depends on the completion of another project, his "Golgotha." Until its completion: "I shall take no pen in hand nor think of any other little book. My metacritique will be dependent on this" (5, 124).

But though by May 2 "Golgotha" is complete, Hamann does not return to his struggle with Kant. He may in time, he reports, writing J. C. Lavater on May 4: "Perhaps even my metacritique of the purism of reason will follow [presumably "after 'Golgotha'"], but a good thing takes time" (5, 140).

That he makes no further progress in his efforts with Kant may have in part to do with the appearance of Part One of Herder's *Philosophy*, which devotes a section of Book Four, though without mentioning Kant, to an anti-metaphysical, more than implicitly anti-Kantian argument. Here Hamann could see Herder's grasp, as well as his sweeping general refutation, of the same Kant that Hamann had been laboring over in vain now for three years. Hamann receives Herder's *Philosophy*, Part One May 28, 1784, and shows it to friends, one of whom is Kant, who then lashes out at Herder with an *ad hominem* response (Kant 1911, 8, 145-55). This elicits a pointed, and extended, answer from Herder in his *Philosophy*, Part Two, though Herder notes that he is responding to the book, not the man, to whom, he says, he owes much, and to whom, to the end of his life, he continued to state he was grateful. Hamann's next letter to Herder, August 6, 1784, notes how pleased he is with Herder's *Philosophy*:

I keep on crowing from my manure pile. I've already said how much I like your pleasure garden [Herder's *Philosophy*]. This beautiful valley borders directly on my hill, or what I just called it. Even were I as gifted a speaker as Demosthenes, I'd still only need to repeat one single phrase three times. Reason is language: *logos*; I keep gnawing on this marrowbone, and I'll gnaw myself to death on it. For a darkness remains for me over this depth: I'm still waiting for an apocalyptic angel with a key to this abyss. (5, 177)

Heidegger quotes from this letter in his essay "Language" (Heidegger 1971, 191). Hamann writes again September 15, 1784, sending Herder the copy of the metakritik he had promised in January, but with this disclaimer: "Here is this ridiculous mouse, dearest, best countryman...and it's as little worth your reading as worth my writing down....I transplanted the best of it into the little Golgotha. You can't set much store by this fragment" (5, 216-17).

Hamann's next reference to his metacritical paper, November 14, 1784, characterizes his ideas there as stupid [dumm]--possibly because they were written before his receipt of Herder's *Philosophy*, Part One, where he will have encountered Herder's negative views of metaphysical thought. At the same time, however, possibly thanks to Herder's *Philosophy*, Hamann expounds presumably new, or revised, metacritical ideas with great vigor and enthusiasm.

This is the first time Hamann has evidenced a hint of satisfaction with his metacritical insights. His correspondent here is F. H. Jacobi, and the letter marks a swift and extraordinary shift in Hamann's attitude toward his efforts with Kant. Writing expansively of his metacritical ideas, he is far from discouraged. (I must omit his delighted observations.) Now, after studying Herder's *Philosophy*, Part One, Hamann's

long-sought idea appears to be coming to him. Herder appears to have served as that “angel of the Apocalypse,” and his *Philosophy*, Part One, as that “key” to the Kantian abyss for which Hamann had called three months back, in his letter of August 6, 1784. That key appears to have opened a way to what he had sought in Kant. Hamann’s reading of the Scottish empiricists had long since convinced him that experience was the only valid basis for knowing. What he had been unable to discern, as already noted, was Kant’s initial error--his *proton pseudos*.

Hamann’s satisfaction with his dawning understanding continues in another letter to Jacobi December 1-5, 1784, and by February 15, 1785, his newfound certainty of insight brings him to a point at which he appears about to assert that he has found what he has been seeking. He writes: “I started reading Descartes’ posthumous work yesterday with pleasure. Apart from the fact that what I read doesn’t for me have much coherence, it does seem to me fruitful. The whole Kantian edifice seems to me to rest on this vain certainty [vain, here, in the sense of ‘product of vanity’]” (5, 366). He does not identify the certainty.

Finally, to Herder three and one-half months later, June 1, 1785, more than a year after receiving Herder’s *Philosophy*, Part One, and more than four years after receiving the first of the *Critique*’s galleys, Hamann is able to explain exactly what it is he has been trying to get at, and with this he at last sees the clear possibility of refuting Kant’s philosophy by means of a philosophical argument of his own. How?--through the reversal of the Cartesian *cogito*. He writes: “[I’ve got] lots of items [now] for my *M e t a c r i t i q u e o f R e a s o n*, of which I’ve no understanding without [privileging] *e x p e r i e n c e* and tradition. It is not *cogito ergo sum*, but the reverse, or, more Hebraically: *est, ergo cogito...*” (5, 448).

Here it is, the insight that calls to mind the similar insight encountered in Heidegger’s Introduction to *Being and Time* and in Chapter One there as well, where it appears twice more (46, 72, 75). Nor is this all: Hamann also adds this prophetic observation: “with the inversion of this simple principle, the whole system perhaps gains a different language and takes a different direction.” *A different language and a different direction* indeed: perhaps those of Heideggerian thought.

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