

# Radical Continuities

Blake and Hamann in the Transnational Enlightenment

Review of Alexander Regier, *Exorbitant Enlightenment: Blake, Hamann, and Anglo-German Constellations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018)

CSABA JÓZSEF SPALOVSKY

DOI: 10.53720/NJJA2869

According to the introduction to this fascinating new study, *Exorbitant Enlightenment* is “a book about the power of multiple comparativisms” (28) and a book of polyglot interests, which allows several comparative methods to run simultaneously in order to reveal new patterns in literary and cultural history. The subtitle is *Blake, Hamann, and Anglo-German Constellations*, but the book has much more to offer than a comparison of two extraordinary figures in the context of two interconnected cultures. A forgotten world opens its gates for the reader, of radical thinkers participating in an international network of intellectual and cultural exchange. Regier’s “exorbitants” are outsiders who are still central to many crucial debates of their time. They belong to a polyglot, mainly Anglo-German history of religion, literature, philosophy, and linguistic theory that came to be dominated and domesticated by a monolingual, national literary history from the nineteenth century onwards, obscuring the role of certain institutions and intellectuals together with their impact on British and European culture.

The book starts with a long introduction, followed by eight chapters focusing on interconnected aspects of the radical culture of the Anglo-German Enlightenment. Regier begins with a demonstration of German cultural and linguistic presence

in eighteenth-century Britain. German influence is traced through a series of examples, the most elaborate and interesting of which is Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), a book whose protagonist was originally called Kreutznaer. Regier emphasises the importance of polyglot transnationalism and the apparently natural presence of Germans and their culture in seventeenth-century England and even earlier. He writes about German churches, schools, and printing presses active in London before the 1790s, all more or less integrated into British society, and shows the important roles they played in the culture of the Enlightenment.

The introduction also clarifies Regier's understanding of the crucial concepts of the Enlightenment and Romanticism. Instead of the more usual linear, monolingual and dialectical model of historical analysis, he aims to acknowledge the continuities between the two periods. This, in itself, is not entirely new: in recent years we have seen more and more scholars questioning the sharp dividing line between Romanticism and the Enlightenment. What distinguishes Regier's approach is his transnational framework and a willingness to think in non-linear ways, and thus to re-arrange literary history into something surprisingly multi-dimensional. Based on Walter Benjamin's writings, he promotes the idea of an Anglo-German "constellation," that is, he studies a bundle of relations and connections within the field.<sup>1</sup> This approach also defines how the chapters of the book relate to one other: they should not be examined as a simple consecutive pattern but as something like a stellar constellation, in which each individual star is linked to the others in multiple ways.

As the title suggests, the concept of the "exorbitant" is central to the book's overall argument. For Regier, this is a term to describe someone "who exceeds proper limits" (7), and not someone who is an outsider. He maintains that to domesticate such figures as "canonical outsiders" (15), which is common in their respective national traditions, is a mistake. Attempting to understand Blake, Hamann and a number of other writers and artists on their "own exorbitant terms" (16), Regier reads the period from a position that is rather off the beaten path, while he resists the temptation of putting the exorbitants at the centre. He believes that "there is something to be gained when we engage with their excessive ways of thinking as being out of orbit" (18). He insists that we need to take these thinkers seriously instead of accepting the still

---

1 Another recent study with a transnational focus is *Coleridge and Cosmopolitan Intellectualism, 1794–1804: The Legacy of Göttingen* by Maximiliaan van Woudenberg (Routledge, 2018), which relies on the methodology of *Konstellationsforschung*, or the research of constellations, as put forward by Martin Mulsov.

prevailing interpretation that they are creative but at the same time mad, interesting but also incomprehensible. Regier's approach is fruitful when speaking of individuals like Fuseli and Lavater, institutions like the Moravians, and especially true of William Blake and Johann Georg Hamann, the two emblematic English and German radical thinkers of the time.

Blake and Hamann are in the centre, if there is any, of Regier's study. Referring to the opinion of William Wordsworth on the madness of Blake and G. W. F. Hegel who called Hamann's texts a "tiresome riddle," Regier shows why these two could never fit into the ruling patterns of their age. However, he also demonstrates—and this is probably the most innovative aspect of the book—that they were not individual lights but rather bright stars in a constellation. Regier's introduction and the first two chapters provide the reader with the necessary background to understand their respective cultural roles and the theories crucial to them and to the book in general: multilingualism; the relationship of language, body and thought; the interconnect-edness of religion and sexuality, revelation and imagination, poetry and creation.

The first chapter starts with a passage from English critic and historian Leslie Stephen from 1898: "It is a familiar fact that no Englishman read German literature in the eighteenth century. One sufficient reason was that there was no German literature to read ... It would, I imagine, be difficult to find a single direct reference to a German book in the whole English literature of the eighteenth century" (31). Although this is still the basis of most standard accounts of Anglo-German literary relations, Regier demonstrates that Stephen's view does not match the historical facts and suggests that our understanding of the period is severely limited by it. He cites nineteenth-century politics, and the influence of Romanticism on Victorian scholarship as two of the main reasons behind Stephen's historically inherited claim. Regier shares Eric A. Blackall's view that German became a "literary language of infinite richness and subtlety" (33) between 1700 and 1775, and refutes the idea that eighteenth-century German literature was inferior in quality, as promoted by Stephen and others.

To counteract the effects of Stephen's claims, Regier turns to the study of translation and publication of German texts in eighteenth-century Britain. German publishers and booksellers played an important role in British literary and cultural life; German books were on the market. Regier enlists works that were commonly available for English readers in their own language, including such highly popular ones as Goethe's *Sorrows of Young Werther* or Johann Caspar Lavater's famous *Physiognomy*

but also works by Klopstock, Wieland, Bodmer, Bogatzky, Rambach, and more, many of which were also discussed in periodicals. Based on the work of Garold N. Davis and Graham Jefcoate combined with Regier's own research, there were at least 135 volumes translated from German to English in London alone between 1680 and 1790, which demonstrates a considerable demand. Regier identifies two waves of German arrivals in London, proposing that the French Revolution meant a transition, rather than a break, in the influx of immigrants, and shows how significant the growing German-speaking community could become in eighteenth-century London life.

Regier insists that we should read "larger historical changes" in connection with "radical individual authorship," and focuses on the two great radicals, William Blake and Johann Georg Hamann, in order to reveal wider cultural and historical transformations. Regier locates these thinkers in their own cultural context and highlights their vital connections to the Anglo-German religious and literary world. He stresses the importance of religious life: of intellectuals and clergymen, as well as certain religious movements and institutions, most notably the Moravian Church. Each small piece of the puzzle is essential to see the richness of the Anglo-German context from which exorbitant and strange figures like Blake, Hamann, Lavater, and Fuseli emerged.

Regier presents Blake and Hamann as two radical thinkers whose works shatter the neat boundaries between what we think of as the Enlightenment and Romanticism. He offers an extensive comparative reading of their similarities and differences in terms of style, attitude, ideas, politics, and more. One of the most elaborate aspects of Regier's investigation is his focus on their respective language theories, which seem to have remarkable affinities with each other. Both Blake and Hamann believed that language was inherently poetical with its own ontological power, which was also the subject of important scientific debates at the time. Moreover, they were both anti-systematic thinkers rejecting "instrumental reason" (70), which they saw as supporting institutional religion and other ideological formations.

In connection with Hamann's critique of instrumental reason, Regier challenges Isaiah Berlin's view (put forward in his influential 1993 essay, *The Magus of the North*), according to which Hamann should be perceived as a precursor to a form of irrationalism—in effect, preparing the ground for Nazism—merely because Hamann was critical of the role of reason in rationalist philosophy. Regier refutes this charge by demonstrating that Hamann was not against reasonable discussions,

and insists that “it is both historically inaccurate as well as conceptually weak to portray Hamann as a precursor of ideologically dubious politics” (89). In fact, both Blake and Hamann celebrated the bodily dimension of all human existence and argued vocally in a style and tone that is unusual in its radicalism, perhaps even today. As Regier states: “In their views and expressions, both of these remarkable figures simultaneously look backward and forward: motivated by deep religiosity and a fascination for origins, they hold positions that *seem* extremely (post)modern but turn out to be even more radical” (71).

Regier shows that both “exorbitants” were part of a wider context and suggests that their possible connection is worth investigating. He traces in exacting detail a transnational cultural network which includes Hamann, Fuseli, Lavater, and Blake. By emphasising the relatively unknown sides of these figures, Regier manages to establish an important continuity between the Enlightenment and Romanticism, while presenting a network of international connections that was typical of the period. He also provides interesting details about the personal lives of Fuseli, Hamann, and Lavater. Such details are far from insignificant, as they reveal how well contemporary intellectuals of the continent and England knew one another, and that they were equally familiar with texts written in English, German, or French. We also get a broader and deeper account of these thinkers’ education and the motivations that shaped their ideas, for example, on language, God, religion, and politics.

An entire chapter is dedicated to a significant but “exorbitant” religious group of eighteenth-century Britain: the Moravian Church. This congregation formed a crucial part of the Anglo-German community in London before the 1790s; however, according to Regier, they are “an institution that does not fit into the scheme of the Enlightenment and Romanticism, neither in literary historical terms nor in the terms that we usually inherit from intellectual history” (151). “The Germans,” as John Wesley called them, brought their culture with them, adding an important dimension to the multilingual and multicultural character of the Anglo-German world. The polyglot nature of Moravian life was a central feature of their existence, survival and influence in those times, and Regier underlines their endeavour to record everything from the ordinary to the extreme, and not only within local ecclesiastical circles, but worldwide. All this evidence places the Moravians in an international network of cultural exchange that affected artistic, literary, religious, and political life in Britain through a wider Anglo-German context that contributed to the theories and works of both Blake and Hamann.

The possibility of a connection between the Moravians and Blake's family was first raised by Thomas Wright in 1929, and it was proved by Marsha Keith Schuchard in 2004. One year before the publication of Regier's book, Ágnes Péter in an elaborate study, *William Blake's Illustrations of the Book of Job* (2017; in Hungarian), considered the impact of this new discovery on Blake scholarship.<sup>2</sup> She attributed even greater importance to the fact that both Emmanuel Swedenborg, who had a decisive effect on Blake's theology, and John Wesley, whose hymns possibly influenced Blake's poetry, were in connection with the Fetter Lane congregation of the Moravian Church where Blake's mother was also a member. Regier elaborates on this connection and reveals many aspects of the relationship between John Wesley and the Moravians, as well as on Swedenborg and the Moravian brothers. He uncovers the multilingual network of religious reform culture only mentioned in Péter's book and joins Schuchard in emphasising the significance of Swedenborg and Wesley in Moravian circles.

Moravian teachings differed both from Anglican and from Dissenter doctrines. Regier devotes special attention to their highly eroticised Christology, and to the importance of the body in their ceremonies and liturgy. He also proves that multilingualism was central to Moravian life and practice: they embraced languages and multilingualism as a gift of God and believed that God spoke to mankind in all languages at the same time. As Regier shows, Moravian poetry and their understanding of Biblical texts was full of physicality, which is not far from the language theory and theology close to the heart of both Blake and Hamann.

Regier moves from what is mostly known to scholars of the period towards what is most unexpected by focusing not only on theories of language and theology, but also on their relation to ideas on matrimony and pedagogy. Blake and Hamann thought of instrumental reason as a force that created a form of religion that was deprived of creativity, which helped to establish destructive and severely limiting social constraints. This form of religion could not be tolerated by either Blake or Hamann, and this is why their deeply religious, yet anti-clerical thinking does not fit into any orthodox form of Christianity. They agreed that institutionalised religion was deeply problematic because it relied on "a structure that has lost all spiritual authority" (174). This loss is properly shown through Blake's and Hamann's views concerning marriage: it was, for them, a cornerstone of society, but its institutionalisation

---

2 The question is revisited in Péter's "Disbelief in Disbelief: William Blake and the Moravian Brethren" in *The AnaChronisT* (18.1).

by contemporary marriage laws led to an anti-human perversion, which they were ready to challenge both in their works and in their personal lives.

Regier continues his study by connecting the institutionalisation of religion to pedagogy. Institutional religion—that shaped marriage laws, among others—was spread mainly through education. This kind of education influenced not only ethics and morality but also language acquisition, which was a crucial issue for both Blake and Hamann. Instead of schools where time, reading, and thinking were all strictly regulated, they both promoted unconventional forms of education. However, Regier is right in criticising them for putting forward no exact programme that could be realised. They envisioned a form of Christianity that was deeply personal for every individual, one that could use its own private language—an impossible scheme, as Regier concludes.

In the last chapters, Regier reminds us of Blake’s familiarity with the Moravian hymns and music via his mother and demonstrates in parallel readings how *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* echoes those polyglot lyrics. We also read about the importance of the Moravian hymnody and its connections to the physical and sexual dimensions of language in the works and theories of Blake and Hamann. According to them, the body is the instrument that allows us to understand ourselves as made in the divine image and to understand “language as a divine gift that allows revelation” (204). In this understanding, language is inherently sexual and not a neutral rationalisation. Both Blake and Hamann insist on sexuality and the sexual quality of language, as an essential and positive feature that needs to be celebrated. As Regier shows, “the graphic articulation of the topic of sexuality and language is part of the conceptual argument” (216) shared by Blake and Hamann. Summarising their thought Regier concludes that “we should rejoice in the physical aspect of man and language, even though they will inevitably illustrate the limited nature of human existence” (218).

In his conclusion, Regier returns to the limitations of Blake and Hamann’s thinking. Although these remarks are not elaborated to form a sustained critique, the argument is fresh and engaging throughout. All in all, the abundance of information and the sources Regier re-discovers open diverse new perspectives for scholars of literature, theology, linguistics, philosophy, and for the general reader interested in the period. Regier uses a direct voice, which makes the book easy to read and sometimes very entertaining, while it demands close attention due to the complexity of the subject itself and to the vast amount of detail synthesised in each chapter.

## CSABA JÓZSEF SPALOVSKY

With *Exorbitant Enlightenment*, a constellation has emerged urging experts to rethink the relationship between the Enlightenment and Romanticism, as well as to form a more comprehensive and accurate picture of the “exorbitant” figure of William Blake and Johann Georg Hamann.

### CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS

Csaba József Spalovszky is a PhD candidate at the Doctoral School of Literary Studies, Eötvös Loránd University of Budapest, Hungary. His current research interests focus on eighteenth- and nineteenth-century English literature and theology, with specific emphasis on the relationship between the theology in William Blake’s prophetic books and Emanuel Swedenborg’s teachings. With four degrees and multiple certifications, he has been working as a secondary-school ESL teacher since 2007 and has been teaching all generations in special professional and language courses. Being a former World Champion athlete and a successful coach of many international champions, he serves as national and international sports diplomat, spokesman, as well as National Coach and Vice-President of the Hungarian Sport Ju-Jitsu Federation. Spalovszky has published articles and studies on Blake and Swedenborg in national literary journals and an international journal of literature and associate sciences.