CHAPTER 7

FROM STURM UND DRANG TO ITALY

STURM UND DRANG

After a period of abandon and debauchery in London, where he wasted the funds of the German patrons who had sent him on a diplomatic mission, Johann Georg Hamann experienced a conversion and became a devout Lutheran Protestant.  

His learned polemic, *Sokratische Denkwürdigkeiten*, was published in 1759.  

Who could say, Hamann protested in that piece, that Socrates was not also to be reckoned among the figures sent by God, that “heaven anointed him its herald and interpreter, appointed him to that calling...which the prophets among the Jews possessed.”  

Like Luther, Socrates had imitated his father, in that he took and hacked away, that which was superfluous on the wood, and improved thereby the form of the work.  

In the beginning, therefore, was Martin Luther. His skepticism about the status of reason contributed to a powerful intellectual and artistic impulse in late eighteenth-century Germany known as the *Sturm und Drang*.  

Hamann took Winckelmann’s evocations of Socrates’s sensuality in his stride, making a comparison between his concern with bodily and artistic form, and Luther’s craftsmanship of doctrine. But more important than this comparison were three qualities or insights that Hamann associated with Socrates and which contained the seed both of the *Sturm und Drang’s* relationship with Greece and Greek poetry, and of the ideas of Goethe’s *Italienische Reise*. Socrates was not guided by reason but by the *Daimon*, the spirit that he mentioned in his dialogues and to whom he attributed his inspiration. The first of Hamann’s insights was that “just as nature has opened our eyes, so history has opened our ears. To analyze a body and an event down to its last particulars means to wish to spy out God’s invisible essence, his eternal force. Whoever does not believe Moses and the prophets will therefore, against his wishes and knowledge, remain a poet, like...
Buffon on the history of creation and Montesquieu on the history of the Roman Empire.” For Hamann, Socrates’s divine mission was confirmed precisely by his obedience to the Daimon, a kind of inspiration sanctioned by providence and disdainful of the reason that classified and passed judgment, whether it concerned Buffon’s plants or Montesquieu’s laws.

The second insight was about the nature of that inspiration. “What compensates in Homer,” Hamann asked, for the ignorance of the rules of art, which an Aristotle after him elaborated, and what compensates in a Shakespeare for the ignorance or violation of the laws of criticism? Genie is the unequivocal answer. Socrates could well afford to be ignorant, he had his Genius, upon whose knowledge he could rely, whom he loved and feared as his god, whose tranquility meant more to him than all the reason of the Egyptians and Greeks. Genie, for Hamann, was a creative faculty, of divine provenance and endowed, by its embodiment in the prophets and the prophetic Socrates, with ethical authority. As an expression of a providence for which prophets were the protagonists of history, Hamann disdained a historiography that tore the veil of nature, an attitude to the past that did not respect the truths which arose in a given locality and tried instead to encompass and delineate the whole in retrospectively imposed categories. Hamann’s third insight therefore appeared to enjoin a mimetic relationship to nature: “Perhaps the whole of history is more mythology,” he observed, and just like nature, a sealed testimony, a puzzle, that cannot be solved without resorting to tools other than our reason.

A wish to faithfully represent the transformations of nature, taking at face value the truths contained in given moments and localities, was the ethical and methodological foundation that Hamann contributed to Herder’s philosophy of history. But this same reverent and mimetic way of proceeding was premised on the “sealed testimony,” the puzzle Hamann equated with nature. Reason, which in his view blocked access to that testimony, could certainly be circumvented by historicist endeavors to capture the whole scene and epoch in which nature manifested itself. Yet it could also be circumvented by the Genie’s personal evocation, not of the entire scene and its place in history, but of particular moments, testimonies of fullness and vitality, of excellence in living, in overcoming, in atoning. For Goethe, who opted for this second approach, this entailed a break with Hamann’s Protestant providential foundation while retaining the insights about nature and Genie, and an eventual return to a theodicy akin to a deistic providence. These insights about nature and Genie were fundamental to Goethe’s relationship with Greek antiquity.