

Raivis Bičevskis*

Paradoxical Monotony

Abstract

If we look at the impressions and influences of Johann Georg Hamann, an Enlightenment-era thinker, in the context of Livonia and Courland from the aspect of producing text and thought, then J. Ch. Berens' project of an enlightened commercial republic in Riga appears as its first episode and as a far-reaching thought complex. Hamann's studies have a philosophical-cameralistic character. They provided a broad modern vision in fragments. The thought complex, where recourse to Latvian folk songs and their meter and tonality appears in the "Aesthetica in nuce" (1762), also rests on this ground. The passage at the end of "Aesthetica" is once instrumentalized in identity politics, solidified, and mythologized even within the framework of Latvian national culture. However, the text passage is extraordinarily complex and interwoven with several layers of context in Hamann's contemporary environment. One of the critical concepts in this passage is "monotony." This concept needs to be addressed in more detail, as it does not universalize and unify but individualizes and divides. Hamann's monotony is paradoxical: the unity of the world is linked to the diversity of the world's sounds and colors, languages, and times: *the world itself is a paradoxical monotony*. With recourse to "Socratic Memorabilia" and various passages from "Aesthetica in nuce," this paper shows that this folk poetry passage becomes more understandable only when considering the background of Hamann's main ideas. Since singing and possible poetry can be found in Hamann, a Hamannian series of thoughts "God-Nature-Language-Senses-Poet" is turned and solidified national-culturally with the help of Herderian motifs. There is no such consolidation in Hamann. Indeed, his theological-eschatological philology of listening and tonality of nature at the end of the "Aesthetica" contains a prefiguration taken up and continued on this side of Hamann's statements in modernity.

Keywords

J. G. Hamann, Tonality, Nature, Senses, Song

* University of Latvia
Email: raivis.bicevskis@lu.lv

Introduction

The philosophy of the Enlightenment still gives us a reason to look at what is at the heart of the modern age. It is also worth looking at the critique of the Enlightenment at the end of the 18th century. This critique (like the ideas of the Enlightenment) has become an *essential part* of the modern age. One of the most influential critics of the Enlightenment is Johann Georg Hamann (1730–1788). During the Enlightenment, his thinking and writing are fatefully linked to certain traditions in the history of theology, philosophy, literature, and certain places and times (Nadler 1949; Bayer 1988; Jørgensen 2013; Kinzel 2019). Thus, his decidedly evocative locality and individuality in his life are also essential and unavoidable, hence his unique writing style (Kinzel 2019, 50). Of course, the most important things happened in Königsberg (Hamann was a friend of Kant and a teacher of Herder), but his stays in the Baltic States are also part of his human and literary life. Hamann's work is one of a man who, in Riga, in Kegeln near Wolmar, in Mitau and Grünhof, foresaw and predicted many things that determined a whole age. Hamann is important as a thinker who transcends the aesthetics, epistemology, political philosophy, and anthropology of his time and is thus relevant today.

The mentioned places and landscapes and the circumstances there are essential for Hamann—in contrast to the universality and unification of the Enlightenment, he emphasized particularity and locality. However, his stays also influenced the local people. Johann Christoph Berens, Hamann's enlightened friend, patron, and reprover should, of course, be mentioned here (Nadler 1949, 61–64), but also, for example, his pupil Woldemar Dietrich von Budberg in Kegeln near Wolmar (Nadler 1949, 49–50). W. D. von Budberg studied and engaged in various arts and became an artist. Some hailed him as the most outstanding painter of Livonia at that time. He can be considered an example of the flowering of Hamann's pedagogical skills, an example of his lifelong translating and writing practice, the prefiguration and archetype of which for Hamann later consisted in the condescendence (*Herunterlassung*) of God himself.

If we look at the impressions and influences of Hamann in the context of Livonia and Courland from the side of producing text and thought, it is clear that Beren's project, an enlightened commercial republic in Riga, appears as the first (and perhaps not yet fully illuminated) episode and primarily as a thought complex. The thoughts that Hamann wrote, inspired and curated by Berens, exemplify an enlightened vision of the future. Hamann's studies, which have a philosophical-cameralistic character, provided a far-reaching perspective of a commercial city and an enlightened society, admittedly in fragments.

However, his written exchanges with Johann Gottfried Herder on the Riga-Mitau axis are also pertinent. Once started in Königsberg, a conversation was continued but never finished (Bayer 1988, 108-124). This conversation is also connected with the complex of thoughts, where the recourse to a Latvian folk song (Hamann 1999, 215-216) appears in the "Aesthetica in nuce" (1762), Hamann's second-largest work following "Socratic Memorabilia" (1759), in which he criticizes the Enlightenment for the first time.

This reference at the end of "Aesthetica in nuce" can be approached differently. The passage is simultaneously instrumentalized in identity politics, solidified, and mythologized even within Latvian national culture. Now, I would like to take a few steps in the direction of this passage in Hamann's "Aesthetica": 1. "Speaking of nature," 2. "Signs of reality," 3. "The transition from simplicity to closeness to the origin," 4. "The paradoxical monotony," 5. "Prefiguration of modernity." This is how we come to an exposition, naturally preliminary, of the factual complex touched upon there.

"...in every dialect, you can hear its voice."

The starting point (and step one) is a passage from the "Aesthetica in nuce." There Hamann writes (for Hamann researchers, the well known) words:

Speak, that I may see you!—This wish was fulfilled by creation, 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 (Hamann 2007, 65).

This sentence is, I think, one of Hamann's most important statements. There, his main theological and philosophical thoughts converge. In it, one can recognize and interpret specific motifs that have emerged in the 19th and 20th centuries (decoupled from Hamann's main theological emphasis) in Romanticism (nature) and literary versions of Modernity (expression). I want to single out only one motif, albeit significant, that leads from nature to language and folk poetry.

The human being, whom Hamann had discussed a few years before "Aesthetica in nuce" in "Socratic Memorabilia" (i.e., 1759), is placed between the knowledge of the sophists (i.e., enlighteners) and the non-knowledge of Socrates, i.e., confronted with non-knowledge in the age of knowledge. If he now dares to undertake a "hellish journey of self-knowledge" (Hamann 1999, 164) and plunge into the abyss of not-knowing, then the whole world seems to have been lost, the world that reason has rationally assembled. Nothing

remains or, in other words, just nothing is there; the empty abyss of nothingness gapes. Nevertheless, the human notices that only their ideas and reflections of the world in this abyss are fluttering, but not what their senses show. The sensually perceptible reality remains present, now, however, not as thought-spinning; instead, it is here in its immediate sensual presence. Out of Nothingness, the world emerges anew. Away from all everyday opinions, humanity can admire it now. The miraculousness of the world becomes evident; the world is there as an amazingly shining nature.

Moreover, the human being, who only now understands the wonder of the world, exclaims: "Speak to me! Speak something! I see you now!"—and the things speak, nature speaks. The point of this newly experienced reality is that the sensually existing nature is always already a speech, always a speech of God. However, humanity can hear this through the senses only if they have come to perceive the sensually given world as an address through the hellish journey of self-knowledge, that is, through Socratic unknowing. It is not a matter of knowledge here but of a language that speaks itself to us through the senses. The world as nature is an address to which humanity is challenged to answer. "Creation (nature)" is a speech to the creature (humanity) through the creature (through the sensually given).

Nevertheless, despite its excellent existence, the given to which the human being has opened themselves now lacks a uniform context of meaning. The promise of nature has no audible language. Despite their transformation through self-knowledge, a person hears the murmurings of things rather quietly and barely audibly; nature speaks, but it is not *a priori* intelligible what it says. Hamann writes (to quote again a very well-known passage):

(W)e have nothing left in nature but *turbatverse* and *disiecti membra poetae* for our use. To collect these is the scholar's task; to interpret them the philosopher's; to imitate them—or even bolder!—to bring them into skill, the poet's humble part (Hamann 1999, 198).

Nature speaks for our human hearing only scattered "turbatverse," we get from its speech only torn fragments of its speech. That is why scholars try to collect these fragments and put them together. In the Age of Enlightenment and modern times, the sciences have explored nature. However, they started not with admiration and not from the realization of not knowing but from an increased thirst for knowledge and the will to dominate nature. Science, as Hamann says, has made "sacrifices" and "idols" of the silent, but speaking things, because it has confronted nature as its object, and it has sampled it from a distance under the guidance of different questions (i.e.,

experimental methods). It has made study results the reason for its pride and has even “worshiped” them. However, these scientific questions are questions humanity asks nature according to its interests and needs. They have forgotten that nature is, already before these questions, an answer, a speech; therefore, a completely different way leads to the answer.

What kind of path this is is a question that does not even arise in modern sciences. In order to be able to take a different path here, Hamann refers to the linguist Johann Georg Wachter (1663–1757). He says in another place of the “*Aesthetica in nuce*” that in the course of humankind’s development, very different signs and kinds of signs arose, with which humanity tried to designate what they found in the world. These signs are, according to Hamann: “poetic or kyriological, historical, or symbolic or hieroglyphic—and philosophical or characteristic” (Hamann 1999, 199). We are dealing here (in step two) with a range of sign types. For Hamann, there must be an “inner logic,” so to speak, of the development of signs, which consists in the fact that signs become more and more abstract and move further and further away from the immediate sensual reality of things. The abstract-scientific language as a system of signs is not closer to nature (as the epithet “empirical” science suggests); it is, in truth, the furthest away from nature and thus also from the language of nature. Nature, however, *speaks sensuously*. The enlightened sciences have just destroyed the sensually perceptible form of nature with abstract mathematical-calculative methods and models. In Hamann’s words from “*Aesthetica in nuce*”: “Nature works through senses and passions. He who mutilates her tools, how may he feel?” asks Hamann (1999, 206), exclaiming in another passage: Who will dare “to purify the natural use of the senses from the unnatural use of abstractions, whereby our concepts of things are mutilated?” (Hamann 1999, 207).

Nature speaks, it always does, and a person answers. However, this answer is bizarre: for Hamann, it is essential in this context that it is not about an individual, self-referential expression but an answer to the speech of nature as an “intense message” (Achermann 2005, 46; cf. Bayer 1990, 41–42). Even the abstract-objectifying sign language of modern science still carries something of the speech of nature, even if only in the form of the mere object reference. However, the development of the signs still shows traces of a more intimate and more original, although already fatefully shifted, diastatic relationship between humans and the nature created by God. Furthermore, this relationship is where the reference to the singing of the Latvian peasants at the end of the “*Aesthetica in nuce*” comes in.

“Should a poet stand up among them...”

As is known, Hamann writes with reference to his previous admiration for Homer determined by unknowing:

Homer’s monotonous meter ought to strike us as at least as paradoxical as the unboundedness of our German Pindar [namely, Friedrich Gottlieb Klopstock, R. B.]. My amazement at or ignorance of the reason that the Greek poet always used the same meter was tempered when I made a journey through Courland and Lithuania. In certain districts of these regions, you can hear the Lettish or non-German people at work singing just a single cadence of a few notes, which is very much like a poetic meter. If a poet were to emerge among them, it would be quite natural for him to tailor all his lines to this measure established by their voices (Hamann 2007, 93).

This passage from the “Aesthetica” is a replica of a remark by Gotthold Ephraim Lessing about Lithuanian songs in his 33rd letter from the “Briefe, die neueste Literatur betreffend” (Letters concerning the newest literature), as Sven-Aage Jørgensen (1998, 189) assumes. Lessing leafed through one of the first Lithuanian dictionaries, Philipp Ruhig’s (1675–1749) *Litauisch-deutsches und Deutsch-litauisches Wörterbuch* (1705), and found some Lithuanian “Liederchen” (as he wrote) and remarked, “What naive wit! What charming simplicity!” (Lessing 1900, 393) In Hamann (and this is the third step in our reflections), this simplicity becomes originality, closeness to the origin, not naive, but God-centered. With Cento from Cicero, he immediately warns not to want to curl it with branding irons, as Lessing must have done. “It would require too much time to put this small circumstance [...] in its proper light, to compare it with several phenomena, to trace the reasons of it, and to develop the fruitful consequences” (Hamann 1999, 216), but already many signs are sent as emphasized by a quotation from Horace’s “Odes” at the very end of “Aesthetica in nuce” and before its afterword titled “Apostille” (Hamann 1999, 216). Much is said since the Sintflut, i.e., probably since the Fall. To follow the sense of what is said up to the origin of all saying is impossible; considering the said for “naive,” given the Fall, is possible, nevertheless not appropriate. Since then, every word, dialect, and tonality (“cadence of few tones”) concerns the origin and strives for it. Nevertheless, it is also wrong and diastatic.

However (in the fourth step), in this passage, it probably makes sense that the singing of the Latvian peasants in this meter and tonality is a sign, a sign of life, that the call-response relationship between the nature created by God and the people have not yet been completely lost. This sign is a sen-

sual-pictorial, oral response to the call by nature. We can say that in Hamann's work, there is a transition from primitive naivety to a primordially about folk songs in the context of the God-centeredness of all speech and all dialects: what seems to be naivety is precisely the fate of a mute mimicry of the human race, which, still seized by nature, speaks, sings and heaps sign upon sign in a mimetic and tonal way, to which the origin and the "meaning" of this foamy-sounding "paradoxical" frenzy nevertheless remains hidden. One can ask whether the orally performed picture-songs are closer to the originary experience than the abstractly intended unified written language of the Enlighteners with which they vainly wanted to "understand" nature in their treatises. Hamann's invectives in the "New Apology of the Letter h" against Enlightenment projects of the standardization of language (Miyatani 2005, 357-365) might lead us to think so. However, while oral performance is not entirely primary, a perspective with profound prehistories down to Plato and post-histories up to poststructuralism and the world constructed by modern media opens up, where Hamann then stands in the middle of these stories.

In my opinion, there is an additional dimension in Hamann's works. If one, from a source-related perspective, gathers folk songs and connects them along with Homer's works and modern German poetry of the time with religious themes (as in Klopstock) and does not devalue them in comparison to contemporary learned tracts and speeches. The passage can be considered a prime example of Hamann's approach to contemporary literature and texts. Lessing said what he stated, "*quod scripsi scripsi*," says "the wisest writer and darkest prophet, the executor of the New Testament, Pontius Pilate" (Hamann 1824, 274). Lessing has evoked folk poetry and found it remarkable. Hamann, however, does not interpret this evocation but only places it in the light of its origin. What Lessing says gains dimension, which for Hamann is the perpetual monotony of the contractions from the origin in all that is said. A monotony then also shows up in the verses of Homer and folk songs of the Latvian peasants. In the most detailed learned discussions of the Age of Enlightenment, it also is an incomprehensible, astonishingly manifold *dialectal, local, diverse, individual* monotony, as the tonality of origin and the sign. It now remains a sign, not senseless, not meaningless, but not clear, a sign of origin, which is also the origin of all signifying and polyglot meaning. The sign, not comprehensible, evoked, like a call, the consequences of the manifold sounding and gestural tumult. Hamann's monotony is paradoxical: the unity of the world is linked to the diversity of the world's sounds and colors, languages, and times: *the world itself is a paradoxical monotony.*

Hamann is also in this tumult, directed to the origin and included in diastasis. Thus also, his texts, “the whole play of my authorship” a “mute mimicry” (Unger 1968, i), are aligned to the origin but also “mute,” i.e., hardly expressible.

A staggering rhapsode, a broken rethor

In the fifth and last step, we can say: at present, the later Hamann readers have taken the place where Homer and Latvian peasants appear together. Then, very seriously, it created an origin myth based on Herder’s “Folk Songs” or based on “The Voices of the Peoples in Songs” (Herder 1807), thus also casting Hamann almost as one of the first “Dainologists,” i.e., as a systematic researcher of Latvian folk songs (“Dainas”), and celebrated his influence on national self-confidence of Latvians and Estonians (“Singing peoples”). Not only that: the evocation of German prehistory relates to it as the feedback of the preoccupation with folk songs at the Baltic Sea, which has been shown by research (Joachimsthaler 2010). Moreover, since Hamann can be considered an eventual poet, the Hamannian series “God-nature-language-senses-poet-diastatics of the answer” is turned and solidified into a Herderian-national-cultural understanding and philosophy of Romanticism. However, there is no such solidification in Hamann. Admittedly, his theological-eschatological philology contains a prefiguration taken up and continued on this side of Hamann’s statements in modernity; therefore, in his own words, he can be said to be a staggering rhapsode and a broken rethor, i.e., one that describes nature and stands on the threshold of historical eras—praises the greatness of nature and hints at an unknown future of history.

The radiance of nature and confused voices of people who try to say and yet cannot say the origin is a vision that later gave rise to variations in modernity, both “political ontologies” (political framework of nation or community) and national-cultural myths, as well as literary experiments. Humanity as the (staggering) rhapsode of origin and the (broken) rethor of beginning has gone from the reflections of a Christian and a modern writer, Hamann, into the open and indeterminate, thus dangerous and ambivalent wilderness. Here Hamann is like Søren Kierkegaard, who respectfully referred to Hamann. Kierkegaard wrote: “It can be said of Hamann what is written on a stove near Kold in Fredensborg: *allicit atque terret*” (Kierkegaard 1909, 442).

Whether Hamann's heritage can still be heard remains an open question. To give an utterly univocal answer to this question seems not entirely faithful to the story.

Acknowledgments

This article is supported by the Project "Institutum Herderianum Rigense: Herder Institute in Riga as a science network in the European Science Network" (LZP registration number lzp-2020/2-0083, LU registration No. LZP-2020/9).

Bibliography

1. Achermann Eric (2005), "Hamanns Insistieren auf der sinnlichen Wirkkraft der Zeichen", [in:] B. Gajek (ed.), *Die Gegenwärtigkeit Johann Georg Hamanns: Acta des achten Internationalen Hamann-Kolloquiums an der Martin-Luther-Universität Halle-Wittenberg 2002*, Peter Lang: Frankfurt am Main, pp. 37-57.
2. Bayer Oswald (1988), *Zeitgenosse im Widerspruch. Johann Georg Hamann als radikaler Aufklärer*, Piper: München, Zürich.
3. Bayer Oswald (1990), *Schöpfung als Anrede: Zu einer Hermeneutik der Schöpfung*, 2nd extended edition, J.C.B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck): Tübingen.
4. Hamann Johann Georg (1824), *Schriften*, vol. V, Reimer: Berlin.
5. Hamann Johann Georg (1999), *Sämtliche Werke*, vol. II, R. Brockhaus Verlag: Wuppertal.
6. Hamann Johann Georg (2007), *Writings on Philosophy and Language*, trans. and ed. K. Haynes, Cambridge University Press: Cambridge.
7. Herder Johann Gottfried (1807), *Sämtliche Werke*, vol. VIII, Cotta: Tübingen.
8. Joachimsthaler Jürgen (2010), *Text-Ränder: die kulturelle Vielfalt in Mitteleuropa als Darstellungsproblem deutscher Literatur*, Winter Verlag: Heidelberg.
9. Jørgensen Sven-Aage (1998), "Einleitung", [in:] J. G. Hamann, *Sokratische Denkwürdigkeiten; Aesthetica in nuce*, Reclam: Stuttgart, pp. 163-191.
10. Jørgensen Sven-Aage (2013), *Querdenker der Aufklärung. Studien uz Johann Georg Hamann*, Wallstein Verlag: Göttingen.
11. Kierkegaard Søren (1909), *Papirer*, vol. II, København: Gyldendal.
12. Kinzel Till (2019), *Johann Georg Hamann*, Karolinger: Wien, Leipzig.
13. Lessing Gotthold Ephraim (1900), *Sämtliche Werke*, 2nd ed., vol. IV, G. Grottesche Verlagsbuchhandlung: Berlin.
14. Miyatani Naomi (2005), "Im Spannungsfeld zwischen Mündlichkeit und Schriftlichkeit", [in:] B. Gajek (eds.), *Die Gegenwärtigkeit Johann Georg Hamanns. Acta des achten Internationalen Hamann-Kolloquiums an der Martin-Luther-Universität Halle-Wittenberg 2002*, Peter Lang: Frankfurt am Main, pp. 357-365.
15. Nadler Josef (1949), *Johann Georg Hamann 1730-1788: Zeuge des Corpus Mysticum*, Otto Müller Verlag: Salzburg.
16. Unger Rudolf (1968), *Hamann und die Aufklärung: Studien zur Vorgeschichte des romantischen Geistes im 18. Jahrhundert*, vol. I, Max Niemeyer: Tübingen.

