The Laughter of the Philosophers

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My favorite “whimsical” anecdote about a philosopher goes like this: Arthur Schopenhauer once threw an old lady down a flight of stairs. (Note how the first line immediately seizes one’s attention.) He claimed it was an accident, of course, but I for one prefer to believe that it was nothing of the sort, and that in fact he took the defenseless crone by her wizened weasand and—with full malice aforethought—flung her over the balustrade to the landing below, uttering a curse as he did so (it more nearly accords with my general impression of the man). Not that he acted without cause; he was never given to caprice. The old lady was a cleaning woman who had made too great a clamor outside his rooms, a transgression than which (as anyone familiar with his essay on noise should know) nothing could have vexed him more; and it was only when his rebukes were met by intolerable impudence that he resorted to force. Curiously, however, the magistrate failed to see the justice in his actions, and sentenced him to pay the woman a monthly pension for the rest of her natural life, which somewhat straitened his finances. When she was finally considerate enough to die, and Schopenhauer saw the notice in the morning obituary, his only reaction was to reach for his pen and write in the margin: “Anus obit, onus abit” (the old woman dies, the debt departs).

The reason this grim little tale so amuses me (quite apart from the magnificent pun, which one hopes was purely extemporaneous), is that the lives of philosophers are so often oppressively, obtundently dreary that any diverting story—even one as macabre as the ordeal of Schopenhauer’s poor old Putzfrau—comes to the scholar as a cherished respite. And, for the most part, the works of philosophers mirror the shapes of their lives. The sublime spiritual sterility of the texts of Kant’s philosophical maturity, for instance, could scarcely provide a more perspicuous glimpse into the personality of perhaps the single most boring man ever to darken a wigmaker’s doorway. The leaden, caliginous bombast of Hegel’s prose was a pure emanation of his grindingly pompous soul. The turgidity of Derrida’s attempts at playfulness were little more than clinical specimens of his insufferable self-infatuation. As a general rule, to put it simply, if one wanders into one’s library in search of mirth, good fellowship, or wit, one does well not to seek out the company of the philosophers.

There are exceptions, however, and none more notable than Søren Kierkegaard. In some sense, indeed, Kierkegaard’s life could be written as a kind of dark comedy; despite his premature death, and a great number of sadnesses that afflicted him along the way, there was something enchantingly absurd about his character, a certain benign perversity that often prompted him to make himself willfully ridiculous, and a peculiarly touching element of the ludicrous that clung to him all the way to his early grave. Few philosophers’ lives can boast comic (or, for that matter, tragic) material comparable to Kierkegaard’s aborted engagement to Regine Olsen, the bizarrely exaggerated symbolic significance he attached to it, his firm expectation of death before the age of thirty-four on account of some unnamed sin of his father’s, his intentional provocation of a feud with the satirical review The Corsair, or his splenetic quarrels with the Danish Lutheran church (and so on).

And he had wit. It is said that once, for instance, as he came to a stream spanned by a bridge so narrow that two men could not cross it abreast, nor pass one another upon it, a truculent bourgeois arrived at the bridge’s other end and—recognizing Kierkegaard—promptly announced that he would not stand aside for an infamous buffoon. “Ah, yes,” replied Kierkegaard, unperturbed, stepping back with a ceremonious sweep of his arm, “I, however, shall.” And, of all the diverting tales that can be told about Kierkegaard, none is really any more terrible than that: if he was ever cruel, it was principally to himself, and he managed to live out his brief but prolific philosophical career without once (if you can credit it) feeling the need to heave an elderly charwoman into a stairwell. Moreover, happily, he was possessed not only of wit, but of literary genius; and for this reason he is one of that blessed and select company of modern philosophers whose writings can be read purely for the pleasure they afford.

Thomas Oden’s generous anthology, The Humor of Kierkegaard, is a sequel to his deservedly popular collection of 1978, Parables of Kierkegaard. Unlike its predecessor, though, it is—in Oden’s own words—intended “as entertainment with no noble purpose.” But it is also, in a sense, a compilation of evidences, offered in support of a very large claim. In his introduction, Oden throws down a “gauntlet”: he challenges the reader to assemble a collection of passages from any ten major philosophers as funny as those he has compiled from Kierkegaard’s writings; furthermore, he makes bold provisionally—until this challenge is met—to declare Kierkegaard “as, among philosophers, the most amusing.” Now, as I have intimated already, I am prone to regard this as a distinction rather like that of owning “the finest restaurant in South Bend, Indiana”: the quality of the competition renders the achievement somewhat ambiguous. Despite which, I am not entirely convinced that Oden makes an incontrovertible case. He does, I think it safe to say, prove that Kierkegaard was probably the most amusing of Danes, but (again) the quality of competition must be taken into account.

Indeed, in his introduction, Oden advances his claim with such vigor and so many proleptic cautions that one might be pardoned for suspecting that he is trying to compensate for some deficiency in the material. While he acknowledges that there is something absurd about offering a theoretical rationalization or justification of humor, he does nevertheless—more as a concession, apparently, to editorial pressure than out of personal inclination—provide a long treatment of the Kierkegaardian theory of comedy. Oden himself urges the impatient reader to skip these pages, and I am almost tempted to recommend impatience to the reader, lest all good will be defeated long before Kierkegaard’s voice has even been heard. Oden proceeds here at a very deliberate pace, as no doubt a scholar must, and this often obliges him to illustrate a point by quoting some amusing passage from Kierkegaard’s work only then to offer an inevitably ponderous explanation of the joke. This sort of thing, in sufficient quantity, can quickly ruin one’s appreciation of what follows.

This is not to say—I hasten to add—that Oden says nothing of interest at this point. He offers much to ponder. What I gleaned from these pages, in part, is that for Kierkegaard the roots of the comic lie in the inherent contradictoriness of human nature: soul and body, freedom and necessity, the angelic and the bestial, eternity and temporality, and so on. Moreover, I learned how profound a difference Kierkegaard saw between genuine humor and mere irony. That is to say, irony can certainly recognize that the incongruities that throng human experience typically frustrate the quest for truth; but, having seen as much, irony is then impotent to do anything more than unveil failure and vanquish pretense. Humor, on the other hand, is born from an altogether higher recognition: that tragic contradiction is not absolute, that finitude is not only pain and folly, and that the absurdity of our human contradictions can even be a cause for joy. Humor is able to receive finitude as a gift, conscious of the suffering intrinsic to human existence, but capable of transcending despair through jest. And this is why the power of humor is most intense in the “religious” sphere: Christianity, seeing all things from the perspective of the Incarnation (that most unexpected of peripeties), is the “most comic” vision of things: it encompasses the greatest contradictions and tragedies of all, but does so in such a way as to take the suffering of existence into the unanticipated absurdity of our redemption. Which yields the—to my mind—gratifying conclusion that, to be both a “lover of wisdom” and an accomplished humorist, one must almost certainly be a Christian; or, rather, that only a Christian philosophy can be truly “comic.”

Again, though, there are times when theory should be touched upon only very lightly. Kierkegaard’s writings—taken in themselves—provide Oden with wonderfully rich sources of plunder, especially the early pseudonymous works, with their thickets of prefaces, interludes, interjections, postscripts, appendices, multiple voices, and preposterous names, not to mention their sinuous coils of indirection. And Oden displays a keen eye for the comic and lyric trouvailles to be reaped from them. He is clearly a man whose long acquaintance with these texts has endowed him with an enviable knowledge of their bounties, and a deep enthusiasm for their complexities and subtleties. Either/Or emerges as the most fertile and delightful of Kierkegaard’s literary achievements in this regard, though almost all the early books abound in comic invention. And, as a whole, this collection can be recommended, for light or serious reading alike. That said, while I enjoyed this anthology thoroughly, I nevertheless came away from it still somewhat unconvinced regarding Oden’s high claims for Kierkegaard; and I find myself still inclined to ask whether Kierkegaard was really the nonpareil humorist that Oden makes him out to be.

For me, this is a question with a special significance. I confess I am one of that minority of readers who admire Kierkegaard more for his literary and satiric gifts than for his contribution to philosophy—which I regard as dubious—or his understanding of Christianity—which I regard as, in many significant respects, disastrously false. While I acknowledge his importance as an inspiration to later thinkers, and am conscious of how eagerly he was absorbed, midway through the last century, into the genealogy of “Existentialism” (perhaps the most annoying philosophical movement to arrive on the continental scene before the advent of post-structuralism), I cannot honestly profess immense admiration for his speculative gifts. I think his critiques of Hegel, for instance, obvious at best, monotonously superficial at worst. As for his place among Christian thinkers, I think it a fairly minor one. As much as I approve of his contempt for polite, liberal, rationalized, and innocuous faith, his actual critique of “Christendom” often seems surprisingly barren and unsubtle. And, for all the initial appeal exercised by his talk of Christian “paradox,” I think it a meretricious and misleading appeal in the end.

For such as me, Kierkegaard the humorist—or novelist, or aphorist, or ironist—possesses an unquestioned eminence, whereas Kierkegaard the philosopher—or theologian, or pietist, or polemicist—cuts a far more equivocal figure. This might dispose me happily to accede to the claim Oden wishes to make did it not also dispose me to judge the evidence he presents somewhat inconstantly, depending on which aspect of Kierkegaard’s mind is reflected in any given selection. And, as it happens, my verdict on the material collected here is distinctly mixed; but I do not think it a verdict dictated solely by personal predilections.

Simply said, this anthology is too long. None of it lacks literary charm, that is certain; but much of it lacks any actual comic element. Of course, Oden does rightly caution the reader against imposing contemporary standards of humor on Kierkegaard, and I would add that it would be a mistake to impose upon him any of one’s customary expectations of a humorist from any period; the reader who takes up this volume anticipating something on the order of Jonathan Swift, Charles Lamb, Max Beerbohm, or S. J. Perelman will unquestionably be disappointed. Nevertheless, one cannot help but feel that, in some instances, Oden has attempted to wring water out of stones.

This is not, certainly, to deny the comic brilliance of many of the passages gathered here. There is, for instance, a genuinely hilarious reflection on how embarrassing it is that there is so marked an absence of the Chinese in the Hegelian system, while not a single German assistant professor is excluded. And there is a wonderful passage where Kierkegaard likens the prospect of being excommunicated from the Danish church to the discovery that, though he is in Copenhagen, he is being given a thrashing in the distant town of Aarhus. Elsewhere he likens a pastor gesticulating vehemently over a mundane matter to a man proclaiming he would give his life for the fatherland and then adding, with full pathos, “Indeed I would do it for ten rix-dollars!” And there is one passage I especially liked (though it comes from a period in Kierkegaard’s authorship of which I am not overly fond):

[I]n modern drama the bad is always represented by the most brilliantly gifted characters, whereas the good, the upright, is represented by the grocer’s apprentice. The spectators find this entirely appropriate and learn from the play what they already knew, that it is far beneath their dignity to be classed with a grocer’s apprentice.

A somewhat greater number of passages, however, could be described only as mild witticisms:

So let the history books tell of kings who introduced Christianity—I am of the opinion that a king can introduce an improved breed of sheep and railroads, etc., but not Christianity.

This is vaguely amusing, perhaps (even though the sentiment it expresses is entirely and damnably false), but is it worthy of anthologization? And there are other passages that might perhaps—and then only if one were desperate to justify their inclusion in this volume—be described as “wry,” such as one long and splendid (though not really humorous) portrayal of the boredom that afflicts the ironist. And there are still other passages that are so earnest, however charming they may be, that I cannot believe that any humor was intended at all.

Oden also has a curious habit of including excerpts whose only distinction is that they contain somewhat involved metaphors—a journey from Peking to Canton, one thief accusing another to the police, a merchant momentarily given false hope as he watches his ship founder at sea, an emperor choosing a day-laborer as his son-in-law, the difference in value between a pound of gold and a pound of feathers, a corpse still able to perform some of the functions of a living body—as if such metaphors were intrinsically humorous. Perhaps the most enchanting metaphorical passage in the entire collection concerns a young seamstress—I lingered over it for some time—but there is nothing amusing about it in the least.

The most dispensable selections are drawn largely from the late polemical writings, particularly the Attack Upon Christendom. Here, even where an attempt has been made to amuse, the humor is so often irascibly joyless that it comes across not as Christian mirth, but simply as irony embittered with sanctimony; and too much of it is written in a voice that is strident, vitriolic, and ulcerated, not so much prophetic as petulant.

The result of the Christianity of “Christendom” is that everything . . . has remained as it was, only everything has assumed the name “Christian.” . . . The change is . . . that the whorehouse remains exactly what it was in paganism, lewdness in the same proportion, but it has become a “Christian” whorehouse. A whoremonger is a “Christian” whoremonger.

This is shrill and tiresome. Yes, in fact there are “Christian” whorehouses, and whoremongers, and whores, and they are nothing like their pagan predecessors, because the formation of conscience within even a defectively Christian culture is something altogether novel; the whorehouse is now full of sinners, whose memories necessarily bear the impress of moral grammars and spiritual promises that the pagan order never knew, and who in consequence may yet awaken to their sin, and who may even find themselves at unexpected moments haunted by charity or tormented by grace. And it is the repeated failure of Kierkegaard to understand just this that makes his treatment of the whole question of Christendom finally so boring—and so humorless.

What, then, of Oden’s gauntlet? Clearly I think that he has been a mite too avid in searching out passages to corroborate his argument, and that he would have done better to produce a volume of perhaps a hundred pages. Still, though, he may have proved his point. Who, after all, are Kierkegaard’s rivals? Plato had as ready a wit as Kierkegaard’s, and probably a healthier nature, and certainly Aristophanes’ speech in The Symposium is a work of comic genius. Schopenhauer was a more agile epigrammatist, despite his streak of pubescent gloom (“Never a rose without a thorn; yet many a thorn without a rose”). Nietzsche was a greater satirist, even if the savagery of his wit confined him to a single comic register. One might, if one is no slave to occidental prejudice, suggest Chuang-Tzu, who was more adept at the droll and the fantastic. But none of these poses any credible challenge to Kierkegaard’s supremacy.

There are, of course, philosophers who are unintentionally amusing. I find Kant’s Critique of Practical Reason nearly as fanciful, silly, and diverting as Alice in Wonderland. Almost everything of Daniel Dennett’s has the power to reduce me to tears of jollity. Heidegger, at his worst, defies parody. But, in these cases, the temperament of the reader provides the better part of the jest. And certainly it would be cheating to adduce even more entertaining works of “occasional” philosophy, like Poe’s Eureka or D. H. Lawrence’s Fantasia on the Unconscious.

There are, it seems to me—after some reflection—only two figures who might credibly displace Kierkegaard from his throne: Voltaire and J. G. Hamann. The former, without question, was a greater and more versatile humorist than Kierkegaard, and in those terms alone there could scarcely be any comparison. The question worth asking, however, is whether Voltaire was in any real sense a philosopher, rather than a mere philosophe; and I would say he was not. I tend to take the view expressed by Baudelaire in his Journaux intimes: Voltaire was a man with no speculative capacity whatsoever, oblivious to mystery, mentally lethargic, a “pastor to the concierges,” who merely refined intellectual philistinism into a kind of “system.” So that leaves only Hamann; and here, I really do think, Kierkegaard is not equal to the contest.

Johann Georg Hamann (1730-88) is, by any measure, an obscure figure, little known outside the exclusive circles of a certain very rarefied kind of scholarship, hardly read at all even in his native Germany, and perhaps truly understood by next to no one. And yet it would be difficult to exaggerate not only the immensity of his influence upon all the great European intellectual and cultural movements of his age, but his continued significance for philosophers and theologians. A friend (and antagonist) of Kant’s, an inspiration to Herder and Jacobi, read and admired by the likes of Goethe, Schelling, Jean Paul, and indeed Kierkegaard, he is the only figure to whom Hegel felt it necessary to devote a long monograph. Today, however, his importance is scarcely a rumor even to the very literate, and the best known book about him in English is a ghastly, feeble, and imbecile squib by one of the twentieth century’s most indefatigably fraudulent intellectuals, Isaiah Berlin. The young, gifted scholar John R. Betz, of Loyola College in Baltimore, is due soon to produce what promises to be the definitive appreciation of Hamann in English, which may go some small way towards reviving interest in this miraculous man; but, at present, he remains all but forgotten.

That Hamann suffers so much neglect, one must concede, is largely the result of the willfully hermetic impenetrability of his most important works. His humor is not, it must be said, immediately accessible: his style quite often resembles that of Laurence Sterne or James Joyce, and is full of eccentric, apparently perverse, and somewhat demented textual games; his prose is intentionally obscure, overflowing with classical references, cryptic metaphors, and convoluted pranks. It is not hyperbole to say that Hamann’s writings constitute probably the most difficult body of literature within the German language: they are brief, compressed, manic, irrepressibly inventive, at once diffuse and piercing, and almost occult in their impregnability. A typical example of his sense of humor might be this, from his New Apology for the Letter ‘h’ (written as a protest against orthographical reforms introduced under Frederick the Great):

To be sure, I would ten times rather lose my breath in the wind talking to a blind man about the first and fourth days of the Mosaic creation story, or to a deaf man about the harmony of a little nightingale or Italian castrato than submit myself any longer to an opponent who is not even capable of seeing that a universal, sound, practical language, reason, and religion without arbitrary axioms is his own oven of ice.

And that is by no means Hamann at his most opaque. At its most unrestrained, his voice is mercurial, Heracleitean, vatic, even sibylline; and even in his own day he was spoken of as “enigmatical,” “dark,” the “Magus in the North.” He admitted that he could not help but speak “the language of Sophists, of puns, of Cretans and Arabians, of wise men and Moors and Creoles” and “babble a confusion of criticism, mythology, rebuses, and axioms.” To Hamann, it was obvious that the Age of Reason—which, to his mind, was an age of deepest darkness—required a prose of almost insoluble opacity. It was to his masterpiece, the Aesthetica in Nuce, that Hamann gave the subtitle “A Rhapsody in Kabbalistic Prose,” but he might have attached it to almost everything he wrote. And yet he was never a wanton irrationalist; Kierkegaard spoke entirely in earnest when he ranked Hamann and Socrates together as “perhaps two of the most brilliant minds of all time.”

Admittedly, it would be all but impossible to assemble an anthology of Hamann’s wit and wisdom like the one Oden has created for Kierkegaard. Hamann’s humor consists so much in ludicrous involutions of thought and language, and in the cumulative effect of one absurdity heaped atop another, and in the almost sweetly earnest obliviousness of a voice like that of a holy fool that one must almost entirely immerse oneself in his imaginative world in order to enjoy the fruits of his comic genius. One need only attempt to describe the lunatic intricacies of Hamann’s prose to realize how impossible it is adequately to convey a sense of its frenzied ingenuity.

For instance, one of Hamann’s works composed in French is a sardonically fawning open letter to Frederick the Great (whose superstitious servility to the mythology of Enlightenment reason Hamann particularly detested) called To the Solomon of Prussia, a text so savage and unrestrained in its mockery that no one would publish it when it was first written for fear of the state censor. Hamann’s last attempt to get it printed was through C. F. Nicolai in Berlin; and when Nicolai failed to respond to his request, Hamann published an exquisitely deranged feuilleton called Monologue of an Author under the ridiculous “Chinese” pseudonym Mien-Man-Hoam. This at least prompted Nicolai to send Hamann an official rejection. But this rejection, in turn, prompted Hamann to compose and publish a piece called To the Witch at Kadmanbor, a “letter” supposedly written by Nicolai to an old sorceress, asking her to translate Hamann’s Monologue from the Chinese of the “Mandarin” who wrote it—a letter that, midway through its course, suddenly becomes a delirious monologue of its own (in which the witch now appears as the Fury Alecto, but with two faces, “a calf’s eye like Juno’s, and the watery eye of an owl”) before concluding with the recommendation that Hamann be forced like his illustrious ancestor Haman—from the book of Esther—to mount the scaffold. Now, honestly, there is no way to appreciate such apparently Bedlamite ravings (if one is indeed able to do so at all) except taken in their totality.

Oden, to his credit, briefly mentions Kierkegaard’s estimation of Hamann as “the greatest humorist in Christianity” (in fact, as Oden neglects to mention, Kierkegaard also called him “the greatest humorist in the world”), but pursues it no further; and this is a pity, because in many ways Hamann provided Kierkegaard with the model for his own authorship; and it is arguable that Kierkegaard’s entire career as a Christian thinker and humorist was a somewhat failed attempt to achieve the purity of vision and richness of mirth that were simply natural and unforced elements of Hamann’s mind and idiom. It was from Hamann that Kierkegaard learned the power of “indirect communication” and the impossibility of making the passion of faith conform to any recognized standards of “responsible” discourse. It was from Hamann, too, that Kierkegaard acquired his taste for outlandish pseudonyms (though Kierkegaard’s were never quite as wild or surreal as some of Hamann’s—Vettius Epagathus Regiomonticolae, An Apocryphal Sibyl, Ahasuerus Lazarus, Abelard Viterbius, Aristobulus, An Angry Prophet from the Brook Kerith, and so on). Indeed, Kierkegaard even once remarked that, had he known earlier the tale of Hamann’s marriage to the serving-girl and (in Hamann’s words) ‘hamadryad’ Regina Schumacher, he himself might have married Regine Olsen after all.

One could, I suppose, argue that Hamann was not a philosopher in the proper sense; but, if Kierkegaard was a philosopher, so was Hamann, and probably a more important one. In fact, Kierkegaard’s own struggle with the legacy of Hegel was, to a great degree, a conscious reprise of Hamann’s agon with Kant and his disciples. In either case, the great moral labor of the critic was to shelter particularity against the all-consuming abstractions of (transcendental or absolute) idealism, and to raise a protest on behalf of the concrete against the ghostly universalisms of modern rationality. In later years, in attempting to disentangle the significance of his authorship from that of Hamann’s, Kierkegaard liked to assert that he had given theoretical depth to insights that, in Hamann, had only the quality of aphoristic lightning bolts; and, increasingly, Kierkegaard came to judge Hamann as too irresponsibly playful, ill-controlled, self-indulgent, and flippant—indeed, perhaps blasphemous. (Some of Hamann’s contemporaries agreed, especially after Hamann adorned the title-page of his Crusades of a Philologian with the leering visage of a satyr.)

It is true, one must concede, that Hamann eschewed systematic expositions of theory to the end; he never abandoned pseudonymy or indirection, never attempted to bring the passion of faith within the securer enclosure of any sort of psychological science or speculative regimen, and never condescended to the soberer disciplines of “direct communication.” Indeed, his opinion of philosophical method as practiced in his day was almost entirely dismissive; when, after his powerful conversion experience in London, Hamann was met by Kant, who had been sent by friends to rescue him from his newfound “enthusiasm,” his reaction was one of polite amusement: “I must laugh at the choice of a philosopher to bring about my conversion. I view the finest demonstration as a sensible girl views a love letter, and view a Baumgartian explication as a diverting fleurette.”

Hamann’s most devastating assault upon Kant’s Critique of Pure Reason is an intricate and inspissated satire, no more than a handful of pages long, entitled the Metacritique of the Purism of Reason, wherein Hamann—in a series of brilliant and parodic strokes—exposes all the ineradicable impurities upon which Kant’s “pure reason” depends. And yet, Hamann’s critique of Kant, for all that it is written as a kind of burlesque, is far more original and startling—and a far more penetrating assault upon modernity—than is Kierkegaard’s critique of Hegel (despite the latter’s satiric excellence). The Metacritique, when its implications are grasped, retains a power to disturb and provoke that nothing of Kierkegaard’s possesses.

This is not to diminish Kierkegaard’s accomplishments, but only to recognize Hamann’s genius. And it is worth noting that Kierkegaard’s theory of comedy—at least as Oden has explicated it—is far easier to reconcile with Hamann’s writings than with Kierkegaard’s. The special logic of this theory, after all, is that the Christian philosopher—having surmounted the “aesthetic,” “ethical,” and even in a sense “religious” stages of human existence—is uniquely able to enact a return, back to the things of earth, back to finitude, back to the aesthetic; having found the highest rationality of being in God’s kenosis—His self-outpouring—in the Incarnation, the Christian philosopher is reconciled to the particularity of flesh and form, recognizes all of creation as a purely gratuitous gift of a God of infinite love, and is able to rejoice in the levity of a world created and redeemed purely out of God’s “pleasure.”

Of no philosopher could this be truer than Hamann. He was a man of the deepest, most fervent and adoring piety, and yet of an almost Nietzschean irreverence (“My unrefined imagination has never been able to conceive a Creative Spirit without genitalia”); he was practically a Christian mystic, and yet he delighted in the world of the senses, especially in the joys of sexual love (his repeated and most disdainful accusation against the apostles of Enlightenment was that they were spiritual eunuchs piping their dreary abstractions in shrill falsetto voices). This was so (however scandalous it might occasionally seem) because in the Christian evangel he had encountered a God whose creatures are the work of delight, who is pleased to reveal his majesty in total abasement, and who is Himself always “the Poet in the beginning of days.” For Hamann, the return to finitude was unreserved and utterly charitable; everything he wrote or did was touched with a spirit of festivity; his humor contained no lingering residue of fatalism, irony, or rancor.

Of Kierkegaard, this is not true. For him, until the end, the return to finitude was a return only to the singular and terrible enigma of the incarnate God in time. There is always a tragic, “dialectical,” even Gnostic tension in his thought: the Incarnation remains a “paradox” rather than a delightful “surprise,” an invasion of worldly time that time cannot comprehend, and that thus forbids any real reconciliation with the world. For Hamann, by contrast, the kenosis of God illuminates and transfigures everything, grace transfuses all of nature, culture, and cult, and so his humor has a wealth, an overwhelming hilarity, and a truly Christian mirthfulness that Kierkegaard’s does not. Where Kierkegaard was most inclined to become severe and saturnine, Hamann was most reckless in his rejoicing. Hamann would have looked, certainly, with a more tender regard upon the absurdity of a “Christian whorehouse”; the idea would probably have moved him more to reflect upon the prodigality of divine love than to indulge in caustic complaint.

This, then, is why I would want to deny Kierkegaard the laurels Oden has so diligently plaited for him: because Kierkegaard fell short, at the last, of his own high vision of the Christian humorist, while Hamann realized it. I might just qualify my judgment by saying that Kierkegaard remains perhaps the greatest human humorist among philosophers, since I suspect that—at least at some spiritual level—Hamann was actually the miscegenate offspring of a satyr and an angel. But, taken without qualifications, the title of “most amusing” philosopher must be accorded to Hamann, and Hamann alone. And, as it happens, I suspect that Kierkegaard (at least in his better moments) would entirely agree.

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