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**THE MAGUS OF THE NORTH:
JOHANN GEORG HAMANN'S
TREATMENT OF THE ARTISTIC GENIUS**

If you are Socrates and your friend wishes to be Alcibiades, then you will need the voice of a Genius as you teach. This role is my duty without my being tied to any suspicions of hubris. [...] Please allow my name to be Genius for now and allow me to converse with you like a Genius from a cloud as I write this letter.

Letter of Johann Georg Hamann to Immanuel Kant,
Königsberg, 27 July 1759¹

The word 'genius' (*Genie*) appears in the German written word in the fifties of the 18th century. This often used 'foreigner' is treated like a fashionable word from France, which invites a certain opposition and a desire to replace it with a native language counterpart.²

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Translated by Kristi Lahne.

1 'Sind Sie Socrates und will Ihr Freund Alcibiades sein: so haben Sie zu Ihrem Unterricht die Stimme eines Genii nöthig. Und diese Rolle gebührt mir, ohne das ich mir den Verdacht des Stolzes dadurch zuziehe. [...] Erlauben Sie mir also, das ich so lange Genius heissen und als ein Genius aus einer Wolke mit Ihnen reden kann, als ich Zeit zu diesem Briefe nöthig haben werde.' Johann Georg Hamann, *Hamann's Schriften*, Erster Theil, hrsg. von Friedrich Roth (Berlin: G. Reimer, 1821), 429. Here and below quotations from Hamann and others have been translated by the author of the text.

2 On this topic: Otto F. Best, *Die blaue Blume im englischen Garten: Romantik – ein Mißverständnis?* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer-Taschenbuch-Verlag, 1998); Hans-Martin Lump, *Philologia crucis. Zu Johann Georg Hamanns Auffassung von der Dichtkunst. Mit einem Kommentar zur "Aesthetica in nuce" (1762)*. Studien zur deutschen literatur, Bd. 21, hrsg. von Richard Brinkmann, Friedrich Senge, Klaus Ziegler (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1970), 108; Carl Dale Hill, *The Soul of Wit: Joke Theory from Grimm to Freud* (London: University of Nebraska Press, 1993).

Thus, Johann Christoph Gottsched in 1760, in his magazine *Das Neueste aus der anmuthigen Gelehrsamkeit* concedes that 'this foreigner [genius] is now our daily guest', without which no written work can do; however, he does recommend using in its stead the well-known German equivalents spirit (*Geist*) or wit (*Witz*), in the name of clarity.³ What is the German world view like during the arrival of the 'foreigner'?

From the 1720s, when Christian Wolff's first writings are published, we can speak of the dominance of rationalist philosophy and aesthetics, whose proponents, in addition to Wolff, also included Johann Christoph Gottsched, Moses Mendelssohn, Alexander Baumgarten, Johann Winckelmann, Gotthold Ephraim Lessing.⁴

In tandem with the growth in popularity of aesthetics as a new branch of science, the idea of genius, or more precisely the idea of artistic genius is developing during the 18th century. The idea of a Genius as the companion to every person hails back to antiquity, actualising with close links to the arts during the Renaissance. At the end of the 17th century and especially in the beginning of the 18th century, in both the French and English theoretical writings on art, a new idea of a new type of genius is starting to appear, which could be considered the modern genius, where it is not the divine mediating guardian spirit that is meant by 'genius', but the innately talented person himself.⁵ Of course, this transformation of the meaning of genius raises new problems. Over the century, a plethora of treatments of the theory of genius are published, first in France and then in England. These traditions develop two unique

3 'Dieser Fremdling [genie] wird bei uns ist jetzt so ein alltäglicher Gast.' Edward Young, 'Conjectures on Original-Composition in a Letter to the Author of Sir Charles Grandison. London. 1759. in 8. The second Edition. D. i. Gedanken über die Originalwerke, in einem Schreiben des D. Youngs, and den Verfasser des Grandisons. Aus dem Englischen. Leipzig, bei Heisii Erben 1760. in 8.', *Das Neueste aus der anmuthigen Gelehrsamkeit*, 1 (Leipzig: Bernhard Christoph Breitkopf, 1760), 674.

4 Frederick C. Beiser, *Diotima's Children. German Aesthetic Rationalism from Leibniz to Lessing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 1. During the 18th century, we may speak of three trends of thought, which Wladislaw Tatarkiewicz has classified as follows: philosophical trend, represented by the German tradition; psychological trend, represented by the British tradition, and artistic trend, represented by the French tradition, which is humanistic by nature, extending back to Greece and Rome: Ladislas Tatarkiewicz, 'L' Esthétique associationniste au XVIIe Siècle', *Revue d'Esthétique*, vol. XIII, (1960), 287–292.

5 On this topic: Holger Rajavee, *The Birth and Formation of Modern Artistic Genius in French and British Traditions in Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries and its Reflections in Twentieth Century*. Doctoral thesis (Tartu: Tartu University Press, 2019).

concepts of genius,⁶ and later, from the mid-18th century, influenced by the French version, a German tradition is added to the treatments of genius.

The first widely known work that is directly dedicated to the subject of genius in the German theories of genius, is by the Lutheran theologian Sebastian Friedrich Trescho. His essay *Thoughts on Genius (Betrachtungen über das Genie)* is published in 1755, and in it the author presents an image of a genius who has obtained his special talents from God. However, studying and self-improvement are needed in order for a genius to actualise in any field. In other words, Trescho equates genius with a talent that has to be discovered first and thereafter continually perfected through learning and work.⁷ In 1757, Johann Georg Sulzer publishes an essay *Developing the concept of genius (Entwicklung des Begriffs vom Genie)*,⁸ and in 1759 Friedrich Gabriel Resewitz writes *An attempt on genius (Versuch über das Genie)*.⁹ The treatments of genius by these two authors follow Wolffian views and have taken as examples the theories of genius prevalent in France, primarily the works of Abee Du Bos and Charles Batteux. Characteristic of those is the artistic genius's connection to rules from antiquity, as well as the demand for idealised imitation of nature, which in an artwork should evoke sensations of pleasure and beauty, which would be supported by the artistic genius's having good taste.

Johann Georg Hamann commences his work in an atmosphere thick with discussions on the budding discipline of aesthetics, where the term 'genius' as a loan word is still finding its place and meaning in the German cultural sphere. His role in finding a place for the idea of genius in the development of German philosophy and aesthetics prove to be revolutionary. This article will analyse Hamann's vision of the artistic genius, which he formulates in a way that has never before

6 On this topic: Holger Rajavee, 'Two geniuses. From Lomazzo to Diderot', *Baltic Journal of Art History*, 11 (2016), 67–88.

7 Sebastian Friedrich Trescho, *Betrachtungen über das Genie* (Königsberg: J. H. Hartung, 1755), 6.

8 *Johann Georg Sulzers vermischte Philosophische Schriften. Aus den Jahrbüchern der Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Berlin gesammelt* (Leipzig: Wiedemanns Erben und Reich, 1773), 307–322.

9 Friedrich Gabriel Resewitz, *Versuch über das Genie. Sammlung vermischter Schriften zur Beförderung der schönen Wissenschaften und der freyen Künste*, Bd. III, St. I (Berlin: Nicolai, 1760), 1–69. The text is first published anonymously by Christoph Friedrich Nicolai publishers in 1759.

existed in the Western theories of genius. I am deeply convinced that Hamann's ideas are absolutely pertinent even today, when the idiosyncratic artist dominates theoretical discourses on art once again – a circumstance which suggests that the reports of the 'death of the author' which surfaced in the middle of the 20th century, are clearly exaggerated.

HAMANNIANA¹⁰

Discourses on Johann Georg Hamann (1730–1788) contain different and sometimes opposing judgements on his philosophy and work, his position and role in the German sphere of thought in the Enlightenment. There is consensus on Hamann being one of the most influential German scholars and philosophers of the mid-18th century, who shakes the reason-centred mindset of the Enlightenment.¹¹ His texts have provided and will provide food for thought and different interpretations in the fields of philosophy, aesthetics, art, theology and linguistics. 'The magus of the north' – a nickname given to Hamann by lawyer, politician and scholar Friedrich Karl von Moser¹² – is an author who is not easily universally understood nor fitted in a concrete framework, and who has created this situation on purpose.

The lion's share of works on Hamann are linguistic or literary. The reason for this could be the complicated use of language in his texts, full of allegories and metaphors, which on the one hand makes his ideas very difficult to understand, but on the other hand makes them interesting as objects of analysis.¹³ In the German cultural sphere, Hamann and his works are discussed throughout the 19th

10 As far as this author is aware, the most complete and up-to-date bibliography detailing the life and works of Hamann may be found here: https://www.hamann-ausgabe.de/pdf/Forschungsbibliographie_HamannBriefe.pdf [accessed 10.06.2021].

11 On the impact of Hamann's ideas, see John R. Betz, 'Reading "Sibylline Leaves": J. G. Hamann in the History of Ideas', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 70 (1) (January 2009), 93–118.

12 Isaiah Berlin, *The Magus of the North. J. G. Hamann and the Origins of Modern Irrationalism*, ed. by Henry Hardy (New York: Farrar, Strus and Giroux, 1993), 69; James C. O'Flaherty, *Johann Georg Hamann* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1979), 25–26. Here I am leaning on the Estonian translation by Jaan Undusk of the name *Der Magus im Norden*, given by Moser; see Jaan Undusk, 'The spirit of Hamann and Herder as the promoter of Estonian literature: The Synecdoche principle', *Keel ja Kirjandus*, 10 (1995), 674.

13 In 1774, Immanuel Kant in his letter implores Hamann to write in 'human language', 'I am a simple son of earth, I have not been taught to understand the divine language of a sensitive intellect'. (Cited in: Ronald Gregor Smith, *J. G. Hamann 1730–1788: Study in Christian Existence with Selections from his Writings* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1960), 47.)

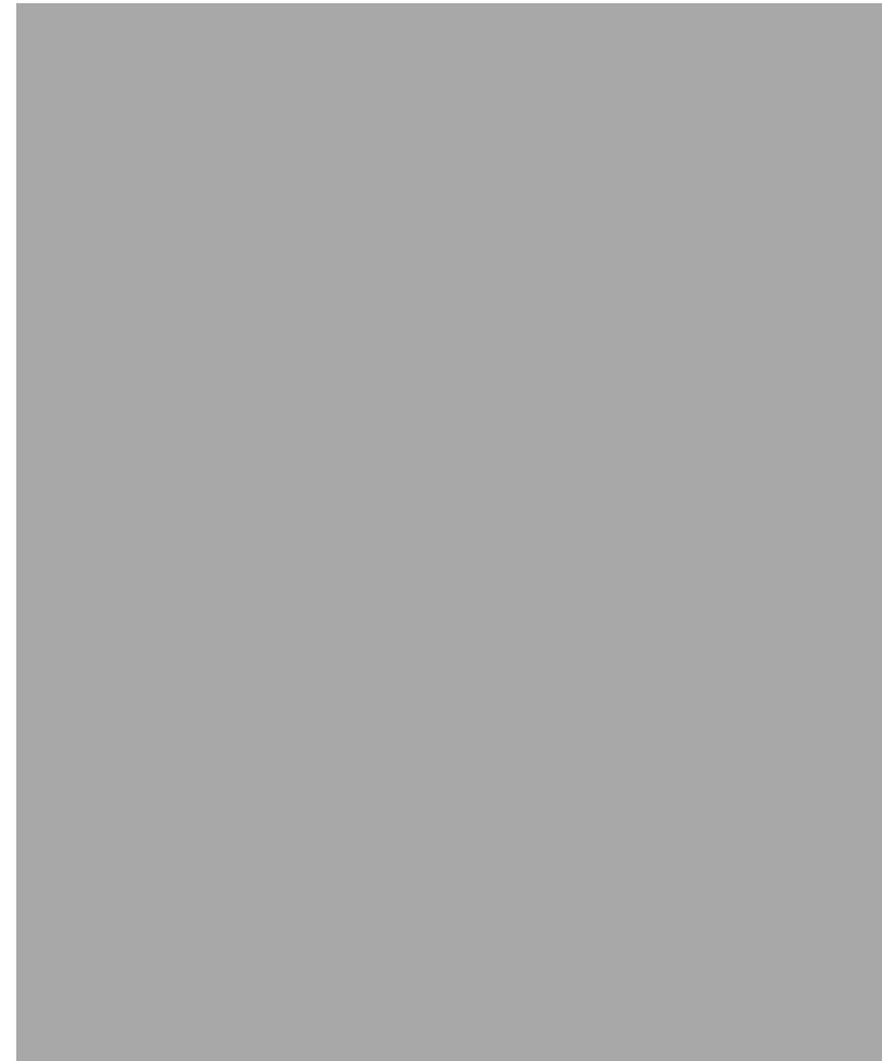


FIG. 1. PORTRAIT OF JOHANN GEORG HAMANN (1730–1788). ENGRAVING FROM JOHANN CASPAR LAVATER, *PHYSIOGNOMISCHE FRAGMENTE ZUR BEFÖRDERUNG DER MENSCHENKENNTNIS UND MENSCHENLIEBE* (1775–1778). PHOTO: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS.

century. In the beginning of the 20th century, a two-volume study in the discipline of linguistics by Rudolf Ungern is noteworthy.¹⁴ A thorough linguistic analysis can be found in the seven-volumed work

14 Rudolf Unger, *Hamann und die Aufklärung. Studien zur Vorgeschichte des romantischen Geistes* (Jena: Deiderichs, 1911).

by Fritz Blanke (1956–1963).¹⁵ Hans Martin Lumpp's is a significant contribution to the study of Hamann's philosophy of language (1970).¹⁶ Oswald Bayer has discussed Hamann in a theological context in his works.¹⁷ Josef Nadler's six-volumed work is one of the propelling compendiums in Hamann studies, which also 'ignites' Anglo-American interest in Hamann from the mid-20th century.¹⁸ On the Anglo-American side, James O'Flaherty's (1979)¹⁹ and Isaiah Berlin's (1993)²⁰ Hamann monographs are worthy of mention here.

Hamann studies are topical today, too, which is attested to by the annual Hamann colloquiums in Germany since 1976, where diverse aspects of Hamann's work are explored.²¹

Regarding Hamann's concept of the artistic genius, a topic which is also the subject of this article, I would highlight the aforementioned O'Flaherty, Berlin, Lumpp and also the works of Frederick C. Beiser,²² which include in-depth treatments of Hamann's concept of genius and its influence on the theory of genius in general, but in a linguistic context.

Although Hamann was fluent in English (it was not common in his contemporary German cultural sphere), and his philosophy was influenced by English empiricism, there are extremely few translations of his works into English.²³

The goal of this article is to closely analyse Hamann's concept of the artistic genius, its main origins, and the unique character of the

15 *Johann Georg Hamanns Hauptschriften erklärt*, hrsg. von Fritz Blanke, Karlfried Gründer (Gütersloh: Bertelsmann, 1956–1563).

16 Lumpp, *Philologia crucis. Zu Johann Georg Hamanns Auffassung von der Dichtkunst. Mit einem Kommentar zur "Aesthetica in nuce" (1762)*.

17 Oswald Bayer, *Johann Georg Hamann. "Der hellste Kopf seiner Zeit"* (Tübingen: Attempto, 1998).

18 Johann Georg Hamann, *Sämtliche Werke, Historisch-kritische Ausgabe von Josef Nadler* (Wien: Thomas Morus Presse im Verlag Herder, 1949–1957).

19 O'Flaherty, *Johann Georg Hamann*; James C. O'Flaherty, *Unity and Language: A Study in the Philosophy of Johann Georg Hamann* (New York: AMS Press Inc, 1966).

20 Berlin, *The Magus of the North. J. G. Hamann and the Origins of Modern Irrationalism*.

21 The first colloquium took place in 1976 in Lüneburg; from 1989, they occur annually in different German towns. The last, twelfth colloquium took place in Heidelberg on 7–9 March 2019.

22 Frederic C. Beiser, *The Fate of Reason. German Philosophy from Kant to Fichte* (London: Harvard University Press, 1987).

23 I would recommend Joyce P. Crick's translation of *Aesthetics in a Nutshell* (1985); James O'Flaherty's *Hamann's Socratic Memorabilia* (1967); excerpts from selected works by Hamann by Ronald Gregor Smith (1960).

idea. In addition, the article will look at why it becomes so influential for many subsequent authors in the second half of the 18th century and in the 19th century, extending into the philosophy of the 20th century. As previously discussed, studies on Hamann have mainly focused on linguistic aspects and his ideas on the artistic genius have had to take a back seat. Of course, we cannot claim that Hamann's vision of the creative artistic genius is the only such discourse in the mid-18th century, considering that the theme is topical at the time in both the French, English and increasingly German art-theoretical sphere of thought. Nonetheless, it is a very unique interpretation of genius, whose impact (especially in the German context) may only be compared to the later discussion on genius by Immanuel Kant in his *Critique of Judgement*, published in 1790. The Hamann concept of the artistic genius deserves highlighting also due to the noticeable and ever increasing interest in the term 'genius' and the different aspects of the idea's historical development in the end of the 20th century and the beginning of this century, which is clearly evidenced by numerous thematic monographs, compendiums and academic articles.²⁴ Hamann's concept of the artistic genius is in an outstanding and remarkable position in the history of this development, which we need to be acquainted with in order to understand his teachings as a whole, which this article here also wishes to demonstrate.

SHORT LIFE STORY

Hamann is born on 27 August 1730 in Königsberg as the eldest son in the family. His father Johann Christoph Hamann is a barber-surgeon. The Hamanns' familial relationships have been described as harmonious, which is reflected in the frequent father-son correspondence. The family has a wide circle of friends and the children (two brothers) are raised in a rather liberal atmosphere. That circumstance will also play an important role in Johann Georg's later life. He receives his earliest education from students by homeschooling, acquiring knowledge in the Greek, French and Italian language, music, dance and painting. Thereafter he goes to the pietistic Kneiphof gymnasium, taking an interest in

24 An historiographical overview of the topic may be found in: Rajavee, *The Birth and Formation of Modern Artistic Genius in French and British Traditions in Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries and its Reflections in Twentieth Century*, 15–19.

philosophy, mathematics, theology and the Hebrew language. Having matriculated as a philosophy student at Königsberg University, he focuses his studies increasingly on law. He leaves the university at the age of 22 without completing the course, and starts making a living as a tutor, and in 1756 he starts working in Riga with the Berens family, thanks to his friend Christoph Berens. This working relationship leads to the planning of a trip to London in 1756, whose purpose still evades researchers (as to whether it was a commercial or a semi-political trip). Hamann arrives in England in 1757 and begins fulfilling the Berens family's assignments, but it ends in a fiasco. In 1758, while being in England, Hamann undergoes a religious conversion, which will be described below. On his return from England he travels around Germany for a time, and, as a great socialiser, expands his circle of acquaintances. In 1767, Hamann returns to Königsberg where he remains until his death, working as a customs officer and a translator.²⁵ Hamann dies in Königsberg in 1788, at the age of 58. The first collections of his works are published by Friedrich Roth and G. A. Wiener in 1821–1825.²⁶

CONVERSION IN ENGLAND

In 1758, Hamann rents a modest room in London, studying different texts, primarily the Bible. Something happens in his hermitic solitude, which becomes the main impulse in the development of his future philosophy and quite potentially determines the enigmatic structure of his writings, which are discussed in this article below. He writes in the essay 'Thoughts on the journey of my life' (Gedanken über meinem Lebenslauf) (1758), 'I felt God's praise! My heart is calmer now than it has ever been. [...] If I have received these great qualities from him, the priceless pearls, the price at which God has allowed me to be born; how can I now doubt his reign through the rest of my life'.²⁷

25 O'Flaherty, *Johann Georg Hamann*, 17–23.

26 Johann Georg Hamann, *Hamann's Schriften*, hrsg. von Friedrich Roth, Gustav A. Wiener (Berlin: G. Reimer, 1821–1843).

27 'Ich fühlte Gott Lob! jetzt mein Herz ruhiger als ich es jemals in meinem Leben gehabt. [...] Wenn ich die grosse Güte, die unschätzbare Perle, den Preis, zu dem mich Gott hat geboren werden lassen, von ihm erhalten; wie sollte ich an seiner Regierung meines ganzen Lebens jetzt zweifeln.' Johann Georg Hamann, *Sämtliche Werke*, Bd. II, Historisch-kritische Ausgabe von Josef Nadler (Wien: Thomas Morus Presse im Verlag Herder, 1950), 41.

However, we might refer to the young Hamann's experience today – whether it was a revelation or an apparition –, the event was undoubtedly seismic, deciding his subsequent world view and to some extent forcing him to stand up for his views, opposing prevalent ways of thinking. At the same time, the content of his texts may be regarded as a desire to convince his opponents to change their one-directional analytical course, which only develops the observing mind, and a wish to give the reader a perfect experience of life through his own works.²⁸ Hamann's conversion does not simply contain a solution to the intellectual conflict between his Lutheran religion and the generally prevalent rationalist zeitgeist. Rather, to Hamann it is proof of God's creative order since the beginning of time, which operates independently of any rational thought structures attached to it over time. From this angle, Hamann sees the relationship between mind and experience and mind and faith in a new light and his subsequent writings are largely attempts at revealing their actual relationships.²⁹ This of course also relates to the development of the concept of genius, whose subsequent epistemology is directly connected to Hamann's experiences in England.

THE GENIUS OF SOCRATES

Hamann proposes his vision of genius in a significantly titled work *Socratic Memorabilia, Assembled for the Boredom of the Public by a Lover of Boredom (Sokratische Denkwürdigkeiten für die lange Weile des Publicums zusammengetragen von einem Liebhaber der langen Weile)*.³⁰ The work itself was written over two weeks in August 1759, and published in December of the same year.³¹ The extension of the title, which mentions 'memorabilia compiled for the public by a lover of boredom', has been interpreted as Hamann's reaction to his contemporary Enlightenment ethics, which praise commercialism and industrialism,

28 Oswald Bayer, *Contemporary in Dissent. Johann Georg Hamann as a Radical Enlightener*, transl. by Roy A. Harrisville, Mark C. Mattes (Cambridge: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2012), xiii.

29 Beiser, *The Fate of Reason. German Philosophy from Kant to Fichte*, 25.

30 Johann Georg Hamann, *Sokratische Denkwürdigkeiten für die lange Weile des Publicums zusammengetragen von einem Liebhaber der langen Weile. Mit einer doppelten Zuschrift an Niemand und an Zween* (Amsterdam: [Hartung], 1759).

31 Beiser, *The Fate of Reason. German Philosophy from Kant to Fichte*, 24.



FIG. 2. TITLE PAGE OF JOHANN GEORG HAMANN'S *SOKRATISCHE DENKWÜRDIGKEITEN FÜR DIE LANGE WEILE DES PUBLICUMS...* (AMSTERDAM: [HARTUNG], 1759). PHOTO: ACADEMIC LIBRARY OF TALLINN UNIVERSITY.

and through that practicality and industriousness, justifying human existence only through productivity.³² In addition, the title of the work is accompanied by a significant subtitle, 'Double dedication to nobody and a twosome' (*Mit einer doppelten Zuschrift an Niemand und an Zween*), which alludes firstly to the general Enlightenment-infected audience as a 'Nobody', and by the 'Twosome' the author means the young director of Riga's mercantile company, Hamann's employer and financier Christoph Berens, and Immanuel Kant.³³ Hamann is in disputes over the Enlightenment ideology with both of them, which ultimately leads to the end of his relationship with Berens and to a longstanding academic opposition with Kant. Thus, the work is charged with personal emotion from cover to cover.

Hamann chooses Socrates as his protagonist, the exemplary hero of the rational philosophy of the Enlightenment, with a view to 'annoy those [rational philosophers – H.R.] in their faith'.³⁴ As Hamann himself very well understands, he is depicting Socrates with a certain irony as the great saint of the Enlightenment, the father of rationalism, the martyr trapped by tradition, prejudices and religion, as the critic and enemy of this new religion.³⁵ As he accepts the genius of Socrates, he sees its influence on his charge in a new way. Hamann associates the genius of Socrates simultaneously with the Holy Spirit of the Christian tradition, as well as with the creative inspirational force of genius, thus placing Socrates among saints.³⁶ Socrates, with his boundless belief in his inner voice of God (not his own mind) and nonchalance towards his unjust death sentence, can therefore be regarded as a precursor of apostle Paul or Christ himself.³⁷ Hamann treats Socrates not as an alternative to Christ, who symbolises the mind's victory over faith, but a forerunner to Christ, a pagan apostle, whose faith stands up to the tyranny of the mind, which allows him to use Socratic wisdom as an exponent of Christian, not pagan values.³⁸ The figure of Socrates is an

32 Beiser, *The Fate of Reason. German Philosophy from Kant to Fichte*, 25.

33 O'Flaherty, *Johann Georg Hamann*, 47; Beiser, *The Fate of Reason. German Philosophy from Kant to Fichte*, 26.

34 O'Flaherty, *Unity and Language: A Study in the Philosophy of Johann Georg Hamann*, 42.

35 Berlin, *The Magus of the North. J. G. Hamann and the Origins of Modern Irrationalism*, 42.

36 O'Flaherty, *Unity and Language: A Study in the Philosophy of Johann Georg Hamann*, 44.

37 *The Cambridge Companion to German Idealism*, ed. by Karl Ameriks (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 80.

38 Beiser, *The Fate of Reason. German Philosophy from Kant to Fichte*, 26.

opponent of the Sophists, who contradicts the fixed dogmatic views that stem from the rationality-obsessed Enlightenment; Hamann's contemporary sophists are Helvetius, Voltaire, Descartes, Leibniz, Kant, Rousseau and Mendelssohn.³⁹ Hamann is convinced that the capability of a genius (and every person in general) is not an innate attribute, but has been obtained through God, 'This is how we understand the importance of our self's being by him; to gain knowledge of our own abilities and path, we must be embraced by God, who alone can solve the secret of our essence.'⁴⁰

As an important trait of his protagonist, Hamann stresses ignorance (*Unwissenheit*), which is based on 'sensation (*Empfindung*), which differs from dogma more than a living animal differs from a skeleton'.⁴¹ Through ignorance we understand Socrates' reliance on his genius, which he does when his intellect is struggling. Genius is a divine source of inspiration, a prophetic voice, which one has to turn to when one's mind is insufficient or inadequate.⁴² Through ignorance Hamann also explains the connection between artist and genius. 'What in Homer makes up for the ignorance of the artistic rules which Aristotle devised after him, and what in Shakespeare makes up for the ignorance or overstepping of those critical rules? Genius is the unanimous answer to that. Of course, Socrates was able to be ignorant; he had a genius on whose knowledge he could rely, whom he loved and feared like his God [...]'.⁴³ The ignorance of an artist not only sets him free from the shackles of rationality, but also from the rules it has imposed on art, which can be ignored, as ignorance also guarantees

39 Berlin, *The Magus of the North. J. G. Hamann and the Origins of Modern Irrationalism*, 43.

40 'Hieraus sieht man, wie nothwendig unser Selbst in dem Schöpfer deselben gegründet ist, das wir die Erkenntnis unserer Macht haben, das, um den Umfang deselben auszumessen, wir bis in den Schooss der Gottheit dringen müssen, die allein das ganze Geheimnis unseres Wesens bestimmen und auflösen kann.' Johann Georg Hamann, *Sämtliche Werke*, Bd. I, Historisch-kritische Ausgabe von Josef Nadler (Wien: Thomas Morus Presse im Verlag Herder, 1949), 301.

41 'Zwischen Empfindung aber und einen Lehrsatz ist ein grösserer Unterschied als zwischen einem lebenden Thier und anatomischen Gerippe desselben.' Hamann, *Sokratische Denkwürdigkeiten für die lange Weile des Publicums zusammengetragen von einem Liebhaber der langen Weile*, 48.

42 Beiser, *The Fate of Reason. German Philosophy from Kant to Fichte*, 27.

43 'Was ersetzt einen Homer die Unwissenheit der Kunstregeln, die ein Aristoteles nach ihm erdacht, und was einem Schakespear die Unwissenheit oder Uebertretung jener kritischen Gesetze? Das Genie ist die einmüthige Antwort. Sokrates hatte also freylich gut unwissend sein; er hatte einen Genius, auf dessen Wissenschaft er sich verlassen konnte, den er liebte und fürchtete als seiner Gott [...]'. Hamann, *Sokratische Denkwürdigkeiten für die lange Weile des Publicums zusammengetragen von einem Liebhaber der langen Weile*, 52.

no knowledge of those rules (in Homer's case), or else their deliberate disregard (in Shakespeare's case). Hamann's view of the position of genius is important to note here – genius is a guiding companion of the artist, not the person itself. Here Hamann emphasises not the human-genius, but the divine intervention in this world, which is actualised by the persons inspired by it, incl. artists. This contains a paradox, considering that Hamann is regarded as one of the original sources of the idea of the (human)genius-cult of the second half of the 18th century. Here we can draw a parallel between Shaftesbury and Hamann – the former is considered the first representative of British aesthetics and the originator of the idea of the modern genius, while being a Neoplatonist of a deeply theological moral education, a proponent of the idea of genius as a divine inspiration and exaltation. Hamann preaches a similar, holistic, idea of genius, but he is to this day interpreted as the instigator of the radical early romanticism and the subverter of the Enlightenment thought (the latter he definitely is).

The other important element which Hamann uses to attack the rationalist mindset, is faith (*Glaube*), 'which is not of reason, and therefore it cannot be subjected to any attacks, because faith has as little to do with reason as tasting or seeing'.⁴⁴ Faith is directly connected to sensation (*Empfindung*), an indescribable feeling. Faith is an experience that differs from any abstract principle. In Hamann's view, faith leaves the realm of reason, its existence cannot be proven or disproven by the mind. 'We must believe in our own being and in the existence of all things, and that cannot be defined in any other way'.⁴⁵ The author is also not treating faith as a fruit of imagination, 'Imagination, even if it were a Sun horse with wings of dawn, cannot be the creator of faith'.⁴⁶ Accounting for the fact that Hamann's ideas become influential in the ideology of romanticism, which assigns imagination in particular a central and important role in the work of an artist, then through this position Hamann actually mitigates the role of imagination in comparison with religious experience. Imagination cannot be an

44 'Der Glaube ist kein Werk der Vernunft und kann daher auch keinem Angriff derselben unterliegen; weil Glauben so wenig durch Gründe geschieht als Schmecken und Sehen.' Hamann, *Sokratische Denkwürdigkeiten für die lange Weile des Publicums zusammengetragen von einem Liebhaber der langen Weile*, 50.

45 'Unser eigen Dasein und die Existenz aller Dinge ausser uns muss geglaubt und kann auf keine andere Art ausgemacht werden.' Ibid., 49.

46 'Die Einbildungskraft, wäre sie ein Sonnenpferd und hätte Flügel der Morgenröthe, kann also keine Schöpferin des Glaubens sein.' Ibid., 51.

independent guide to truth. An artist that trusts his imagination is on the wrong track, because life must be lived based on faith, the source that cannot be found in the human mind or imagination.⁴⁷ Beiser interprets Hamann's views on faith as new and provocative, namely that in faith we have a special knowing which contradicts discursive, rational knowing. The sensation of faith carries within it a perceptive knowing which cannot be reduced to anything nor is it submissible to proof, or discursive.⁴⁸ Therefore it is not possible to call Hamann's views in the context of faith strictly irrational, as faith is neither rational nor irrational, as it cannot be proven or disproven rationally.⁴⁹ In Hamann's Christological conviction, the truth is both divine and human.⁵⁰ Hamann equates religious and artistic dedication to life, both of which are divine gifts, given to a remarkable human being, whether it be a staunch faithful or an artist, 'There are activities of a higher order, which cannot be explained by this world's elements (dogmas). The divine is that which changes the miracles of nature and original works of art into signs that denote the manners and actions of those considered saintly. It is not just the end, but the pilgrimage of the written work is a masterpiece of an unknown genius, which the sky and earth regard as one creator, mediator and protector, in a transfigured human form'.⁵¹

AESTHETICS IN A NUTSHELL

The second of Hamann's works which deals with the concept of artistic genius, is *Aesthetics in a Nutshell. A Rhapsody in Cabalistic Prose (Aesthetica in Nuce. Eine Rhapsodie in Kabbalistischer Prose)* (1762), which became the epistemological gospel of the *Sturm und Drang*

47 Knut Alfvåg, "Imagination and Critique in the Work of Johann Georg Hamann", *Mishkan*, 80 (February 2019), 72.

48 Beiser, *The Fate of Reason. German Philosophy from Kant to Fichte*, 27–28.

49 Beiser, *The Fate of Reason. German Philosophy from Kant to Fichte*, 29.

50 On this topic: Oswald Bayer, *Johann Georg Hamann. 'Der hellste Kopf seiner Zeit'* (Tübingen: Attempto, 1998), 52–79.

51 'Es giebt Handlungen höherer Ordnung, für die keine Gleichung durch die Elemente (Satzungen) dieser Welt heraus gebracht werden kann. Eben das Göttliche, das die Wunder der Natur, und die Originalwerke der Kunst zu Zeichen macht, unterscheidet die Sitten und Thaten berufener Heiligen. Nicht nur das Ende, sondern der ganze Wandel eines Schriften ist das Meisterstück des unbekanntes Genies, das Himmel und Erde für den einigen Schöpfer, Mittler und Selbthalter erkennt und erkennen wird in verklärter Menschengestalt.' Hamann, *Hamann's Schriften* (1821), 158–159.

movement.⁵² It is quite possible that the work's title has been derived from Christoph Otto von Schönaich's *The Whole Aesthetic in One Nut (Die ganze Ästhetik in einer Nuss)* (1754), a satire against Friedrich Gottlieb Klopstock.⁵³

In this work, Hamann solves the question of the creativity of the artistic genius (poetic genius) through language, the cognition of which is linked to spiritual experience and here the artistic genius is given an advantage before the scientist and the philosopher. Hamann believes that 'poetry is the native language of the human race'⁵⁴ and that the 'poet at the beginning of the day is the same as the thief at the end of the day'.⁵⁵ It is the duty of the artistic genius to create the right combinations of symbols out of his natural mother tongue, not to invent new symbols. The word of God to humankind through the Bible is poetry, God chose the language of poets to reveal himself, not that of the philosophers'.⁵⁶ Through this line of thought we see how Hamann shifts creative power from the rationally established 'rules of art' to the realm of emotions and feelings. Rules, on the other hand, Hamann compares to the Vestal Virgins – they have no meaning when they are not broken.⁵⁷ It is only the art that includes images, and not a rational concept, that can bestow immediate knowledge upon humans, because art is a non-discursive medium.⁵⁸ The magic of language is restored through poetry and Hamann gives the poet the right and ability to fix nature's jumbled-up and fragmented natural text. The duty of the artist will be to restore the divine-organic unity of language and nature.⁵⁹

According to Hamann, nature works through the senses (*Sinne*) and passions (*Leidenschaften*).⁶⁰ 'The senses and feelings speak and

52 Beiser, *The Fate of Reason. German Philosophy from Kant to Fichte*, 34.

53 *Classic and Romantic German Aesthetics*, ed. by Jay M. Bernstein (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 1.

54 'Poesie ist die Muttersprache des menschlichen Geschlechts.' Hamann, *Sämtliche Werke*, Bd. II, 197.

55 'Der Poet am Anfange der Tages ist derselbe mit dem Dieb am Ende der Tage.' *Ibid.*, 206.

56 O'Flaherty, *Unity and Language: A Study in the Philosophy of Johann Georg Hamann*, 45.

57 Isaiah Berlin, *Against the Current, Essays in the History of Ideas*, ed. by Henry Hardy (New York: Penguin Books, 1982), 169.

58 Beiser, *The Fate of Reason. German Philosophy from Kant to Fichte*, 35.

59 Undusk, 'The spirit of Hamann and Herder as the promoter of Estonian literature: The Synecdoche principle', 674.

60 Hamann, *Sämtliche Werke*, Bd. II, 206.

understand nothing but images. Images contain the treasure of human insight and bliss'.⁶¹ Through them God speaks to the artist, who interprets those images, therefore engaging in imitation. 'To speak is to translate – from the language of angles into the language of humans, this means putting thoughts into words, things into names, images into signs [...].'⁶² Because the artist imitates the creator, he is far from depicting an already finished reality in readiness; rather, the artist's artistic imitation contains creative words (and images), which are involved in the creative process themselves.⁶³ Hamann, following Shaftesbury, shifts the emphasis from the finished artwork to the creative process, thus distancing from the Aristotelian tradition; and it is precisely through this that Hamann becomes an influential shaper of the *Sturm und Drang* movement as well as of the later ideas of romanticism. In addition to Shaftesbury, with whose works Hamann is well acquainted⁶⁴, I would also see a connection here between Hamann and the Cambridge Platonists, who directly influenced Shaftesbury's aesthetics. Ralph Cudworth's idea of the divine 'plastic nature', which is able to create itself through human art, is similar to the line of thought propounded by Hamann.⁶⁵ However, the direct reflection of the activity of a genius is always God, as Hamann pronounces in his essay 'Clouds. An Epilogue to Socratic Memorabilia' (*Wolken. Ein nachspiel Sokratischer Denkwürdigkeiten*) (1761), 'But is the stupidity of genius rich enough to replace wisdom with regard to general truths? This is the main question – *Deus intersit!* – *dignus vindice nodus!*'⁶⁶

61 'Sinne und Leidenschaften reden und verstehen nichts als Bilder. In Bildern besteht der ganze Schatz menschlicher Erkenntnis und Glückseligkeit.' Hamann, *Sämtliche Werke*, Bd. II, 197.

62 'Reden ist übersetzen – aus einer Engelsprache in eine Menschensprache, das heist, Gedanken in Worte, – Sachen in Namen, – Bilder in Zeichen [...]' Ibid., 199.

63 *The Cambridge Companion to German Idealism*, 81.

64 During his studies, in the beginning of the 1750s, Hamann translates the 1711 published three-volume book *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times*. See John R. Betz, *After Enlightenment: The Post-Secular Vision of J. G. Hamann* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 27; Horst Meyer, 'Hamann und Shaftesbury', *Johann Georg Hamann und England, Hamann und die englischsprachige Aufklärung*. Acta des siebten Internationalen Hamann-Kolloquiums zu Marburg/Lahn 1996, ed. by Bernhard Gajek (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1999), 197–204.

65 Ralph Cudworth, *The True Intellectual System of the Universe* (London: Printed for Richard Royston, 1678), 155–156.

66 'Ist aber die Thorheit des Genies reich genug die Weisheit zu ersetzen, die durch den Zusammenhang allgemeiner Wahrheiten in Sinne fällt? Dies ist der Hauptknoten – *Deus intersit!* – *dignus vindice nodus!*' Hamann, *Sämtliche Werke*, Bd. II, 107.

Aesthetics is permeated firstly by the idea of art as the imitator of nature, through which the world of God is revealed to us, and secondly by the idea of art as the reflector of the deeper feelings of the artistic genius's personality. 'Oh, Muse, who is like a goldsmith's fire and a washerman's soap! – One that dares to purify the natural use of the senses from the unnatural use of abstractions, which mutilates our understanding of things and suppresses and blasphemes the name of the Creator.'⁶⁷ This is a paradoxical union of extreme subjectivity, which demands of the artist the expression of his most personal desires and feelings, and at the same time of extreme objectivity, which requires the artist to imitate nature and surrender to its influence.⁶⁸ The more subjective and pure the artist can be in expressing his feelings, the more objective will be his depictions of God's nature in his artwork, the more God will be reflected through the feelings of the artist within a human being, being an expression of both the artist's and God's creativity simultaneously. 'Every person's reaction to his work is a sign and token of our participation in the heavenly nature and our having originated from Him.'⁶⁹ Hamann categorically dismisses any other kind of imitation. From his letter to Kant, 'He who believes another's reason more than his own, seizes to be human and ranks first among the servile herd of imitators. Even the biggest human-genius should be too bad for us to imitate'.⁷⁰

JUDGEMENT OF THE CRUSADES, OR TASTE AND GENIUS

One important element that accompanies the artistic genius idea of the 18th century, is the matter of taste. To what extent is the artist dependent on taste in the execution of his artwork and how does that influence aesthetic attitudes? Hamann tackles the question of taste

67 'O eine Muse wie das Feuer eines Goldschmieds, und wie die Seife der Wäscher! – Sie wird es wagen, den natürlichen Gebrauch der Sinne von dem unnatürlichen Gebrauch der Abstractionen zu läutern, wodurch unsere Begriffe von den Dingen eben so sehr verstümmelt werden, als der Name des Schöpfers unterdrückt und gelästert wird.' Ibid., 207.

68 Beiser, *The Fate of Reason. German Philosophy from Kant to Fichte*, 36–37.

69 'Jede Gegenwirkung des Menschen in die Kreatur ist Brief und Siegel von unserem Antheil an der Göttlichen Natur, und das wir Seines Geschlechts sind.' Hamann, *Sämtliche Werke*, Bd. II, 207.

70 'Der eines andern Vernunft mehr glaubt als seiner eigenen, hört auf ein Mensch zu sein, und hat den ersten Rang unter dem servum pecus der Nachahmer. Auch das grösste menschliche Genie sollte uns zu schlecht dazu sein.' Hamann, *Hamann's Schriften* (1821), 438.

in his *Judgement of the Crusades (Beurtheilung der Kreuzzüge)* (1763). It is remarkable that the author uses the term 'genius' in the sense of the person himself, thus abandoning the former concept of genius as an accompanying spirit.⁷¹

'Finding and perpetrating a medium between two extremes is not the mission of a genius but taste. Genius only knows his own abilities and always uses that as a benchmark. He judges the abilities of others according to his own or does not pay any attention to the others, nor ever find the right measure of insight, which to presuppose of his readers.'⁷² Hamann frees his artistic genius from the shackles of taste, letting him act only on his greatness and will, while not being afraid for the genius and public to contrast. This independence from taste is clearly also the credo of the originality of the work of the artist. 'Therefore sometimes the great artists seem to be writing for the angels, sometimes for children'.⁷³ Leaving taste completely up to the arts audience, he advises the artist to refrain from subduing himself, 'A true genius only knows his own dependencies and weaknesses, or the limits of his talent. Equalisation of his power is a big negative.'⁷⁴

IMPACT AND RECEPTION OF HAMANN'S IDEAS

There are very few authors whose genius concept is as influential as Hamann's. A lot of it is due to his aforementioned extremely personal, yet mystery-shrouded approach. John R. Betz notes that Goethe has called Hamann the brightest mind and literary father of his era in Germany. Hegel, who writes a thorough review of Hamann's early works, considers him a genius and a bright critic of the Enlightenment

71 A thorough linguistic treatment of the term and word 'genius' in Hamann's works may be found in: Lump, *Philologia crucis. Zu Johann Georg Hamanns Auffassung von der Dichtkunst. Mit einem Kommentar zur "Aesthetica in nuce" (1762)*, 107–143. It is interesting to note that in two of the discussed works, 'Socrates' and 'Aesthetics', which are considered the most important and influential sources of the new idea of genius, Hamann uses the word 'genius' on just three occasions.

72 'Das Mittel zwischen beiden Extremitäten zu finden und zu halten, ist kein Werk des Genie, sondern des Geschmacks. Das Genie kennet nur seine eigene Kräfte, und nimmt die Grösse derselben allzeit zum Maasstab an. Es urtheilt von der Fassungskraft anderer nach der seinigen oder vielmehr es siehet gar auf andere nicht, und weiss niemals das rechte maass der Einsicht zu treffen, die es bei seinen Lesern voraussetzen kann.' Hamann, *Sämtliche Werke*, Bd. II, 259.

73 'Daher scheinen die grossen Genies bald für Engel, bald für Kinder zu schreiben.' Ibid., 259–260.

74 'Das wahre Genie kennt nur seine Abhänglichkeit und Schwäche, oder die Schranken seiner Gaben. Die Gleichung seiner kräfte ist eine negative Grösse.' Ibid., 260.

era. Schelling regards him as a prophet, who is a guiding light to his philosophy of mythologies.⁷⁵ This line of positive epithets could continue even longer. Regardless of the long shadow that is cast on the era by the spirit of Kant's concept of genius, Hamann's thoughts and stances, and his literary style form a basis for the German early romanticism, especially the ideology of the *Sturm und Drang* movement – a phenomenon in European cultural history, which is relatively short-lived, but whose impact on European artistic culture is far more influential and expansive than it seems. The name alone, given to the group in 1776, suggests ambition for change.⁷⁶ Hamann's concept of genius is extended into the 19th century's philosophy and literature, including through the impact of the *Sturm und Drang* movement; at the end of the 19th century it reveals itself through Kierkegaard, and in the beginning of the 20th century through the literary movement influenced by existentialism.⁷⁷

Beiser names a line of works by different authors, which have been influenced by Hamann's idea of emphasising the metaphysical artistic creativity, advocated in his *Aesthetics – Reden* by Schleiermacher, *Hyperion* by Hölderlin, *System des transcendentalen Idealismus* by Schelling, *Lehring zu Sais* by Novalis, *Vorlesungen über Transzendentalphilosophie* by Schlegel.⁷⁸

Speaking of the concept of genius itself, in this context there is a clearly distinguishable lineage, which appears in the work of his friend and student Johann Gottfried Herder by the acknowledgement of the relationship between the divine and the artistic genius, and by centring feelings as the main elements of sense and perception.⁷⁹ We also see a similar holistic concept of genius in the works of Friedrich Heinrich Jacob.⁸⁰ Friedrich Schiller stresses the idea of a creative genius as an artist free from taste and rules in his letters

75 Betz, 'Reading "Sibylline Leaves": J. G. Hamann in the History of Ideas', 94.

76 On the origins and etymology of the *Sturm und Drang* name, see William S. Heckscher, 'Sturm und Drang. Conjectures on the Origin of a Phrase', *Simiolus: Netherlands Quarterly for the History of Art*, 1 (2) (1966–1967), 94–105.

77 On this topic: Walter Lowrie, *Johann Georg Hamann: An Existentialist* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf&Stock, 1950).

78 Beiser, *The Fate of Reason. German Philosophy from Kant to Fichte*, 37.

79 Earl Nicholas Lewis, 'Herder's Theory of the Gifted Individual', *The German Quarterly*, 29 (3) (May 1956), 134–136.

80 Edward T. Larkin, 'Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi: The End of Reason and the Void', *Historical Reflections/Réflexions Historiques*, 26 (3) (Fall 2000), 387–403.

on the aesthetics published in 1795.⁸¹ In the 19th century, Hamann's ideas are evident in the emergent countermovement against Kant's dualist philosophy (Tittle, Schultze, Maimon, etc.). In addition, we must mention the 19th century philosophers who have been directly influenced by Hamann's philosophy, such as Schlegel, Schelling and also Hegel.⁸²

According to Paul W. Bruno, the idea of an unlearned, emotive, unique genius – started by Hamann and carried on by the *Sturm und Drang* movement, won the hearts of the Western world through Herder's teachings, to Kant's disappointment. The over-amplification of the concept of genius, which Kant is fighting against, acquires thereby an even more powerful narrative.⁸³

Analysing modern texts on artistic genius in the broadest scope, whether it is from the French, British or German authors, it is hard to find an approach to the subject quite as personal, deeply emotional as Hamann's. By entering into a dissenting dialogue with his contemporary German authors (who were his friends or acquaintances in personal life), Hamann creates the image of an artistic genius who is a sharply conflicting subject in all its manifestations, thus disagreeing even with his influencers, which means primarily the genius theories of British empiricism (Shaftesbury, Hume, Burke, etc.). Having acquired a holistic world view through his conversion, Hamann presents a new vision of the artistic genius, which underscores the metaphysical artistic creation as an intellectual process, thus contradicting the prevalent aesthetic of the era which values artwork as an experiential finished product. Hamann interprets creativity as a revelation, which needs creative imagination to acquire the revelation. His idea of genius is primarily an idea of a free subject, who is a representative of the divine creative spirit on earth. This biunique connection with the divine is undoubtedly novel and provocative in its time, considering the mentality of the Enlightenment, and it could be viewed as contra-aesthetics or anti-aesthetics. Hamann, denying the zeitgeisty perfected and rule-bound, pleasing artworks driven by beauty ideals, proposes an opposing idea of creative freedom,

81 *Schiller's Briefe über die ästhetische Erziehung des Menschen*, hrsg. von Arthur Jung (Leipzig: Druck und Verlag von B. G. Treubner, 1875).

82 Beiser, *The Fate of Reason. German Philosophy from Kant to Fichte*, 17.

83 Paul W. Bruno, *Kant's Concept of Genius. Its Origin and Function in the Third Critique* (London: Continuum, 2010), 121.

independent of rules regarding depictions of God's nature, and art as a process of metaphysical meaning, whose criterion of success is the faith of the artistic genius. It is also noteworthy that Hamann does not offer his vision of genius as a comprehensive theoretical postulation, but presents it through his own literary creation as an artwork created by genius, which stands out cardinally with its literary formulation and style, without following current rules and norms, being intriguing and ironic in its time and thereby also definitely influencing some later authors, who assume the idea of a creative and original artistic genius as their motto. He is the first author who proffers a creative principle that is in stark contrast to the prevalent zeitgeist, which becomes characteristic of romanticism (and also of the contradictory nature of modernism).

Even though Hamann concentrates on literary arts in his concept of the artistic genius, I am convinced that his principles can be extended to other art forms. Broadly speaking, Hamann's concept of genius, which contradicts the rationalism of the Enlightenment, becomes influential not only in his own time, but it retains importance through various authors, who are influenced by Hamann in the following 19th century, with the development of the romanticist artistic genius-centred view of culture, extending into the roots of modernism, which in its turn starts contradicting the aesthetics of romanticism, and in which Hamann's idea of the free and conflicting genius has a role to play, albeit in a completely different context.

IN CONCLUSION

The key to understanding Johann Georg Hamann's idea of genius lies in the fact that Hamann sees himself as a Socratic genius in his time, whose duty it is to prophetically open the eyes of the 'blind' intellectuals whose world view is reason-centred. The two catalysts of Hamann's genius treatment are: 1. the conversion he experienced in England, which influenced his subsequent holistic world view, where faith (*Glaube*) has a central, determinative and preferable role before the intellect; 2. his views, including the concept of genius, are born out of opposition to the dominant reason-centred philosophy and aesthetics (which is in contrast to Hamann's deeply religious beliefs, in consequence of the aforementioned apparitional experience), typical of the Enlightenment in mid-18th century Germany (Wolff, Gottsched,

Mendelsson, etc.). Hamann's views are most sharply and powerfully evident in the provocative responses to his rational critics, ultimately realised in his various enigmatic writings.⁸⁴ Compared to the style of many of his contemporary authors, Hamann is conspicuous by the irony prevalent in his works, which could be regarded as the main method of the works studied in this article.⁸⁵ Indeed, Kierkegaard has called Hamann the greatest humorist of Christianity.⁸⁶ Hamann's works should be considered artefacts which in their comprehensive structure are meant to be examples of the formation of the radically new idea of the creative genius in literature. These are works by an artistic genius, which harbour expectations of analyses and responses now and in the future.

84 A good example of such a sequence would be the origin story of the *Socratic Memorabilia*, which is spurred on by a response to Berens and Kant, after which a negative critique of 'Socrates' by Christian Ziegler is published in *Hamburgischen Nachrichten* (a pseudonym behind which Hamann sees Berens and Kant), which is followed by a response from Hamann: *Clouds: An Epilogue to Socratic Memorabilia* (1761), in which Hamann offers a thorough description of a connection between genius and insanity. We may but assume that should that critique of 'Socrates' have not existed, the response to it would not have become published either.

85 O'Flaherty, *Johann Georg Hamann*, 59.

86 *Ibid.*, 55.

HOLGER RAJAVEE: THE MAGUS OF THE NORTH: JOHANN GEORG HAMANN'S TREATMENT OF THE ARTISTIC GENIUS

KEYWORDS: JOHANN GEORG HAMANN; 18TH CENTURY AESTHETICS; ARTISTIC GENIUS; STURM UND DRANG; COUNTER-ENLIGHTENMENT

SUMMARY

In the 18th century, questions abound on the new branch of science that is the discipline of aesthetics. In connection with this, first in France and England, then also in the German sphere of thought, artistic genius as the producer of an aesthetically valued artwork becomes an object of interest. The term 'genius' enters German vernacular in the middle of the 18th century, when the scholar and philosopher Johann Georg Hamann commences his life work. Interpretations of the works of Hamann, an influential irrationalist or anti-rationalist of the Enlightenment era, are topical even today. At the time, the Enlightenment-inspired, nascent German genius theory is greatly influenced by the French tradition. However, Hamann becomes a radical changer of the concept of genius. During his sojourn in London (1757–1758), Hamann undergoes a religious conversion, which subsequently becomes a catalyst for his entire works and philosophy. Influenced by the British empiricist genius tradition, from his first writings (*Socratic Memorabilia* and *Aesthetics in a Nutshell*), Hamann enters into dispute with the spirit of the Enlightenment that dominates German aesthetics, represented by Gottsched, Mendelssohn, Lessing, etc., remaining in opposition throughout his creative career. In his innovative literary works, rich in metaphors, he proposes his own holistic idea of genius, which centres around an artistic genius with a God-given talent, whose creativity is directly connected to his faith in God and the perfect nature he created. Hamann's poetic artist, who creates his works through divine sensation, is not limited by a single rule or law, nor is he bound by the taste preferences of his audience. Hamann does not see artistic creation as a pleasurable artefact which enhances nature by rational rules, which has to adhere to the limits of good taste – that view was prevalent and dominant at the time, especially in the French and German Enlightenment ideology. He highlights the idea of art as a metaphysical creative process which stems from feelings and sensations through faith, which has a deep spiritual meaning.

Hamann's works, in which he addresses the questions of art and genius, are not dry postulations, but the author's original visions of ingenious creation, which stand out by their intriguing innovative structure, and often by ironic and humorous undertones. Hamann's concept of the artistic genius is one of the cornerstones of German early romanticism, it has influenced numerous authors in the 19th century and extended into the 20th century through existentialist literature. Hamann's vision of genius does not have equivalents in the list of genius treatments, it is unique in both content and form. Hamann's ideas of genius will remain topical in every era when subjective views of art are in focus, which stem from the inner creative freedom of the artist, a creative who crosses boundaries and ignores conventions, whose aspiration is guided by something that cannot be subjected to ordinary explanations. The time has arrived on the spiral of history today when the phenomenon of the artist is yet again at the centre of discussions, and there is no reason to doubt that artistic genius will continue revealing itself in times to come.

CV

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