

Hume and the Sources of German Anti-Rationalism

I

THE subject with which I intend to deal is central neither to Hume's thought, nor to his intellectual development, nor to his life, nor to the world in which he lived and wrote. I am concerned with the influence of certain ideas of Hume's on, or rather the use made of them by, a group of thinkers who, in most respects, utterly rejected all that Hume believed and stood for. The movement which they formed is, I think, best described as the German Counter-Enlightenment, which reached its height towards the end of the eighteenth century. Two, at least, of its leaders, Johann Georg Hamann and Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi, saw Hume as an out-and-out enemy, but, nevertheless, one with a difference: a man who, however little he may have intended it, supplied them with weapons, both offensive and defensive, against his close philosophical allies, the French Encyclopedists, whom above all others they wished to confute. Their use of some of Hume's writings, if he had conceived of its possibility, would almost certainly have astonished and, indeed, horrified their author; the moral and intellectual distance between him and these German irrationalists could scarcely have been greater. The history of ideas is not without its ironies.

It is a commonplace, which I do not need to labour, that the culture of the west in Hume's lifetime was largely dominated by the ideas of the French Enlightenment. Whatever the differences that divided the French *philosophes* and their disciples in other countries (and these differences were deeper and more numerous than is often supposed), there existed nevertheless a wide consensus: it rested on an acceptance of what was, in effect, a secular version of the old natural law doctrine according to which the nature of things possessed a permanent, unalterable structure, differences and changes in the world being subject

to universal and immutable laws. These laws were discoverable in principle by the use of reason and controlled observation, of which the methods of the natural sciences constituted the most successful application. The most powerful instrument in the acquisition of knowledge was held to be mathematics. Whether this was due to the fact that the basic structure of reality was itself such that mathematics was an abstract representation, or symbolisation, of it, or, alternatively, whether mathematical methods were no more than the most reliable means of recording, predicting, and therefore controlling nature, whose real character remained inscrutable, was a less crucial issue than what followed from either assumption: namely, that the true path to knowledge was that of the natural sciences; that is to say, all statements with claims to truth must be public, communicable, testable – capable of verification or falsification by methods open to and accepted by any rational investigator. From this it followed that all other types of authority were to be rejected, and in particular such foundations of faith as sacred texts, divine revelation and the dogmatic pronouncements of its authorised interpreters, tradition, prescription, immemorial wisdom, private intuition and all other forms of non-rational or transcendent sources of putative knowledge. This principle was held to apply to both the human and the non-human world: to abstract disciplines, such as logic or mathematics, to the applied sciences which established the laws of the behaviour of inanimate bodies, plants, animals and human beings, and to the normative disciplines which revealed the true nature of ultimate human goals, and the correct rules of conduct, public and private, social and political, moral and aesthetic.

According to this doctrine, all genuine questions were in principle answerable: truth was one, error multiple; the true answers must of necessity be universal and immutable, that is, true everywhere, at all times, for all men, and discoverable by the appropriate use of reason, by relevant experience, observation and the methods of experiment, logic, calculation. A logically connected structure of rules, laws, generalisations, susceptible of demonstration or, at least in practice, of a high degree of confirmation (and, where required, of application appropriate to differing circumstances) could, at least in principle, be constructed, and could replace the chaotic amalgam of ignorance, laziness, guesswork, superstition, prejudice, dogma, fantasy, and, above all, what Helvétius called 'interested error', which enabled the cunning and the strong to dominate and exploit the stupid, ignorant and weak, and had throughout human history been largely responsible

for the vices, follies and miseries of mankind. Only knowledge, that is, the growth of the sciences, could rescue mankind from these largely self-induced evils. Some believed that certainty in empirical matters was attainable, others that no more than high probability could be achieved; some were pessimistic about progress towards virtue or happiness, others were more sanguine. But the majority of the *philosophes* were agreed that if irrational passions could be controlled, and ignorance, prejudice, fear and greed diminished, an end could be made to the worst confusions in human thought and feeling, which led to blind fanaticism in thought and savage barbarism in practice.

This faith in the powers of reason and science was by no means universally held, even in the mid-eighteenth century in western Europe – at least not with equal confidence or fervour: it was regularly assailed by the insidious doubts of sceptics, by the hostility of the orthodox defenders of the authority of church and state, by the defenders of variety, individual and cultural, and of local and traditional values, as well as by the champions of the artistic imagination untrammelled by universal rules and regulations, who, by mid-century, had begun to attack the citadels of neo-classicism. Nevertheless, it would not, I believe, be inaccurate to say that the central tradition of the Enlightenment rested on the assumptions of which I have supplied so over-simplified and crude a summary. Despite pleas for historical understanding and the celebration of the beauty and strength of early epic poetry by such critics as von Muralt, Bodmer and Breitinger in Switzerland, Lowth, Blackwell and the Wartons, father and son, in England, and, most of all, by the founder of historicism, Giambattista Vico in Naples; despite the growing interest in the Bible as the national epic of the Jews, in Homer as the voice of the entire Greek people, in the sagas of the Norsemen and the Celts, in oriental literatures, in Shakespeare and Milton, in folk-song, myths, legends and, above all, diverse cultural traditions which could not be made to fit into the critical straitjackets provided by the Parisian arbiters of taste, this reaction remained largely confined to the province of literature and the arts; the central ideological edifice of the Enlightenment remained relatively unaffected.

The first formidable attack upon it, uncompromising, violent and fraught with lasting consequences, came from Germany. This is not the place in which to try to elaborate on the many factors which led to this German backlash against the French cultural domination of

the western world. It was certainly not unconnected with the anti-rationalist currents in the Lutheran Reformation; nor with the relative – cultural as well as economic – deprivation of German-speaking populations in the hundred years that followed Luther's revolt, in contrast to the great cultural flowering of Italy, France, England, Spain and the Low Countries, which bred in the Germans a growing consciousness of their own provincialism, and with it a sense of inferiority, deepened by the disasters of the Thirty Years War. I am not a social historian. I am not qualified to speculate on either the roots or the effect of the inevitable rise of resentment and wounded self-esteem in German territories, particularly in relation to France, then in the full pride of its power, wealth and artistic achievement. Yet even to the eye of an amateur it seems obvious that this condition is not unconnected with the rise of pietism, one of the most introspective, austere and self-absorbed of all the inner currents of Lutheranism. The pietists, profoundly unpolitical in temper, contemptuous of the world and its varieties, sought direct communion of the individual soul with God. Liable to extremes of both emotion and self-discipline, they tended to be suspicious of hierarchy, ritual, learning and rational speculation – as against the living voice of the individual conscience with its absolute sense of moral and spiritual duty, infallible guide in the unending battle in and for the soul of sinful man between the word of God and the temptations of the world, the flesh and the devil. Pietism was particularly strong in East Prussia, where the attempt by Frederick the Great, in the middle years of the eighteenth century, to modernise that backward and semi-feudal province with the help of French-speaking officials was resented and resisted among the devout, conservative population. Much of this sentiment was probably at the root of the revulsion against the materialism, utilitarianism, ethical naturalism and atheism of the French *lumières* which one finds in such thinkers as Hamann, Lavater, Herder and, indeed, Kant himself. They and their disciples Jacobi, Fichte, Schelling, Baader, were in fact the philosophical wing of German cultural resistance movements – of the *Sturm und Drang*, of 'pre-romanticism' and, indeed, of romanticism itself.

Let me say something about the mysterious figure of Hamann, the Magus of the North, as Kant and others have called him, who was, perhaps, the most influential leader of this emotionally charged, basically religious opposition, a man described as the first émigré of the *Aufklärung*, the leader of the Vendée of the Enlightenment. Born in

1730 in Königsberg, he received, like his older friend and one-time patron, Kant, a strictly pietist upbringing. In the 1750s and 60s he was looked upon as a promising young publicist in the service of the German *Aufklärung*. He first made his name with a translation of a French treatise on commerce, accompanied by a disquisition of his own on the effects of trade and the social value of merchants. He admired Lessing, was taken up by Moses Mendelssohn, Nicolai and the other leaders of liberal German culture in Berlin; Kant and his friends had high hopes of their young protégé. However, during a brief sojourn in London in 1757–8, Hamann went through a spiritual crisis, returned to the pietist faith of his early years, and came back to Königsberg a convinced opponent of the Enlightenment. During the rest of his life – he died in 1788 – he published a series of violent attacks upon scientific materialism, universalism and secularism. These were written in an idiosyncratic, obscure, rhapsodical, sybilline prose, full of at times untraceable allusions, private jokes, elaborate puns, meandering digressions into dark paths, which appear to lead nowhere in particular; all this in language which he doubtless intended to contrast as sharply as possible with the, to him, now detestable elegance and brilliance, shallow clarity and spiritual emptiness of the *habitués* of the Paris salons – blind leaders of the blind, men cut off from the true, the inner life of man. He was by temperament not merely indifferent, but deeply opposed, to those who seek to find some intelligible order in the universe, capable of being reduced to, and communicated by means of, a theoretical system. He belonged to those thinkers (perhaps more often found east than west of the Rhine) whose hatred of tidy, rational schemas leads them to look for the exceptional and the irregular, if only because these serve to undermine reliance on general laws, and to confute those who suppose that they can catch and order the teeming variety of reality within their artificial constructions. Monist, dualist, pluralist systems were, for him, equally delusive chimeras, efforts to confine the unconfinable, contain the wildly conflicting, unpredictable, often chaotic, data of direct experience, and reduce them to regularities and symmetries by means of logical or metaphysical links – he describes them as walls of sand built to hold back the waves of an ocean.

A more profoundly anti-scientific or anti-rational outlook can scarcely be conceived: all knowledge for Hamann can be obtained solely through direct confrontation with reality provided by the senses, by instinct, by the imagination, by the immediate, uncontradictable

insight of the poet, the lover, the man of simple faith. His favourite quotation is *I Corinthians* 1.27 – ‘God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise’ – that is, Descartes, Voltaire and their disciples in free-thinking Berlin. Like William Blake, Hamann believed that truth is always particular, never general; genuine knowledge is direct, gained through some species of immediate acquaintance; the senses, outer and inner, do not refer: they present data directly, and any attempt to organise such data into systems distorts their concrete actuality. ‘To cut the cord between faith and the senses is the first symptom of our upside-down type of thought.’ Belief (in Hamann’s sense) is a ‘basic instinct’ (*Grundtrieb*) without which we could not act at all.¹ Words are symbols which convey a voice speaking) they are either a method of communication between real persons, immortal souls, or they are mere mechanical devices, the classifying instruments of an impersonal science. Hamann was a passionate Christian pietist, and believed that men had or could have direct experience of God, everywhere and at all times: the words of the Bible were God’s voice speaking directly to them, and so was the whole of nature to those who had eyes to see and ears to hear; so, too, was the history of mankind, which was a divine language to convey spiritual truths to an untrammelled understanding, not corrupted by the formulas of the sophists of Paris. It was not words that were the main obstacle to the vision of reality, as Bacon, Locke, Berkeley had maintained. Direct perception was far more violently distorted by concepts, theories, systems; such book-keeper’s devices might have their uses in organising or controlling economic or political activities – regions that no longer interested Hamann – but they failed to reveal the real world. They were mere fictions, *entia rationis*, man-made dummies, mistakenly identified with the real world. Only insight which sprang from feeling – at its height, from love for a person or a thing – could reveal and illuminate. It was not possible to love the ghostly network of formulas, general propositions, laws, concepts and categories that the French philosophers had erected between

¹ Johann Georg Hamann, *Sämtliche Werke*, ed. Joseph Nadler (Vienna, 1949–57) (hereafter *Werke*), vol. 3, p. 190. All references to Hamann’s works are to this edition, with the exception of letters, which are taken from Johann Georg Hamann, *Briefwechsel*, ed. Walther Ziesemer and Arthur Henkel (Wiesbaden and Frankfurt, 1955–79) (hereafter *Briefwechsel*).

themselves and reality. The task of the philosopher was to explain life in all its contradictions, all its peculiarities, not to smooth it out, or substitute for it hypostatized abstractions, idealised entities, useful, perhaps, for limited ends, but figments all the same. God is a poet, not a mathematician; only spiders like Spinoza make systems that shut out the real world, 'catch small flies'¹ and build 'castles in the air'.² Men have mistaken 'words for concepts, and concepts for realities'.³ No system, no elaborate construction of scientific generalities, will, in Hamann's view, enable a man to understand what is conveyed by a gesture, a look, a tone, a style, or to understand a line of poetry, a painting, a vision, a spiritual condition, an *état d'âme*, a form of life – how can men, caught in such webs of abstractions, achieve communion with their fellows, still less with God, who speaks to them in the simple human language of the Bible, in the burning words of inspired visionaries, of nature, and of history, if only men knew how to look and to listen?

What is real is always particular; what matters is the unique, the individual, the concrete, that wherein a thing differs from other things; for that is its essence and its point, and not that which it has in common with other things – all that the generalising sciences seek to record. 'Feeling alone gives to abstractions and hypotheses hands, feet, wings.' God speaks to us in poetical words, addressed to the senses, not in abstractions for the learned. Men like Kant (an intimate friend) suffer, he tells us, from 'a gnostic hatred of matter',⁴ rearrange reality into artificial patterns and live in a world of figments. Systems, Hamann insists over and over again, are mere prisons of the spirit, they lead not only to false ideas but sooner or later to the creation of huge bureaucratic machines, built in accordance with rules which ignore variety, the unique, asymmetrical lives of men, and force living creations into the mechanism of some repressive political system, in the name of some intellectual chimera, unrelated to the flow of history or the real lives lived by men. To understand a man, a group, a sect, one must grasp what shapes them – the union of language, tradition and history. Every court, every school, every profession, every sect, has its own vocabulary. How does one enter them? With the passion of a friend, like a lover, an intimate, with faith, not by means of rules.

¹ Letter to Kant, 27 July 1759, *Briefwechsel*, vol. 1, p. 378.

² Letter to Jacobi, 14 November 1784, *ibid.*, vol. 5, pp. 265–6.

³ *ibid.*, p. 264.

⁴ *Werke*, vol. 3, p. 285.

Reality is an unanalysable, dynamic, changing organism, incapable of being represented by the static metaphors of mathematics and the natural sciences. All absolute rules, all dogmatic precepts are fatal: they may be needed in the conduct of ordinary life, but nothing great was ever achieved by following them.

The English critics, Young above all, had rightly maintained that originality entailed breaking rules, that every creative act, every transforming insight, could be obtained only by setting aside the commandments of the arrogant masters of theory. Hamann declared that rules are like vestal virgins; unless they are violated, there will be no issue. Nature is no ordered whole: so-called sensible men are blinkered beings who walk with a firm tread because they are blind to the true and profoundly disturbing character of reality, sheltered from it by their man-made contraptions; if they glimpsed it as it is – a wild dance – they would go out of their minds. How dare these pathetic pedants impose on the vast world of continuous, fertile, unpredictable, divine creation their own narrow, desiccated categories? There is no knowledge save by direct perception – a direct sense of reality which Hamann calls *Glaube*, faith, the direct capacity which all men have for unquestioning acceptance of *data* and not *facta*.¹ Faith is analogous to sight or taste – the physical senses offer me my immediate experience of the physical world, while faith – *Glaube* – is needed to reveal to me my inner life, as well as the meaning of what others say to me by means of symbols, gestures, ritual acts, works of art, books or any other expression of the imagination or the passions. *Glaube* is for Hamann a kind of sense; faith, like the senses, cannot be refuted by reason, it is not its creature; its findings need no evidence, it does not rest on grounds, it is not subject to doubt; it may be delusive, but it cannot be corrected by calculation or rational argument, certainly not by the constructions of the scientists, which are, at best, mere practical devices for utilitarian purposes, which say nothing to the soul or the senses, through which alone God and nature speak to us.² The wisacres of Paris, like their allies in Berlin, who dissect nature, deal with dead matter: they know a great deal and understand little. Man is not born to reason, but to eat and drink and procreate, to love and hate, agonise and sacrifice and worship. But they know nothing of this in Paris, where the monstrous *cogito* has obscured the sublime *sum*.

¹ Letter to Jacobi, 22–4 May 1788, *Briefwechsel*, vol. 7, p. 487. See also *Werke*, vol. 3, p. 190 (cf. p. 167, note 1 above).

² *Werke*, vol. 2, pp. 73–4.

Hamann accepted no less than a total reversal of the values of the Enlightenment; in place of the abstract and general he wished to place the particular and the concrete: in place of the theoretical constructions, stylised patterns and idealised entities of the philosophers and scientists – the directly given, the unmediated, the sensuous. He was in the strict sense of the term a reactionary; that is, he wished to return to an older tradition of the ages of faith: quality in place of quantity, primacy of the given, not of the analytic intellect, the immediately perceived secondary qualities, not the inferred primary ones; the free imagination, not logic. His deepest conviction was of the indissolubility of spirit and matter, the sensuous and the spiritual attributes of man, and of the omnipresence of God, transcendent and personal, not the depersonalised world soul of the pantheists, or the remote Clockmaker – the rationally demonstrated, somewhat shadowy Supreme Being of the deists.

I have tried to convey the general drift of this most unsystematic father of German romanticism, with his revulsion against the French *raisonneurs* and his celebration of the irregulars of life, the outsiders and vagabonds, outcasts and visionaries, whom he favours because they are closer to God than liberal theologians who seek to prove his existence by logical methods. 'Whoever seeks to conceive God in his head', wrote a German pietist¹ thirty years earlier, 'becomes an atheist', and this is what Hamann himself believed. Religion was the direct experience of the presence of God, or it was nothing. From *Glaube* – belief or faith – to revelation was but a short step. Hamann's religion was that of the burning bush, not that of Thomist logic or 'natural' semi-Lutheran religion; it sprang from a Dionysiac experience, not Apollonian contemplation. Driven to the extreme to which he drives it, this attack on all generalisation leads inevitably to the denial of the possibility of all language and thought. Hamann ignores this. He is obsessed by the conviction that the fullness of life, the transforming moments of sudden illumination, are lost in analysis and dissection. No wonder that he was greatly admired by Goethe and by the romantics and criticised sternly by Hegel, that he inspired Herder and Jacobi and, most of all, Kierkegaard, who called him 'The Emperor'.

What, you may ask, has all this to do with David Hume, whose temperament, beliefs and entire outlook were exceedingly remote

¹ Count Nikolaus Ludwig von Zinzendorf. See *Zinzendorf: Ueber Glauben und Leben*, ed. Otto Herpel (Sannerz/Leipzig, 1925), p. 16.

from this ecstatic view of life, who was repelled by nothing so much as zeal, fanaticism, religious enthusiasm, against which (so his best biographer tells us) he had reacted so strongly, as a result of his own strict Presbyterian upbringing? And indeed, it *has* nothing to do with Hume. But Hume, so it turned out, had, all unknowing, a good deal to do with it.

II

Hume's works, like those of other British writers, were much read in the mid-eighteenth century by German intellectuals. The *Treatise* was translated into German only in 1790, but translations of some of the moral, political and literary essays, in the form of *Vermischte Schriften*, were published in German in 1754–6, including *An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding* in 1755. A German version of *The Natural History of Religion* was published in 1755, and an anthology of Hume's writings (compiled by J. G. Bremer), perhaps translated from the French, appeared in 1774. A complete version by K. G. Schreiter of the posthumous *Dialogues on Natural Religion* came out in 1781.

Hamann was a lifelong student of Hume. He read him partly in translation, but mainly in English – he certainly read the *Treatise* in the original, probably during his early London sojourn. His first mention of Hume occurs in 1756, after he had read the German translation of the essays. In letters to Jacobi of 1787 he wrote 'I studied [Hume] even before I wrote my *Socratic Memoirs* [i.e. before 1759] and this is the source to which I owe my doctrine of faith [*Glaube*]' and 'I was full of Hume when I was writing the *Socratic Memoirs* . . . Our own existence and the existence of all things outside us must be *believed* and cannot be demonstrated in any other fashion.'¹ It may be an exaggeration to claim that Hamann actually derived his notion of *Glaube* as fundamental to all knowledge and understanding solely from Hume. But equally there is no doubt that Hume's doctrine of belief, particularly such assertions as, for example, the statement in the *Treatise* that '*belief is more properly an act of the sensitive, than of the cogitative part of our natures*',² made a profound impression upon

¹ Letters of 22 and 27 April, *Briefwechsel*, vol. 7, pp. 155, 167. The last sentence is a self-quotation: see *Werke*, vol. 2, p. 73.

² David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge (Oxford, 1888) (hereafter *Treatise*), p. 183.

Hamann played a part in his return to fervent Christian faith, and certainly reinforced his anti-intellectualism by providing him with an anti-Cartesian weapon of great power. The doctrine that reason is unable to progress by means of purely logical steps from one statement of fact about the world to another – and that consequently the entire ontological structure of the Cartesian, or indeed any other rationalist metaphysics, was built on a central fallacy – that, to Hamann and his followers, was a boon of inestimable value; they used it as a battering-ram against the hated Wolffian philosophy that dominated German universities and that seemed to them to despiritualise the world, to reduce its irregular, living texture to an artificial pattern of bloodless categories, or, alternatively, in its empirical version, to the deathly materialism of Holbach or Helvétius, in which there was, for Hamann, no colour, novelty, genius, thunder, lightning, agony, transfiguration. In the course of this he transformed Hume's psychological and logical concepts into religious ones; for Hamann, belief, faith, revelation, were ultimately one.

Nevertheless, Hume's scepticism, above all his denial of the existence of necessary connections in nature, and his severance of logical relations from those of the real world, which had shocked Kant out of his dogmatic slumber, delighted Hamann, since for him this cleared the path to the existence and power of the basic human faculty of belief, without which there was neither thought nor action, neither an external world nor history, neither God nor other persons, nothing but an unrefuted solipsism. Hamann had no illusions about Hume's general position; no man who had demanded that philosophy, when dealing with the human mind, adopt the methods of the natural sciences, could be anything but an enemy; but Hume was an enemy who, however unintentionally, had uncovered the truth on a crucial issue. 'Hume', Hamann wrote to Herder in 1781 (evidently meaning to contrast him with Kant), 'is always my man, because he at least paid homage to the principle of faith, and incorporated it in his system.'¹ No doubt Hamann unwarrantably identified Hume's doctrine of belief with the full doctrine of Pauline faith in things unseen. Still, belief and acceptance of reality without *a priori* demonstration were the basis of Hume's epistemology. To have so powerful an ally in the camp of the enemy, indeed, in the shape of an unbeliever through whose mouth God had chosen to reveal a central truth, was itself a marvellous gift. Towards the end of the preface to the second edition

¹ Letter of 10 May 1781, *Briefwechsel*, vol. 4, p. 294.

of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, in a famous sentence, Kant says 'it remains a scandal for philosophy and human reason in general that the existence of things outside us . . . must be taken only on faith, and that if it occurs to someone to doubt it, we can produce no counter-argument sufficient to prove it'.¹ What is a scandal for Kant is at the very heart of Hamann's doctrine; in support of it he quotes Hume's words in the *Enquiry*: 'It seems evident, that men are carried, by a natural instinct or prepossession, to repose faith in their senses';² and he tells Kant: 'to eat an egg, to drink a glass of water, the Attic philosopher Hume needs faith . . . If he needs faith to eat and drink, why does he belie his own principle when judging of things higher than . . . eating or drinking?'³ In other words, if the reality of the external world is guaranteed by belief as a form of direct acquaintance, why should this also not hold of our belief in God, the belief or faith of those who daily and hourly see God in His creation, or hear His voice in His sacred books, in the words of His saints and prophets, to be found among the humblest and most unregarded of mankind? Whatever his errors, Hume is surely right about belief; without it, Hamann tells Kant in 1759, there can be no action: 'if you want a proof for everything, you cannot act at all – Hume realises this'.

Even though Hume's concept of belief is none too clear, as he himself admits in the *Treatise*, it is nevertheless far removed from Hamann's quasi-intuitive, infallible, Pauline-Lutheran *Glaube*. Hume at times speaks of belief as a peculiar and not further describable 'feeling'⁴ or 'superior force, or vivacity, or solidity, or firmness, or steadiness'⁵ and the like; but the reasonableness or justification of beliefs about reality rests not so much on the evidence of introspection of this kind, as on repeated conjunctions of impressions, and the association of the resultant ideas, that is, on regularities in experience and the construction therefrom of a systematic network of reliable expectations without which neither human thought nor action is possible. Although inductive methods, which rest on the undemonstrable belief that the future will imitate the past, cannot yield certainty, their job

¹ *Kant's gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 3 (Berlin, 1911), p. 23, note.

² David Hume, *Enquiries*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge, 3rd ed., revised by P. H. Niddich (Oxford, 1975) (hereafter *Enquiries*), p. 151.

³ Letter of 27 July 1759, *Briefwechsel*, vol. 1, p. 379.

⁴ e.g. *Treatise*, p. 624; *Enquiries*, pp. 48–9; *An Abstract of a Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. J. M. Keynes and P. Sraffa (Cambridge, 1938), pp. 18–21.

⁵ *Treatise*, p. 629.

is to generate various degrees of probability. It is by these that, for Hume, at least in some moods, rational beliefs (which, in his somewhat loose fashion, he tended to identify with custom, habit, experience, nature and the like) are to be distinguished from mere fantasy or guesswork or prejudice or superstition. Since the existence of one thing can never logically entail the existence of any other, these methods are all that is available to us for building a body of knowledge. It is by applying this criterion to the assertions of theologians, whether orthodox Christians or deists, that Hume justifies his most sceptical and destructive conclusions.

Nothing could be further from Hamann's fervent defence of *Glaube* as the only path to the external world, to other persons, to God. At times he almost acknowledged this. 'I do not know', he wrote in 1787 to Jacobi, 'what Hume or either of us understands by *Glaube* – the more we speak and write about it, the less we shall manage to seize hold of this lump of quicksilver; *Glaube* cannot be communicated like a parcel of goods, it is the kingdom of heaven and hell within us.'¹ This is very remote from Hume's world, something of which, in some sense, Hamann is not unaware, for he systematically ignores everything in Hume which is antipathetic to him, that is, almost all that is most characteristic of the Scottish philosopher. Thus he says nothing about Hume's insistence on the 'received maxims of science, morals, prudence, and behaviour',² which Hamann himself looks on as so many philistine obstacles to the authentic vision of truth. Hamann has nothing to say on the crucial distinction made in the *Treatise* between superstition and prejudice, on the one hand, and, on the other, belief supported by direct experience and the evidence of constant conjunction. He ignores Hume's psychology of belief as the effect of nature, custom, tradition and the like; he detests the associationist psychology with its mechanical approach and hair-splitting (as he calls it). As might be expected, he will have nothing to do with Hume's notion of the self as a bundle of sensations, the plaything of desires and passions; Hamann's self is an immortal soul known by

¹ Letter of 27 April to 3 May 1787, *Briefwechsel*, vol. 7, p. 176. On this see W. M. Alexander, *Johann Georg Hamann: Philosophy and Faith* (The Hague, 1966), pp. 130 ff.

² Which Shirley Robin Letwin rightly stresses; see her article 'Hume: Inventor of a New Task for Philosophy', *Political Theory* 3 (1975), 134–58. For Hume's phrase see *Hume's Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, ed. Norman Kemp Smith (Oxford, 1935) (hereafter *Dialogues*), p. 169.

direct *Glaube*, with an inner life concerned with matters not dreamt of in Hume's philosophy. Hume for Hamann is an unbeliever whose theological views are therefore of no concern to him; consequently he ignores the inconsistency between Hume's apparently deistic argument in *The Natural History of Religion*, and its virtual dissolution in the *Dialogues* (pointed out by Kemp Smith and others) and replacement by Philo's total agnosticism; nor does he pay attention to Hume's violent diatribes against precisely the type of Christianity that he and his friends most fervently espoused.

Hume's positivism and his anti-clericalism are equally remote from Hamann's own spiritual concerns. He mentions neither the celebrated passage in section 12 of the *Enquiry* about committing everything that is neither quantitative nor empirical to the flames, nor the equally famous designation of historical religions as 'sick men's dreams', and 'playsome whimsies of monkies in human shape',¹ about which Hume declared that 'in a future age, it will probably become difficult to persuade some nations, that any human, two-legged creature could ever embrace such principles. And it is a thousand to one, but these nations themselves shall have something full as absurd in their own creed, to which they will give a most implicit and most religious assent.'² In theory Hume is speaking only of absurdly irrational systems and religions, but irrationality was not a defect in Hamann's eyes: indeed, he accepted and glorified it. His interest in Hume is intense and lifelong, but narrow, confined to Hume's argument against the conception of reason held by the rationalist thinkers, the followers of Descartes and Leibniz and Spinoza. Hume is acclaimed for showing that reason is not an organ of discovery, and for reducing it to its proper role as a mere capacity for recombination, elucidation, consistency, taxonomy, lacking all power of creation or revelation. Hume, Hamann wrote in 1759, is 'a spirit for tearing down, not building up, that is indeed his glory'.³ Hume is a destroyer of metaphysical illusions; it was precisely because Kant, in his effort to build a system of his own, to some degree restored the very *a priori* links discredited by Hume, that Hamann clearly preferred Hume to his old Königsberg friend, whom he sometimes calls – whether or not

¹ *The Natural History of Religion*, section 15. *Essays Moral, Political and Literary*, ed. T. H. Green and T. H. Grose (London, 1875), vol. 2, p. 362.

² *ibid.*, section 12, p. 344.

³ Letter to Lindner, 21 March 1759, *Briefwechsel*, vol. 1, p. 305.

... - complement - a Russian Hume'.¹ Hume is, of course, one of the pillars of the Enlightenment, a fighter on the wrong side of the barricades; nevertheless, Hamann sees him as being, despite himself, a kind of ally. 'Just as nature', Hamann writes to Lindner in 1759, 'furnishes an area of poisonous weeds with antidotes in close proximity, and the Nile knows how to couple the crocodile with his treacherous enemy, so Hume falls on the sword of his own truths';² like Socrates, Hume shows how wide is the realm of human ignorance - a very useful weapon, Hamann remarks, against 'our clever heads and scribes'. Hume's immortal service is his destruction of apriorism, the notion of logically or metaphysically guaranteed truths about the world: this, for Hamann, removes the rationalist barriers to direct communication with nature and with God, liberates the creative imagination in which such communication can be embodied, and brings down the house of cards of the builders of metaphysical fictions. Hume's relativism, his phenomenalism, his doctrine of the role of belief in the growth of scientific knowledge - all this is nothing to Hamann. It is the cauterising scepticism which Hume is held to share with Socrates, that confession of ignorance of first causes, or of the ultimate purpose of things, which prepared the soil for the daimon of Socrates, for the revelation of the divine, the Pauline vision, that excited Hamann. His hatred of laws, rules, system, is almost obsessive: it is this love of an open texture, whether of the individual imagination or of social relationships that are spontaneous, founded on natural human feeling, that is echoed in the two centuries that followed by Herder and his disciples - populists, romantics, influenced by Rousseau, nostalgic seekers after a vanished organic society, denouncers of all forms of alienation.

In all this, it is direct contact of the individual with things and persons and God, the movement of both history and nature, which he calls 'faith', that dominates Hamann's thought. He says that faith - *Glaube* - in its most intense form is something which must lead and illuminate us in a fashion far more immediate, more inward, darker and more certain than 'rules' of any kind. This notion of belief is, of course, something very different from that strain in Hume in which he speaks of belief as a more or less mechanical, inescapable acceptance of external reality, which men share with animals; or, indeed, from

¹ Letter to Herder, 10 May 1781, *Briefwechsel*, vol. 4, p. 293 (see also p. 172, note 1 above).

² Letter of 3 July 1759, *ibid.*, vol. 1, p. 355.

the epistemology of Reid and the Scottish school. Yet they had the root of the matter in them: 'truth to tell,' Hamann wrote later in his life, 'I look with pity on the philosopher who demands from me evidence that he possesses a body and that there exists a material world. To waste one's time and wit on these kinds of truths and evidences is at once sad and ridiculous.'¹ It is because Hume shows the absurdity of demanding demonstrative proof of the existence of any thing or person, human or divine, and, unlike Kant, does not draw ontological lines between types of reality with no basis in experience, that Hamann claims him as an ally. This accounts for the fact that in his references to Hume he shows no trace of the kind of attitude displayed towards him by his British detractors, nothing resembling Beattie's outburst against the 'vile effusion of a hard and stupid heart', or Warburton's and Hurd's denunciations - evidently he is not, to Hamann, one of the three demons driven by the angel into the bottomless pit of Reynolds's celebrated allegorical painting.

Hamann's particular use of Hume is perhaps best illustrated in his treatment of the words which form the concluding paragraph of the tenth section of the *Enquiry*, entitled 'Of Miracles'. In this, according to Kemp Smith 'probably the most notorious passage in all Hume's writings',² Hume asserts that

upon the whole, we may conclude that the *Christian Religion* not only was at first attended with miracles, but even at this day cannot be believed by any reasonable person without one. Mere reason is insufficient to convince us of its veracity: And whoever is moved by *Faith* to assent to it, is conscious of a continued miracle in his own person, which subverts all the principles of his understanding, and gives him a determination to believe what is most contrary to custom and experience.³

No unprejudiced reader could fail to notice, as indeed Kemp Smith points out, that both the content and tone of this passage are ironical and clearly designed to discredit faith in miracles. Hume's general argument is that the probability of human mendacity or delusion or fantasy or credulity is, on the evidence available, far greater than the probability of the events in question, the prodigies and miracles reported in the Old Testament, which are incompatible with the laws of nature as established by experience; and since the testimony of

¹ Letter to Jacobi, 16 January 1785, *ibid.*, vol. 5, p. 326.

² *Dialogues*, p. 60.

³ *Enquiries*, p. 131.

those who have claimed to have observed miracles cannot be regarded as being more reliable than the mass of the testimony of observation on which acceptance of the laws of nature is founded, the weight of the former cannot stand up against the weight of the testimony for the latter.

Hamann, and after him Jacobi, did not, as they well might have done, question the *validity* of this argument; they simply turned it round. They seized eagerly upon this very text as an argument for the miraculous nature of faith, a doctrine of which Hamann's most ardent admirer, Kierkegaard, became the most celebrated proponent. For Hamann, miracles are not a breach of the natural order, for he does not believe in causality, either as a relation of real objects or as a category of the mind – a truth for which, again (less plausibly in the latter case), he claims the authority of Hume. For Hamann everything is a work of God, working not through secondary causes, but by the direct action of His will. What is there in nature, he asked, in the commonest and most natural events, which is not a miracle for us, a miracle in the strictest sense? Everything that happens need not have happened unless God had willed it so: we accept it as real because we have been given *Glaube* – in itself a miracle – which indelibly impresses it upon our minds, our senses, imaginations, memories and intellect. Hume's 'continued miracle in his own person' is precisely what the thinkers of the Counter-Enlightenment most passionately believed, or wished to believe. Writing to his friend Lindner in 1759 about this passage, Hamann says 'Hume may have said this scornfully or earnestly, nevertheless it is orthodox, and a testimony to the truth from the mouth of an enemy and persecutor of it – all his doubts are but a proof of his proposition.'¹ And three weeks later, in a letter to Kant, he cites the same sentence from Hume's essay – 'a passage which should prove that even in jest, without knowing or wishing to do so, one can tell the truth'.² Hume is 'like Saul among the prophets',³ a witness to a truth which he does not himself understand; for does he not rightly declare that faith – true Christian faith – is neither custom nor common sense, but a miracle of the spirit? Yet Hume did not see that this applied to himself too, did not realise that it undermined his own scepticism; he may have intended these words against Christianity,

¹ Letter cited on p. 176 above, note 2, p. 356.

² Letter of 27 July 1759, *Briefwechsel*, vol. 1, p. 380; see Alexander, op. cit. (p. 174, note 1 above), p. 152, note 2.

³ *ibid.*

but – such is God's grace – he thereby added to the believers' armoury.

It is probably in this spirit that Hamann began to translate the *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, which Hume's nephew David published in 1779, three years after the author's death. The first edition of the *Dialogues* appeared on 21 July; a year later, on 7 August 1780, Hamann completed his own work on the text. It is not a complete translation, only a résumé and a rendering of about a quarter of Hume's text. He circulated it in manuscript privately to his friends, and it remained unpublished until 1951, when Nadler included it in his edition of Hamann's works. So far as we can tell, this was the only version of Hume's *Dialogues* known to Kant – there is no evidence that he was acquainted with Schreiter's full version of 1781. 'The *Dialogues* is a work full of poetic beauties', Hamann wrote to the publisher Hartknoch in 1780, 'and like Green¹ I consider it not so very dangerous. I am translating it like a fifty-year-old Swabian clergyman, for the benefit of my open-hearted [*freimüthige*] colleagues and countrymen . . .'.² Kant is said to have been delighted and influenced by it, although the *Prolegomena* of 1783 shows that he did not fully accept the refutation of the argument from design, which Hume develops in it. As for Hamann, any attack upon rational theology and deism was grist to his mill and that of the other defenders of revelation against both atheists and proponents of natural religion, between whom he and his allies professed to see little difference. The very notion of natural religion angered Hamann, who compared it to the idea of natural language – a typical fiction of the philosophers, logic-choppers who had not enough sense of reality to know that languages were intimately connected with particular places and times, particular environments, particular forms of historical growth, were organic expressions of particular groups of human beings in unique relationships to one another, something which no general formula could convey. The real enemies were the deists, who invented an abstraction, a First Cause, or The Divine Clockmaker who set the universe in motion; but what had this *ens rationis*, this figment of the philosophers, to do with the God who spoke to men's hearts, the God whose only begotten son died to redeem us from our sins? 'It seems evident,' said Hume in the twelfth section of *An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*, 'that men are carried, by a natural instinct or prepossession, to repose faith in their senses; and that, without any reasoning, or even almost before

¹ Kant's friend, the English merchant, who lived in Königsberg.

² Letter of 29 July 1780, *Briefwechsel*, vol. 4, pp. 205–6.

the use of reason, we always suppose an external universe . . .'. Even animals do this. 'But this . . . opinion of all men is soon destroyed by the slightest philosophy, which teaches us, that nothing can ever be present to the mind but an image or perception.'¹ For Hume this is an argument against commonsense realism. But to Hamann this and similar passages may well have seemed the very opposite: warnings, the more striking if they were not consciously so intended, against the corrosive touch of philosophy and its delusive constructions, particularly when they touch on matters of ultimate concern, such as the relationship of man to God.

So also with the *Dialogues*. In the concluding passage of the *Dialogues*, in a paragraph added by Hume in one of his final revisions, Philo says

A person, seasoned with a just sense of the imperfections of natural reason, will fly to revealed truth with the greatest avidity: While the haughty dogmatist, persuaded that he can erect a complete system of theology by the mere help of philosophy, disdains any farther aid, and rejects this adventitious instructor. To be a philosophical sceptic is, in a man of letters, the first and most essential step towards being a sound, believing Christian.²

Hamann does not, as far as I know, refer to this passage: yet it is difficult not to think that he could have regarded it as anything but yet another piece of Christian evidence provided by an enemy, unintended testimony to a truth sufficient to destroy the scepticism or agnosticism which is Philo's official position in the *Dialogues*. Hume's scepticism seemed to him to sweep away far more effectively than Kant's cautious arguments the rickety constructions of reason which obstruct the inpouring of faith; into the vacuum so created *Glaube* can enter. In one of his last letters to Jacobi, which I have quoted already, Hamann says 'I was full of Hume when I was writing the *Socratic Memoirs*, and [a passage in] my little book refers to this: *Our own existence and the existence of all things outside us must be believed and cannot be demonstrated in any other fashion.*'³ This is the heart of the *Dialogues* for Hamann. 'One must start *a posteriori*, not *a priori* — that is the mistake of other philosophers.'⁴ Causality, determinism, are

¹ *Enquiries*, p. 151 (see also p. 173, note 2 above). ² *Dialogues*, p. 282.

³ Letter of 27 April 1787, *Briefwechsel*, vol. 7, p. 167 (see also p. 171, note 1 above).

⁴ Letter of 25 February 1786, *ibid.*, vol. 6, p. 281.

barriers to the comprehension of the miraculous nature of reality. 'Do you not realise, philosopher, that there is no physical bond between cause and effect, means and ends, but a mental, ideal one, one of blind faith, as the world's greatest writer of his country's history and of the "natural church" has maintained?'¹ The blind 'faith' is 'the faith that is not the work of reason and not open to attacks by reason, since faith no more happens according to reasons than taste or sight'.² That is why 'Hume is always my man', not Kant — 'our fellow-countryman who is constantly blasting away with his causality'³ (*seine Causalitätsstürmerey*).