

Studies on Themes and Motifs in Literature

Body Language:

Corporeality, Subjectivity,
and Language in
Johann Georg Hamann

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Introduction

Faith in Language

This study takes as its point of departure Hamann's own suggestion that we begin with the only accessible certainty, our existence: "Unser eigen Daseyn und die Existenz aller Dinge ausser uns muss geglaubt werden und kann auf keine andere Art ausgemacht werden. Was ist gewisser als des Menschen Ende, und von welcher Wahrheit gibt es eine allgemeinere und bewährtere Erkenntnis?"⁶ A central paradox of Hamann's thought is revealed in this curious inversion of faith and certainty: given that there is no truth more certain and established than one's own existence (and by extension, the cessation of that existence), it is an odd claim indeed that this truth must be accepted on faith. Moreover, this faith becomes the precondition for the very truth it generates: certainty is faith, and faith is certainty. The epistemological model Hamann proposes is therefore based on the assumption that all knowledge of the world begins with the belief that there is a world to be known. On this point, Hamann is the intellectual heir of Humean skepticism, through which knowledge of the outside world is a matter

of belief rather than an object of reason. As Hamann admiringly, if a bit cheekily, points out in a 1759 letter to Kant: “Der attische Philosoph, Hume, hat den Glauben nöthig, wenn er ein Ey essen und ein Glas Wasser trinken soll” (ZH.I.379). However, this tautology equating certainty and faith is interesting not only for its representative nature (for if one dares to make a generalization of Hamann’s thought, it is that he continually seeks to invert and combine opposites in unexpected ways), but because Hamann locates the interaction and realization of these two spheres in language.

This claim must be understood on two levels. The first proceeds from the assumption that the most fitting expression of human finitude is a language grounded in the particularity of that finitude. The authenticity of this language is underwritten by its reflection of “*unser eigen Daseyn*” (N.II.73), and not any notion of an abstract, universal, human existence. Such a language must reflect what Hamann calls the “*sichtbare Schema, in dem wir einher gehen*” (N.II.198), all the profane, corporeal vicissitudes of finite, human existence. It does so through an original use of language, one that employs metaphor, wit, and irony in order to create ever new and unexpected reflections on a particular, lived life. In this respect, Hamann comes close to Friedrich Nietzsche’s concept of language as metaphor, a comparison to which this study will return. However, the more such a constitutive refusal of abstraction and universality in language mirrors the corporeal finitude of human existence, the closer it comes to the certainty that existence in faith grants. Therefore, by destabilizing the abstract dimension of language to such a radical degree, Hamann—this study proposes—comes precariously close to making faith inevitable, as the alternative to a groundless relativism appears to be unlivable. Furthermore, by positing faith as that which makes the perception of existence possible, Hamann elevates faith to the level of a quasi-faculty, constitutive of human subjectivity and no longer a matter of will and choice. What *does* remain a matter of choice, however, is the recognition and implementation of that cognitive horizon granted by faith.

Hamann’s insistence upon an embrace of corporeal finitude can further be described as a form of negative theology, in which faith and its

divine manifestations reside in the small and particular. It is crucial to note, however, that Hamann does not regard the body as evidence of post-lapsarian sin to be overcome by the exertions of the Lutheran “inner man” of the soul.⁷ On the contrary, Hamann urges human subjectivity to orient itself within the corporeal, reveling in its profane, yet divinely granted, existence. There is a recuperative joy to be found in the body, reflected in the gustatory, tactile, acoustic, and sexual metaphors found throughout his work.

The second level at which Hamann’s focus on language as the realization of certainty and faith must be understood, and the main focus of this study, is the connection he posits between language and ontology. For Hamann, language is not only the communication and expression of finite being; language is finite being’s very essence and structure. In a 1787 letter to Jacobi, Hamann delineates what he sees to be the metaphysical object of his philosophical thought: “Jeder wünscht die Umschaffung der bisherigen Philosophie, hofft sie, arbeitet daran, trägt sein Scherflein dazu bei. Was in deiner Sprache das Seyn ist, möchte ich lieber das Wort nennen” (ZH.VII.175). By equating being and language, Hamann makes an essentially theological argument, reflecting his interpretation of the two creation accounts in Genesis, with a nod to the beginning of the Gospel of John). His reading of these two differing accounts (the first concerning the creation of the world through the Word of God and the second concerning the creation of man through an act of divine volition) will be addressed at several points throughout this study. Preliminarily, it is crucial to note that Hamann differentiates between the creation of man and the realization of man’s being. The former occurs by the hand of God, whereas the latter is actualized through language. However, the language Hamann has in mind is not primarily that of words and human communication; it is the language of man’s communication with the created world through his senses and perceptions. As Hamann states in his most famous essay, the 1760 “*Aesthetica in Nuce*”: “Sinne und Leidenschaften verstehen nichts als Bilder. An Bildern besteht der ganze Schatz menschlicher Erkenntnis und Glückseligkeit” (N.II.197). The perception of the created world through human senses thus already constitutes a communication with that

world, and it is within this communication that Hamann locates the actualization of human ontology. For Hamann, the indisputable certainty of human existence, and the perception of that existence through the senses, are both fundamentally constitutive of human existence and a matter of language.

What makes Hamann's thesis remarkable, and what elevates it above the philosophical dead-end of a theologically grounded explanation for the nature of reality, is that it fully embraces the finite, particular, and at times even fatuous nature of the linguistic dimension of human existence. He thereby prefigures, albeit from a theological perspective, many modern debates on hermeneutics, literary criticism, and the tension between subjectivity and the abstraction of language. He destabilizes traditional, Enlightenment notions of subjectivity, cognition and epistemology, and radicalizes the Kantian circumscription of reason to an extreme degree. The paradox at the heart of his project is that Hamann comes to this philosophy of finitude not at the expense of, but due to, his belief in God. Hamann emphasizes the ineluctably fragmented, particular experience of finitude in order to posit a recuperative universality found only within the shattered remains of our small, finite existence: faith. If for some the devil is in the details, for Hamann it is God himself. What he proposes is a form of negative theology, in which a divine universality is only accessible via a withdrawal into a radical finitude marked by our corporeal existence.

It is the task of this study to probe the contours of that corporeal finitude, located where knowledge (or certainty) intersects with faith, or, more precisely, where knowledge and faith are inverted. In positing the body as that which conditions a subject's encounter with the world, Hamann, it will be argued, prefigures a notion of finite subjectivity that not only runs counter to the Enlightenment tradition, but also reemerges in nineteenth-century (via Kierkegaard and Nietzsche) and twentieth-century discourses (via Benjamin) on the tension between subjectivity and the abstraction of language. Language is wrested away from abstraction and, therefore, any universality, and becomes the expression of a finite, corporeal subjectivity, which for Hamann is itself a state of limitation both imposed and resolved by a

divine creator. Furthermore, it will be argued that Hamann's severe restriction of a hermeneutic horizon, never reaching beyond the ground of sensual perception, precariously leads to the inevitability of faith as the only access to universal meaning. For if all we have is our own subjectively determined finitude, and the existence of that finitude must be taken on faith, what other option remains than to reach out for a recuperative universality?

Hermeneutics of the Small

At first glance, Hamann's stance appears to pose an irreconcilable dilemma: if the ground of all cognition is determined by subjective perception, what hermeneutic tools remain to step beyond the radical singularity of those perceptions? This study argues that the way out of this dilemma lies in delineating the connection Hamann posits between corporeal finitude and its expression in language. This study will show, primarily through an analysis of Hamann's interpretation of the creation accounts in Genesis, that for Hamann language is not only the expression of that finitude, but a form of it. In other words, for Hamann, language *is* ontology; the world—both human and non-human—exists as language, insofar as language is the very condition of man's communication with the world through his senses and vice-versa. Each subject reaches beyond itself by unfolding its full, sensual, perceptual being in and through language.

This study begins with a provisional delineation of inter-related hermeneutic strategies running throughout Hamann's thought. In keeping with Hamann's larger poetological project, they should be regarded as interlocking concepts that only gain currency in concert with one another. The first of these grows out of Hamann's extreme attention to historical embeddedness, revealing what he sees as the historical nature of all thought and experience. This valorization of the temporal is unique, however, because Hamann locates it simultaneously in the present, past, and future. His desire not to be understood discloses an orientation toward a future that leaves its mark on both the past and present.