

The Revivifying Word

Literature, Philosophy, and the
Theory of Life in Europe's
Romantic Age

Clayton Koelb

Studies in German Literature Linguistics and Culture

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Call ye these appearances
Which I beheld of shepherds in my youth,
This sanctity of nature given to man,
A shadow, a delusion — ye who are fed
By the dead letter, not the spirit of things,
Whose truth is not a motion or a shape
Instinct with vital functions, but a block
Or waxen image which yourselves have made
And ye adore!

— Wordsworth, *The Prelude* VIII

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Preface

THIS BOOK EXAMINES A FRUITFUL POINT of intersection between the rhetoric of philosophy and the rhetoric of fiction during the Romantic century: the apostle Paul's well-known proposition that the dead letter can be revived by the living spirit. This proposition provided the philosophical foundation for an aesthetic theory, and that theory in turn implied a remarkably productive narrative idea. The aesthetic theory focused attention on the mysterious process by which lifeless material objects mediate an interaction between the living minds of artists and their audiences. The narrative application was a set of literary texts in which characters cross the boundary between death and life with the help of some form of reading. Romantic aesthetics thus provided not only the theory but also the principal theme for a persistent genre of Romantic fiction. In both theory and practice, then, Romanticism was frequently a matter of life and death.

The period-concept "Romanticism," though still much contested, is useful for a study like this one, which traces a concept (and a practice derived from that concept) that traveled widely geographically — from Europe to the United States and beyond — and extended in time from the middle of the eighteenth century to the middle of the nineteenth.¹ In this book, therefore, I follow the proposal of William Galperin and Susan Wolfson, who have suggested redefining Romanticism as

an intellectually and historically coherent century-long category, 1750–1850, which we unabashedly call "The Romantic Century." Our totalizing nomenclature may appear a bit backward-looking, especially for an era of revolutions. But the words and events of romanticism at this category's center are actually quite consistent with the essential monism that lurks (at least teleologically) in the dialectical constitution of romantic studies currently in vogue, where "and" is invariably the keyword: margin "and" center; past "and" present; self "and" society; along with the host of rubrics that begin with "romanticism and. . . ."

This book suggests that another important "and" be added to the list: "matter/letter *and* spirit." The dialectical relation between dead matter and living spirit, it can be argued, is the most significant and persistent of all the Romantic "ands." Its persistence is indeed formidable: fascination with its implications continues to the present day.

It is essential not to lose sight of the fact that behind the impetus for the expansion suggested by Galperin and Wolfson lies a historically significant insight: the Romantic century set the agenda for modernity. That is

not all it did, by any means, but it surely did at least that. The important issues that have been contested throughout the modern period (from around 1750 to approximately the present) were first framed, or significantly reframed, by writers who were productive from 1750 to 1850.

Those familiar with my other work will not be surprised to find that this project, too, focuses on reading, which I understand here as the process of reconstructing and construing human discourse that has been embodied as a material artifact. The interaction between the living producers and receivers of such discourse, mediated as it is by lifeless objects, necessarily involves readers in an activity that must, at times, seem like a rite of revivification. It surely seemed so to the writers discussed in this book, who in effect founded their conception of art on the mysterious possibility that potential life inheres in apparently dead matter. In this conception they were undoubtedly abetted by a prominent strain of scientific thought, outlined in the second chapter, arguing for the presence of life even in presumably “dead” things like minerals. The interpenetration of matter and spirit was in fact assumed by an influential sector of the European cultural elite, and in consequence the conceptual boundary between dead matter and living organisms could, in the minds of many, blur and even disappear. The process of reading was the paradigmatic and homely example of precisely how one could — and regularly did — cross the boundary, taking the dead matter of a text and turning it into the living thoughts of a reader.

The study of Romantic culture, particularly of literary culture, has in recent years most frequently been cast in the mode of ideological critique. Artistic endeavors have been regularly understood as epiphenomena that reflect, distort, or attempt to evade the more important political, social, economic conditions of human life. There has been a significant effort to bring to the foreground these allegedly more basic, allegedly more “historical,” circumstances of which cultural artifacts like literary texts are supposed to be symptoms. Certainly some very interesting and illuminating work has come out of this approach, and it has appropriately chastened those who might have become inattentive to some of the features of the total historical matrix in which texts are necessarily embedded. One prominent strain of current research, for example, pays particular attention to the material culture of the period, partly out of a desire to investigate something hitherto neglected by scholarship, but partly also out of the conviction that Romantic writers had themselves ignored or devalued material conditions in their quest for a fuller understanding of that intellectual/spiritual quality denoted by the German word *Geist*.

This study takes an approach to cultural history that attempts analysis rather than critique. As D. W. Smith has defined it, cultural analysis “studies the social practices that help to shape or serve as cultural substrate of the various types of mental activity, including conscious experience.”

Scholarship in this vein tries to identify in social practices such as literature, philosophy, and science those cultural structures that shape the way participants in that culture experience the world — without taking any stand on the adequacy or inadequacy of those structures. Cultural criticism of Romanticism looks to identify its omissions and distortions; cultural analysis of Romanticism hopes to trace as clearly as possible those cultural constellations that allowed Romantics to see the world as they did. It does not come to any conclusions as to whether or not they saw it correctly. The concepts “omission” and “distortion” do not play a central role in the analysis.

Still, one side effect of closely examining such constellations might be the discovery that some of our assumptions about omissions and distortions were premature. While it is true that Romantic culture placed a very high value on *Geist*, a careful examination of the letter/spirit constellation suggests that there was a significant materialist component in Romantic thought. This book tries to show that Romantic culture was deeply and abidingly concerned about the interdependence of *Geist* with a material vehicle. The process of writing and reading exemplifies every aspect and subtlety of the interaction between matter and spirit. Indeed, it is hardly possible to overstate the theoretical complexity of a process that involves taking thought embodied in a living creature, reembodying such thought in language, and embodying that language yet again in material objects; then, conversely, extracting language from material objects and thought from linguistic structures to reembody them once more in a living organism. Far from evading or suppressing the material, the Romantic century lavished upon matter its most consistent and careful intellectual scrutiny.

Because my overall aim has been to contribute to the cultural history of the Romantic century by looking through the lens of literature, I have had to make certain strategic decisions about the deployment of evidence. As part of my endeavor I have had to examine, to a limited degree and with a very tight focus, the history of philosophy and the history of science: the early chapters offer the results of my investigation in those areas. The political history of the time, important as it was, had primarily indirect effects on the matters relevant to this inquiry and therefore receives less attention. I have chosen for detailed analysis a number of works of European fiction that represent both the phenomenon I am describing and its temporal and geographic span. The sample offered here is not meant to be exhaustive but rather illustrative; it seeks to indicate the overall shape of a cultural trend.

* * *

I am grateful to the Johnston family, particularly Margaret and Paul A. Johnston, the donors who generously endowed several professorships at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. Not only did they provide the funds, but they also specified that these endowed chairs be named, not

in honor of themselves, but in recognition the achievements made by distinguished Carolina scholars. I therefore also owe a special debt of thanks to the late Guy Benton Johnson, whose important contributions to a field far from my own provided an occasion for the Johnston family's philanthropy. The research fund accompanying the Guy B. Johnson chair, along with a research and study leave provided by Carolina's College of Arts and Sciences, facilitated completion of the book. I benefited from the opportunity to try out portions of the manuscript as talks, first at a panel held at a Modern Language Association convention, and later on the occasion of an invitation to speak at Duke University. The comments I received were very helpful in refocusing my thinking as I revised the text. Chapter 4, "Eat This Scroll," has appeared in print before in somewhat different form, under the title "Incorporating the Text: Kleist's 'Michael Kohlhaas,'" in *PMLA* 105, no. 5 (1990):1098–1107.

The manuscript went through a number of transformations on its way to completion. The last and most important of them was stimulated by the work of Janice Hewlett Koelb in her book *The Poetics of Description* and by the detailed advice she offered me in the final stages of revision. Without her I would not have known many of the things I needed to know and should have known when the project began. It was her suggestion, for example, that I look into the writings of Robinet, a key figure in late eighteenth-century natural philosophy and an essential link in the argument of the early chapters. It is thanks to her that my various drafts finally developed into a book fit to print.

Clayton Koelb
Chapel Hill, North Carolina

Note

¹ For differing points of view on how to understand "Romanticism," see Lovejoy; Wellek; Peckham; Abrams, "English Romanticism"; Eichner, "*Romantic*"; Kroeber; and McFarland (25–49). McGann provides a useful overview (17–56). Reinhart Koselleck has called this period the "Sattelzeit" (saddle period) — that is, the era of transition from the premodern to full-fledged modernity. "This period thematizes the transformation of the premodern usage of language to our usage, and I cannot emphasize strongly enough its heuristic character" (5). Koselleck has vigorously defended the notion that modernity begins in the eighteenth century, most notably perhaps in his essay "The Eighteenth Century as the Beginning of Modernity" (154–69).

Note on Abbreviations and Translations

USE THE FOLLOWING ABBREVIATIONS to refer to frequently cited works. Although I quote the original French or German for texts written in those languages only when necessary for the analysis, I provide references throughout to standard editions of the original texts, alongside that of the translation, so that readers can easily locate the passages in the original as needed. Translations not otherwise credited are mine.

- GE [Gautier English] Gautier, Théophile. *The Works of Théophile Gautier*. Trans. and ed. F. C. de Sumichrast. Vol. 11. New York: George D. Sproul, 1901.
- GF [Gautier French] Gautier, Théophile. *Spirite: Nouvelle fantastique*. Paris: Editions A.-G. Nizet, 1970.
- GS [Goethe Sorrows] Goethe, J. W. *The Sorrows of Young Werther and Selected Writings*. Trans. Catherine Hutter. New York: Signet-New American Library, 1962.
- GW [Goethe Werke] Goethe, J. W. *Werke. Hamburger Ausgabe in 14 Bänden*. Ed. Erich Trunz. Vol. 6. München: C. H. Beck, 1996.
- HE [Hugo English] Hugo, Victor. *Notre-Dame of Paris*. Trans. John Sturrock. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1978.
- HF [Hugo French] Hugo, Victor. *Notre-Dame de Paris. Les Travailleurs de la mer*. Ed. Jacques Seebacher and Yves Gohin. Paris: Gallimard, 1975.
- KM [Kleist Marquise] Kleist, Heinrich von. *The Marquise of O—and Other Stories*. Ed. and trans. David Luke and Nigel Reeves. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1978.
- KW [Kleist Werke] Kleist, Heinrich von. *Sämtliche Werke und Briefe*. Ed. Helmut Sembdner. Vol. 2. München: Hanser, 1961.
- MM [Maturin Melmoth] Maturin, Charles Robert. *Melmoth the Wanderer*. Ed. Victor Sage. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2000.
- PT [Poe Tales] Poe, Edgar Allan. *Selected Tales*. Ed. Julian Symons. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1980.
- SF [Shelley Frankenstein] Shelley, Mary Wollstonecraft. *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus. The 1818 Text*. Ed. James Rieger. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1982.

Part I

Letter and Spirit

Introduction: “The Dead Man’s Life”: Romantic Reading and Revivification

But how are we to raise the defunct language of
Nature from the dead?

— Hamann, *Aesthetica in Nuce*

MANY POETS, PHILOSOPHERS, AND SCIENTISTS of Europe’s Romantic Age struggled to formulate a theory of life that would answer some of the most difficult questions in philosophy. How can we properly characterize and explain the mysterious relation between dead material bodies and living, animate beings? What process causes one to turn into the other? What happens when a living creature ceases to live? And, most puzzling of all, is it possible that life could arise out of lifeless matter? The key that could unlock these mysteries lay surprisingly close at hand: the process by which dead matter could come to life, they imagined, must be something like the process of reading.

In the context of a natural philosophy that suggested the potential presence of life in all material bodies,¹ a novel way of thinking about reading and writing began to develop in the mid-to-late eighteenth century in Germany. Although its basic notions were daring — even a bit alarming — this way of thinking spread steadily across the continent and helped to shape European culture for much of the next century. The new notion of reading was founded upon no less radical a project than the raising of the dead in and through language. Of course I do not mean that the goal of the writers I consider here was to restore life to the dead bodies of actual previously living persons — though their fictional characters sometimes attempted just that. I mean rather that these writers wanted to reanimate cultural materials they thought of as worn-out, decayed, dismembered, or effaced and to find a vital spirit in apparently lifeless material bodies. The aim of their art was revivification of a world filled with objects that were now (or in some cases had always been) devoid of vitality, and their aesthetic theory frequently presents artistic creativity as a spirit that animates otherwise dead matter. Such a fascination with the resurrection of the dead was hardly new in Christian Europe, but during the eighteenth century it took a turn away from the orthodox concern for the promised awakening of the dead at the Last Judgment and indeed away from the death and resurrection of Jesus, toward an urgent and abiding interest in the problem of reading. What follows is an exploration of the ways in which certain late eighteenth-century and early nineteenth-century writers struggled with reading as a life-and-death issue.

Even in its earliest stages, long before the Schlegels made the term “Romantic” the emblem of a particular literary outlook and the focus of a critical debate that goes on to this day, the reaction against Enlightenment rationalism had certain characteristics that we recognize as typical of the Romantic strain of modernity. Nowhere are these roots of Romantic modernity more apparent than in the writings of Johann Georg Hamann and Johann Gottfried Herder, whose influence was great among the *Stürmer und Dränger* who helped set the agenda for the intellectual revolution in Europe that marks the boundary, imprecise though it may be, between the early modern (ca. 1492–1750) and the modern world (1750–?). Hamann and Herder offer an early version of the already complex question of the role of art in bringing the dead back to life.

Hamann’s *Aesthetica in Nuce* (1762), though notoriously difficult to interpret, clearly demonstrates such a close relation between reading and revivification that it can serve as an initial landmark in the history of Romantic thought.² Hamann understands the entire universe as a text in need of interpretation. God’s act of creation, he says, is

an utterance to created things through created things, for day speaketh unto day, and night proclaimeth unto night. Its word traverses every clime to the ends of the earth, and its voice can be heard in every dialect. The fault may lie where it will (outside us or within us): all we have left in Nature for our use is fragmentary verse and *dissecta membra poetae*. To collect these together is the scholar’s modest part; the philosopher’s is to interpret them; to imitate them, or — bolder still — to adapt them, the poet’s. (141–42)

God is the supreme poet, and His poetic masterpiece is the created world of nature.³ For reasons that are not clear — the problem may have a cause “outside us or within us” — the great poem of the world appears to us in a fragmented form. The pages of the great book of the world have already been scattered, ripped apart, written over, or simply lost. The language of nature is already, from the limited human perspective, at any rate, “defunct [*ausgestorben*]” (147). Hamann’s “cabalistic” voice suggests that human beings may be at least partially responsible for the apparent death of nature: “Behold, the scribes of worldly wisdom, great and small, have overwhelmed the text of Nature [*den Text der Natur*], like the Great Flood” (146). Hamann believed that Enlightenment scholars had done the same thing to God’s other great book, Scripture, by paying too much attention to its linguistic surface.

The two great poetic works of the Creator, in this view, are composed in a language now defunct. When Hamann claims that the language of nature is dead, he makes an implicit analogy with the Bible, for it is clear everywhere in the *Aesthetica* that nature and Scripture are two variants of a single great divine enterprise. By means of this analogy one can begin to

get a sense of what Hamann means by his claim that the language of nature is now defunct and why he cannot point to a specific cause of death. A “dead” language is one that, over the course of time, has lost its character as mother tongue and can only be understood by complex acts of reconstruction. Such a language no longer has a connection to any living community of speakers, but one cannot pinpoint the exact moment when the connection was severed. So it is with the language of nature, from which the living community of men has become estranged. Death now gapes between the utterance that speaks through created things and those who try to understand it.

The task of poets and philosophers, then, is no different from that of biblical scholars: they must “raise the defunct language of Nature from the dead” (147). As the analogy with Scripture suggests, there is no other way to go about this project of revivification than by *reading*. Though it is not certain what methods we should use in order to obtain the best result, it is certain that we will get no result unless we read, for only by reading can the living spirit return to the dead letter. We must begin, however, with those dead letters, hoping to reanimate them and not merely manipulate and multiply their dead bodies.⁴ Hamann directs much of his ironic venom against scholars who paid special attention to the Bible as a textual artifact, like the orientalist and theologian Johann David Michaelis, whom he presents as one of the principal “scribes of worldly wisdom.”⁵ Hamann’s distaste for Michaelis, Voltaire, and the rest of the rationalists is based on his horror at a literal mode of reading that attends to the text itself as a set of verbal signifiers rather than to the spiritual meaning figured by the text. The “literal” reading of the Bible Hamann is objecting to is thus quite different from that advocated by modern evangelical Christians who hold to a belief in the “literal” truth of Scripture. Hamann thinks Michaelis pays too much attention to the letters and not enough to their significance, thus leaving the text as dead at the end of the process of reading as it was at the beginning:

But if we raise up the whole deserving righteousness of a scribe upon the dead body of the letter [*auf den Leichnam des Buchstabens*], what sayeth the spirit [*Geist*] to that? Shall he be but a groom of the chamber of the dead letter, or perhaps a mere esquire to the deadening letter [*des tödten-den Buchstabens*]? God forbid! (143)

The allusion in these lines to Paul’s famous formulation in the Second Epistle to the Corinthians is only one of the scores of biblical allusions in the *Aesthetica*, but it is one of the most revealing — and one of the most important for the history of Romantic aesthetics. It offers the passage from Paul as a concise conceptual foundation, a vocabulary and a set of relationships, upon which may be erected an elaborate structure of thought concerning the connection between reading and writing on the one hand

and living and dying on the other. Hamann himself makes a substantial contribution to the elaboration of that structure in his little “Rhapsody in Cabalistic Prose.” The passage in question is this one from Paul’s second letter to the Corinthians:

Do we begin again to commend ourselves? or need we, as some others, epistles of commendation to you, or letters of commendation from you? Ye are our epistle written in our hearts, known and read of all men: forasmuch as ye are manifestly declared to be the epistle of Christ ministered by us, written not with ink, but with the spirit of the living God; not in tables of stone, but in fleshy tablets of the heart. And such trust we have through Christ to God-ward: not that we are sufficient of ourselves to think any thing of ourselves; but our sufficiency is of God; who also hath made us able ministers of the new testament; not of the letter, but of the spirit: for the letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life [τὸ γὰρ γράμμα ἀποκτείνει, τὸ δὲ πνεῦμα ζωοποιεῖ]. (2 Cor. 3:1–6)

The question that Paul addresses is one that resonates loudly in Romantic thinking, even among those Romantics not at all concerned, as Hamann was, with the preservation of Christianity. For Paul must specify for the Corinthians — and above all for himself — the source of the power and authority that resides in the documents of Scripture. His immediate concern is obviously to establish his own authority, but to do so he has to derive his legitimacy from some source other than written texts, for he has none. He must find a way to account for the power of texts like the Old Testament without undermining his own claim to authority.

His strategy is to take a notion of apparently Greek heritage and use it to undermine the authority of the bare text. It seems likely that Paul knew, directly or by way of an intermediary, the skepticism displayed toward writing by Plato in the *Phaedrus* and elsewhere in the writings attributed to him. In making his distinction between the living spirit and the dead letter, Paul echoes the sentiment upon which Socrates and Phaedrus agree near the end of the dialogue. In response to Socrates’ recommendation of a kind of discourse he compares to writing “in the soul [ἐν τῇ ψυχῇ]” rather than on paper, Phaedrus says: “You mean the living, breathing discourse [λόγος ἔμψυχος] of the man who knows, of which the written one can be fairly called an image” (276 A). Paul’s distinction between the dead letter (γράμμα) and the living spirit (πνεῦμα) is a significant variation and extension of Plato’s distinction between inanimate “written discourse [λόγος γεγραμμένος]” and “animate speech [λόγος ἔμψυχος].” For Plato’s Socrates, the written word is inanimate because it is merely an image (εἶδωλον) of the originally animate discourse, and as such it has to function outside the context of the interaction between “living, breathing” persons that Plato calls dialectic. Paul’s argument is similar in suggesting that the discourse of the soul or spirit (πνεῦμα) is more powerful than writing and closer to the divine original of all authority. But Paul, a man

brought up in a culture that revered the written word in a manner unknown to classical Greece, displays an ambivalence about documents more radical than Plato's. Paul actually shifts this ambivalence onto documents themselves, which he understands to possess both a living and a dead aspect. Documents *can* be a form of living, breathing discourse, but only if their dead letters are animated by the living spirit.

Like Plato's Socrates, who prefers writing "in the soul," Paul prefers writing "in the fleshy tablets of the heart [*ἐν πλαξίν καρδίαις σαρκίναίς*]" to literal written documents. But Paul is willing to grant a far greater spiritual power to written texts than the very limited role Socrates sees for them in the *Phaedrus*. This becomes clear in lines from 2 Corinthians immediately following those just cited:

But if the ministration of death, written and engraven in stones, was glorious, so that the children of Israel could not steadily behold the face of Moses for the glory of his countenance; which glory was to be done away: how shall not the ministration of the spirit be rather glorious. For if the ministration of condemnation be glory, much more doth the ministration of righteousness exceed in glory. (2 Cor. 3:7–9)

Although the "ministration of death, written and engraven" (Paul's Greek is "service of death in letters [*ἡ διακονία τοῦ θανάτου ἐν γράμμασιν*]") gets the worst of the comparison with the "service/ministration of the spirit [*διακονία τοῦ πνεύματος*]," it is still acknowledged as "glorious" and worthy of esteem. Paul's rhetoric obviously means to devalue the (written) law of Moses, the old covenant, in order to extol the merits of the new covenant of Jesus, whose testament was as yet unwritten. It was not his intention, however, to dismiss the Torah as devoid of divine authority — quite the contrary. The "glory" he ascribes to the old covenant is a measure of its great worth, of its genuine derivation from God. The coming of Christ and the new covenant, however, sets aside the old, replaces its sentence of death passed on all the children of Adam with the promise of life, and therefore surpasses it in glory.

Paul goes on to explain how it is that the covenant of Moses, though "made in glory," can appear to be nothing but a set of dead letters. It is as if, he says, the veil that Moses had to wear to shield the children of Israel from the splendor of the Lord that shone in the lawgiver's face still clung to the Mosaic law itself. The Old Testament text is hard to understand, "for until this day remaineth the same veil untaken away in the reading of the old testament." Scripture reports, however, that the veil was taken away from Moses' face "whenever he turns to the Lord." Paul glosses this passage from the old Scripture by claiming that "the Lord [in this passage — perhaps Exodus 34:34] is the Spirit [*ὁ δὲ κύριος τὸ πνεῦμά ἐστιν*]" (2 Cor. 3:17). In the presence of the divine πνεῦμα, then, the dead letters come back to life, the veil is removed, and the old text speaks plainly, even as it

seems to do to Paul when he reads Exodus. The surest evidence that Paul believed in the possibility of turning the “service of death in letters” to the service of the living spirit is his own practice of rereading passages from the Old Testament.

Hamann’s abhorrence for the dead letter is no less than Paul’s; indeed one would have to say that it is even greater, since Hamann is concerned with a far larger text than the apostle was. When Hamann expresses his anger at the possibility of raising “the whole deserving righteousness of a scribe upon the dead body of the letter,” his concern is directed not exclusively or even principally at Michaelis and the other philologically oriented readers of Scripture but at the entire project of Enlightenment philosophy. For Hamann this project amounts to nothing less than the transformation of the whole book of creation into a set of dead letters untouched by the spirit, the divine *πνεῦμα* of which Paul spoke. The threat of rationalism is that the great text, the language of which is now “dead” for us, will remain dead forever, never again receiving the revivifying touch of the spirit, or even the touch of the emotions that constitute the embodiments of the spirit. “If the passions are limbs of dishonor, do they therefore cease to be weapons of virility? Have you a wiser understanding of the letter of reason than that allegorical chamberlain of the Alexandrian Church [Origen] had of the letter of the Scriptures when he castrated himself in order to reach heaven?” (146). Enlightenment philosophy suffers from the same self-destructive literalism that afflicted Origen,⁶ but it is directed not toward Scripture alone but toward the entire book of Nature.

Hamann proposes that all intellectual activity — philosophy, scholarship, and poetic art — should be a form of revivification of dead language. “Nature and Scripture then are the materials of the beautiful spirit which creates and imitates [*Natur und Schrift also sind die Materialien des schönen, schaffenden, nachahmenden Geistes*]” (147). The “beautiful spirit” brings vitality to these materials, while literalism leaves them cold and lifeless. Hamann agrees with Augustine’s assessment that the prophetic books of the Old Testament are nothing but “insipidity and foolishness” if read literally but are miraculously revitalized and transformed by the power of Christ, just as that power transformed the water into wine at Cana: “the first sign by which He reveals the majesty of His humble figure transforms the holy books of the covenant into fine old wine” (148). One cannot avoid noticing that the creative spirit of revivification is at work in Hamann’s reading of the Gospel of John. Hamann simply takes for granted the figurative equation of the jars filled with water with the books of the old covenant, making the story of the miracle at Cana an allegory of Christ’s skill at raising the defunct language of an old document from the dead.

Hamann’s “aesthetic in a nutshell” is founded on the possibility of endless acts of revivification, made possible by the infinite and ultimately