

Gotthold Ephraim Lessing (1729-1781)

To the extent that the eighteenth century in Germany was indeed an age of the unfettered critical spirit, as Immanuel Kant assured his contemporaries it was, it found its most articulate voice in Gotthold Ephraim Lessing. As a scholar of classical antiquity he rivals Johann Joachim Winckelmann. In his extended controversy with leading Protestant theologians on the nature of Christianity and the truth of its teachings, a topic of singular importance to the European Enlightenment, he presented the more convincing arguments until he was silenced by ducal decree. But his most significant contribution was the rejuvenation of German literature, especially the drama.

Lessing's devastating attack on Johann Christoph Gottsched's theater reform put an end to the attempt to establish a classicist literature in Germany. Reinterpreting Aristotle's *Poetics*, Lessing subordinated aesthetic "laws" and "rules" to the effect which a specific genre is to have on its recipients, thus replacing the normative poetics that governed French classical literature and that, in turn, were espoused by Gottsched and his followers. The new theoretical orientation, especially in its application to dramatic theory, marks the beginning of "modern" German literature; it led to works which have maintained their place in the canon of German literature ever since. Among them are some of Lessing's own: his plays continue to evoke a considerable amount of critical attention, and his dramatic masterpieces, *Minna von Barnhelm* (1767; translated, 1806), *Emilia Galotti* (1772; translated, 1800), and *Nathan der Weise* (1779; translated as *Nathan the Wise*, 1791), can still be found in the repertoire of the German theater. Lessing reasoned that if the purpose of tragedy is to evoke "Mitleid" (pity), the stoic hero and the related set of aristocratically tinged values cease to be a proper subject for the drama. Stoic endurance may elicit admiration, but not pity. Witnessing human suffering will evoke pity, and the experience will intensify if the protagonist shares common bonds with his audience. With

this argument Lessing opened the stage to the social realities of his time.

Lessing's conviction that pity is the cardinal virtue and the ultimate goal of tragedy did not prevent him from using the theater as an instrument for the more general purposes of the Enlightenment. He attacks anti-Semitism in *Die Juden* (1755; translated as *The Jews*, 1878), exposes cruelty and egocentricity in the guise of patriotism in *Philotas* (1759; translated, 1878), demonstrates the failings of "enlightened" absolutism and bourgeois passivity in *Emilia Galotti*, and crowns his dramatic work with a plea for religious tolerance in *Nathan der Weise*, one of the noblest documents of the European Enlightenment.

Lessing was born in Kamenz, Saxony, on 22 January 1729, the third of twelve children of Johann Gottfried Lessing, a Protestant minister, and Justina Salome Lessing, née Feller. His unusual talents were recognized early. In 1741 he was admitted to St. Afra in Meißen, one of the elite secondary schools endowed by the dukes of Saxony. In 1746, complying with his father's wishes and equipped with a stipend from his native city, he enrolled as a student of theology at the University of Leipzig. At this center of eighteenth-century scholarship, the unusual alliance of Gottsched, then rector of the university, and Frederike Caroline Neuber, the leader of a theatrical troupe, had given the stage a new respectability. Lessing's lifelong fascination with the theater began in Leipzig. His first play, *Der junge Gelehrte* (1755; translated as *The Young Scholar*, 1878), was performed there in January 1748; it is a comedy in which he lampoons an arrogant young scholar engaged in meaningless philological squabbles totally divorced from real learning, as well as from the world around him. With his friend Felix Weiße, who was to become a minor playwright, Lessing translated Marivaux; wrote poetry in the anacreontic vein; and wrote outlines for several plays, most of which remained fragmentary. Such activities caused his parents some consternation. Although the errant student was allowed to change the focus of his

studies to medicine and philology, Lessing left the university in 1748 to seek his fortune in Berlin. In a letter to his mother (20 January 1749), he blames this move on debts he had incurred; it is likely that the bankruptcy of Neuber's troupe in the summer of 1748 was contributing factor.

Lessing survived in Berlin as a struggling writer. He became review editor of the *Berlinische Privilegierte Zeitung* and received a masters in theology during a stay in Wittenberg in 1751-1752 and gradually built a reputation as a literary critic. He did not eschew formidable targets: he took Friedrich Gottlieb Klopstock to task for his religious fervor, and Samuel Gotthold Lange, Horace translator and respected head of the Halle school of poets, was ridiculed for incompetence in *Ein Vade Mecum für den Hrn. Sam. Gotth. Lange* (A Primer for Mr. Samuel G. Lange, 1754). But although he was a prolific writer--his collected works, *Schriften* (Writings, 1753-1755), began to appear before he was twenty-five years old--the Prussian capital and the literary market in Germany did not afford him, or any other independent writer, a comfortable existence. The success of his first bourgeois tragedy, *Miß Sara Sampson*, (1755; translated, 1878), increased his stature as a playwright and drew new attention to his early comedies, but it did not alleviate his financial problems. The play depicts Sara's elopement with Mellefont, a young man who finds himself torn between her and a former lover. Above all he is motivated by a deep-rooted urge to maintain his personal freedom. The sophistication of Sara's reasoning as to why she cannot accept her distraught father's forgiveness has persuaded critics to interpret the play as a commentary on the Third Commandment. But the indictment of rigid bourgeois morality, specifically with regard to sexual ethics, is equally prominent. The tearful reunion of errant daughter and regretful father, who blames himself and his own strict moralistic stance for Sara's poisoning by Mellefont's former lover, set the stage for domestic tragedies well into the nineteenth century.

The play's English models--Restoration drama--and the London setting had a provocative edge: in no German city was the dominance of French culture felt more keenly than in the Berlin of Frederick II. Yet Lessing's attitude can hardly be called chauvinistic; for while ridiculing Corneille, he praised Diderot, and in Voltaire he admired the philosopher but belittled the playwright. However, his squabble with the great French philosopher over a manuscript Lessing should have returned earlier than he did may well have ruined his chances for an appointment at the Prussian court--if indeed the king needed such a pretext to prefer a French intellectual to a German one. Lessing found support elsewhere. His circle of friends included Moses Mendelssohn, accountant by profession and philosopher by inclination; Friedrich Nicolai, publisher and staunch supporter of Enlightenment causes; and Karl Wilhelm Ramler, author and instructor at the military academy. Travel plans--he had agreed to accompany the son of a rich Leipzig merchant on a tour of Holland, northern Germany, and England--came to an abrupt halt in Amsterdam with the outbreak of the Seven Years' War in August 1756. Lessing returned with his charge from Holland to Leipzig, which was occupied by Prussian troops.

Lessing remained in Leipzig until May 1758, when he returned to Berlin. In Leipzig he barely supported himself by translating works by Francis Hutcheson (1756), William Law (1756), and Samuel Richardson (1757), and collaborating with Mendelssohn and Nicolai on the journal *Bibliothek der schönen Wissenschaften und der freyen Künste* (Library of Liberal Arts, 1757-1758). But it was not only economically that his position was a tenuous one. Although it was rumored in Berlin that he had written against the interest of the Prussian state, he estranged his Leipzig friends by consorting with officers of the Prussian army who had just levied an extraordinarily heavy tax on the city. A true cosmopolitan, he assured Nicolai that he considered himself neither a Saxon nor a Prussian patriot. And Johann Wilhelm Ludwig Gleim, whose *Preußische Kriegslieder* (Prussian

War Songs, 1758) Lessing had edited, was finally taken to task for his blatant nationalism: "Vielleicht zwar ist auch der Patriot bey mir nicht ganz erstickt, obgleich das Lob eines eifrigen Patrioten, nach meiner Denckungsart, das allerletzte ist, wonach ich geitzen würde; des Patrioten nehmlich, der mich vergessen lehrt, daß ich ein Weltbürger seyn sollte" (It is possible that the patriot is also not quite stifled in me, although the reputation as a fervent patriot is the last thing I crave, as a patriot, that is, who makes me forget that I should be a citizen of the world). He also made the price of heroic greatness the theme of a one-act play: the self-sacrifice of the title character in *Philotas* is an indictment of a society that educates its youth to accept death on the battlefield as the ultimate goal and unquestioningly to place the interest of the state over all human concerns. The setting of the play in classical antiquity does not blur the obvious analogy to Prussia's acquisition of Silesia through war.

Despite this anticipation of the spirit that characterized the great minds of the following generation, Lessing was not totally unaffected by the upsurge of pro-Prussian sentiments triggered by the Seven Years' War. He looked forward to his return to Berlin, "wo ich es nicht länger nötig haben werde, es meinen Bekannten nur ins Ohr zu sagen, daß der König von Preußen dennoch ein großer König ist" (where I will no longer be obliged to whisper into my friends' ears that the King of Prussia is a great king in spite of it all), he wrote to Gleim in May 1757.

Among the projects Lessing completed during his second stay in Berlin were an edition of the all but forgotten works of the seventeenth-century poet Friedrich von Logau (1759) and a collection of his own fables, *Fabeln: Drey Bücher* (1759; translated as *Fables: In Three Books*, 1829). Of more immediate impact was his *Briefe, die Neueste Litteratur betreffend* (Letters, on the Most Recent Literature, 1759), a journal of literary criticism to which Nicolai and Mendelssohn also contributed. The fictional framework of these "letters"--they are

addressed to an officer recovering from wounds received in the battle of Zorndorf--allowed Lessing the elegant informality that characterizes most of his critical writings. Moving beyond the traditional form of reviewing individual publications, he used the journal to exert influence on the entire spectrum of contemporary literature. The famous seventeenth letter (16 February 1759) contains an attack on Gottsched's efforts to reform the German stage. It is based on arguments which were later to be more fully developed by Johann Gottfried Herder: that literary models should be akin to the national character; that indigenous traditions are preferable to imported themes and forms; and that Shakespearean theater is superior to classical French drama, even though the latter adheres to the letter of Aristotelian poetics while the former violates it.

Lessing's theoretical stance placed him between the two established and feuding camps in Leipzig and Zurich. His rejection of Gottsched may have endeared him to the Swiss critics Johann Jakob Bodmer and Johann Jakob Breitinger, but, because their revision of Gottsched's theories was only a modest one, the feeling was not mutual. Lessing saw the danger of forming yet another literary clique. His decision to withdraw from the journal may also have been prompted by his financial situation, which remained as uncertain as ever; he was unable to respond to pleas from Kamenz that he support two of his brothers attending the University of Wittenberg. In September 1760 Lessing resigned; a month later he left for Breslau to join the staff of the Prussian general Bogislaw Friedrich von Tauentzien as regimental secretary.

Less is known about his years in Silesia than about any other part of his life. According to a local schoolmaster, J. B. Klose, he slept late, went to every book auction in town, and, after performing his secretarial duties, attended theatrical performances. Often leaving before the last act, he spent the better part of the night gambling with fellow Prussian officers. Even though Klose's account, cited by Lessing's brother and first biographer Karl Gotthelf, may be

slanted, it seems obvious that these were relatively carefree years for Germany's foremost critic.

It is unclear what Lessing expected for himself after he proclaimed the end of the long war to the citizenry of Breslau in 1763. But his hopes, hinted at in a letter to his father, were not fulfilled: "Ich warte noch einen einzigen Umstand ab, und wo dieser nicht nach meinem Willen ausfällt, so kehre ich zu meiner alten Lebens Art wieder zurück" (I am only waiting for one decision. Should that be contrary to expectations, then I will return to my old way of life). Von Tauentzien was appointed governor of Silesia, and Lessing returned to his old and rather insecure way of life. But unlike his dramatic figure, the Baltic nobleman Tellheim in *Minna von Barnhelm*, who had also joined the Prussian cause for reasons he finds difficult to explain after his sudden and unjust dismissal, Lessing was not destitute. Although many of his personal effects were lost in transit from Breslau to Berlin, he was able to send a significant amount of money to his family, and his library at this time contained some six thousand volumes.

The literary results of his four years in Silesia were two major works: *Minna von Barnhelm* and *Laokoon: Oder Über die Grenzen der Mahlerey und Poesie* (1766; translated as *Laocoon; or, The Limits of Poetry and Painting*, 1836).

The plot of Lessing's great comedy reflects the aftermath of the war. In a humane and generous gesture, Major von Tellheim had asked for smaller reparations from the defeated Saxons than were expected. When the vanquished proved unable to pay even these at short notice, he advanced them some of his own money to meet the minimum demands of the Prussians. While this selfless deed wins him the love of Minna, an aristocratic Saxon heiress, the Prussian ministry suspects bribery. The play opens with Tellheim dismissed, dishonored, and about to be evicted from his hotel room. It ends with his honor rehabilitated by the king, his fortune restored, and his impending marriage to Minna. Despite this seeming

conventionality, Lessing's play is a radical departure from the genre as established on the German stage. More significant than the true-to-life characters and idiosyncratic diction of the dramatis personae was the public discussion of social problems caused by the war and high-handed Prussian administrative measures. Instead of following the traditional pattern of exposing some aberrant form of behavior to ridicule, Lessing subjects the aristocratic concept of honor to scrutiny. When his honor is questioned, Tellheim, although innocent, refuses to marry Minna. When she claims to be dishonored in the eyes of Saxon patriots for loving a Prussian officer, and disinherited as well, he reverses his position; the now-eager suitor is forced to invalidate his own earlier arguments, which Minna quotes back to him. Neither the plausibility of her fictitious misfortune nor the superiority of "Mitleid" over honor as a virtue inspiring moral action could have been lost on the audience. The play rapidly became the most popular of Lessing's dramatic works. Its first performance, in Hamburg on 30 December 1767, was followed before the end of the decade by productions in Frankfurt am Main, Vienna, Leipzig, Berlin, and Breslau. That the king's letter ultimately solves Tellheim's dilemma led to a reading of the play as a glorification of Frederick II; the opposite interpretation points to the arbitrariness of Tellheim's rehabilitation and finds a general indictment of Prussia and its ruler. More recent scholarship has focused on aesthetic and sociopolitical issues.

With *Laokoon* Lessing participated in a larger European debate on the specific differences among the individual arts and the nature of aesthetic perception. His plan was to include music and dance, but the published work is restricted to the pictorial arts (painting and sculpture) and literature. A discussion of theories presented by Joseph Spence in *Polymetis* (1747) and by Anne Claude Philippe de Tubières, comte de Caylus in *Tableaux tirés de L'Iliade* (1757) precedes the introduction of his true target: Winckelmann. In his *Gedanken über die*

Nachahmung der griechischen Werke in der Malerei und Bildhauerkunst (On Imitating Greek Artworks in Painting and Sculpture, 1755) Winckelmann analyzed the Laocoön sculpture and concluded that the Greeks avoided the artistic expression of extreme emotions: the priest and his sons, about to be strangled by snakes, display only muted and controlled suffering. This stoic ideal was diametrically opposed to Lessing's own views; yet he disputes Winckelmann's famous dictum that no inner turmoil would disturb the Greeks' "edle Einfalt and stille Größe" (noble simplicity and calm grandeur) not on moral but on aesthetic grounds. Since Homer and Sophocles allow their heroes to scream, he argues, different laws must apply for the writer and the sculptor. In his search for these laws he establishes several principles which have proved to be extraordinarily fruitful for all subsequent theory in this area, among them the structural analysis of the medium to determine its representational possibilities, the distinction of natural and arbitrary signs, and the participatory role of the reader or viewer. Literature uses successive signs in time; the pictorial arts employ coexisting figures and colors in space. Therefore, the proper subject of literature is "Handlungen" (action) while "Körper" (objects) are the most adequate subjects for the painter and the sculptor. Limited to re-creating a single moment in time, the artist must select one that leaves the most latitude for the imagination. It is not the pinnacle of an emotion but an earlier or later stage that allows viewer participation. For this reason Laocoön is depicted as suffering, but not screaming. Lessing concludes that literature is superior to pictorial art because it can represent the entire spectrum of human emotions. It achieves its highest form by translating its arbitrary signs into natural signs, by turning words into the spoken dialogue of drama.

The impact of the work was considerable. Even Winckelmann's great admirer Goethe remembered in his autobiography "daß dieses Werk uns aus der Region eines kümmerlichen Anschauens in die freien Gefilde des Gedankens hinriß" (that this work lifted us from the level of

meager perception to the unencumbered regions of thought). But Lessing had to defend himself in *Brief, antiquarischen Inhalts* (Letters on Classical Matters, 1768-1769) against an attack by Christian Adolf Klotz, a professor of rhetoric in Halle; the entire first volume of Herder's *Kritische Wälder* (Critical Essays, 1769) was a critique of *Laokoon*--by and large Herder sided with Winckelmann; and Goethe presented his own views as a third position in the journal *Propyläen* in 1798.

Lessing's hopes for employment as royal librarian in Berlin or at the art gallery in Dresden ended in disappointment. In the spring of 1767 he accepted a position as theater critic at the newly founded German National Theater in Hamburg. He may well have shared the high expectation embodied in the idea of a national theater; his involvement in a similar venture in Mannheim in 1776 and his interest in plans for a national academy in Vienna to be presided over by Friedrich Gottlieb Klopstock would point in that direction. But regional interests and petty rivalries and intrigues foiled all of these attempts to establish an intellectual center of national significance. The Hamburg enterprise, underfunded and mismanaged, folded before the end of the year. Lessing stayed to complete his contribution: the *Hamburgische Dramaturgie* (1767-1769; translated as *Hamburg Dramaturgy*, 1962).

It is not a systematic work. When the original plan to review each play, all of the actors, and every performance had to be abandoned because of personal sensitivities, Lessing broadened his theme to include all matters pertaining to the contemporary debate on drama: the nature of the tragic hero--he is to be "vom gleichen Schrot und Korn" (of like kind) as the audience in order to affect them; the concept of genius; and the problem of historical accuracy in drama are among the issues treated. An overriding concern is the critique of French classical drama, and Shakespeare is used to substantiate its devaluation. But the greatest attention is devoted to a reinterpretation of Aristotle's comments on tragedy. In the light of modern scholarship

Lessing's reading of the crucial passage may be faulty: he translates *eleos* and *phobos* as *Furcht* (fear) and *Mitleid* (pity), declares *Furcht* to be pity we feel for ourselves, and sees both emotions as the object of the cathartic experience of tragedy.

Eminently sociable, Lessing acquired a large circle of friends in Hamburg. With Johann Bode he entered into a short-lived publishing business; in the house of the merchant Engelbert König he met his future wife, Eva, who was then married to König; the children of Hermann Samuel Reimarus, professor of oriental languages, provided him with the manuscript of their father's radically deistic "Apologia oder Schutzschrift für die vernünftigen Verehrer Gottes" (Apology or Defense of the Rational Worshipers of God). He became acquainted with Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach, then musical director of the Hamburg parish, and played chess with Klopstock. He also met Johann Arnold Ebert, professor at the Carolinum in Brunswick, who secured for him his last position: the librarianship at the ducal library in Wolfenbüttel, then and now one of the most significant libraries in Europe.

Financial difficulties and poor health delayed his departure from Hamburg, and he did not assume his new duties until May 1770. His years in Wolfenbüttel were overshadowed by the provincialism of the duchy of Braunschweig-Lüneburg and the social and intellectual isolation in which he found himself. Although his relationship with the court in Brunswick was strained from the beginning, he was not treated ungenerously. His prolonged absences from Wolfenbüttel were tolerated, and he was asked to accompany a member of the ducal family on a tour of Italy from April to December 1775; the duke also exempted his publications from censorship and approved his plan to make the treasures of the library available to the public. Lessing's work on Berengar of Tours (1770) and the six-volume *Zur Geschichte und Litteratur: Aus den Schätzen der Herzoglichen Bibliothek zu Wolfenbüttel* (On History and Literature: From the Collections of the Ducal Library in Wolfenbüttel,

1773-1781) are efforts in this direction. Most of his commentaries on rare or forgotten texts take the form of righting an old wrong. Thus he defends the heretic Berengar against his orthodox critics, Leibniz against the accusation of religious hypocrisy, and the sixteenth-century apostate Adam Neuser as a victim of religious intolerance. The third volume of *Zur Geschichte und Litteratur* (1774) includes the first of a series of fragments from Reimarus's "Apologie," which were to involve Lessing in an extended theological controversy with the Hamburg theologian Johann Melchior Goeze and others, and which culminated in the publication of *Nathan der Weise* in 1779.

But before the quarrel over the "Reimarus Fragments" dominated his life, he was able to complete *Emilia Galotti*. In a letter to his brother, Lessing describes the play as "eine modernisierte, von allem Staatsinteresse befreite *Virginia*" (a modernized *Virginia*, devoid of all political concerns). He provided his ducal employer with a similar description, and it is likely that he deemphasized the play's sociopolitical content to avoid censorship. *Emilia Galotti* is an indictment of an immoral prince, Hettore Gonzaga. The prince's designs on Emilia, who is unaccustomed to the amorality of the court and unable to defend herself against it, seem to leave her no alternative but to seek her own death. On her wedding day she finds herself trapped at the prince's retreat after her bridegroom has been murdered. The prince, indirectly the perpetrator of this crime, now acts as judge and orders a full investigation, thus preventing Emilia's escape. That Emilia is less afraid of the political and judicial power of the prince than of the power of seduction has inspired many psychological analyses. That her father, Odoardo, urged by Emilia, kills her and spares the prince seems to expose the passivity and frustrations of the middle class.

The play was hailed as the prototype of a German drama with true-to-life characters, but Matthias Claudius found the heroine's fear of her own sensuality difficult to understand; Goe-the called

the play a masterpiece yet found it "nur gedacht" (too contrived); and Friedrich Schlegel, who influenced future commentaries on Lessing by praising the philosopher at the expense of the poet, described the play as "ein großes Exempel der dramatischen Algebra" (a great example of dramatic algebra).

Even though more recent commentaries have deemphasized the play's sociopolitical edge, it is clear that Lessing's view of the Prussian state, which during his lifetime had emerged as a major military power in Europe, had undergone considerable change. In response to an ironic remark by Nicolai regarding censorship in Vienna, Lessing belittled a presumed freedom of the press that allows inane attacks on religion but excludes all critical review of social and political conditions. In this respect, he calls Prussia "das sklavischste Land Europas" (the most slavish country in Europe). Having joined the Freemasons in Hamburg, and possibly disappointed by the "secrets" imparted to him at his initiation, he published *Ernst und Falk: Gespräche für Freymäurer* (1778; translated as *Masonic Dialogues*, 1927). The work maps out the duties of the citizen in an imperfect state.

In 1771, after the death of her husband, Eva König had become engaged to Lessing. Returning from his Italian journey, he intensified his efforts to have his position upgraded, for he considered his own financial independence an essential prerequisite to marriage, despite Eva's considerable fortune. Embittered by delays, Lessing was ready to resign when his conditions were finally met. A few months later, on 8 October 1776, the wedding took place on the estate of friends near Hamburg. Lessing's marital life was short. His son Traugott survived for only one day after a difficult birth, from which the mother never fully recovered. Eva Lessing died on 10 January 1778.

In his grief, Lessing submerged himself in the increasingly polemical debate triggered by his second installment of segments from the

Reimarus manuscript. The first portion, "Von der Duldung der Deisten" (On Tolerating Deists) in 1774, had gone widely unnoticed; but the radical questioning of the New Testament accounts of Christ's death and resurrection in *Vom dem Zwecke Jesu und seiner Jünger* (On the Purpose of Jesus and His Disciples, 1778) triggered a vociferous response from the already embattled orthodox Protestant camp. Its main spokesman, Goeze, was no match for Lessing's satirical pen, but he succeeded in rousing the established ecclesiastic and secular hierarchies into action. Lessing's publisher, the Waisenhaus-Buchhandlung in Brunswick, was ordered by ducal decree to halt the distribution of all writings pertaining to the controversy; and Lessing, whose efforts to persuade the court otherwise were ignored, was advised to cease all further publications on matters of religion.

To shield Reimarus's children from public wrath, Lessing had presented Reimarus's text as "Fragmente eines Ungenannten" (Fragments by an unnamed author). Furthermore, he had introduced the deistic arguments with counterarguments of his own. Despite these precautions, he was soon publicly suspected of being himself the "unnamed" author. In defiance of his ducal employer's order, Lessing published simultaneously in Hamburg and Berlin; his penultimate response to the ultraconservative Goeze then turned to his old forum, the theater, to present his last word on the matter.

A posthumously published preface to *Nathan der Weise* says: "daß der Nachteil, welchen geoffenbarte Religionen dem menschlichen Geschlechte bringen, zu keiner Zeit einem vernünftigen Manne müsse auffallender gewesen sein, als zu den Zeiten der Kreuzzüge" (the disadvantage which revealed religions bring to mankind can never have been more obvious to a rational man than at the time of the Crusades). The play shows intolerance and inhumanity to be the result of the conviction that a single religion is the sole recipient of transcendental truth. But the principal representatives of the warring factions--

a young Templar captured and pardoned by Saladin (the Muslim ruler of Jerusalem), and the wise Jewish merchant Nathan--overcome their religious as well as their political and racial differences. Even before the play's utopian ending, which reveals that they are related to each other, they become friends. This friendship is brought about by several educational processes which permeate the play and culminate in the famous Parable of the Rings. Questioned by Saladin regarding the truth which all religions claim, Nathan responds with Lessing's adaptation of one of Boccaccio's tales from the *Decameron* (1953). Under the veil of allegory Nathan allows all revealed religions the same degree of "truth." They are indistinguishable from one another in that they all base their claims on reported historical events; such "historical proofs" are judged to be insufficient in the court of reason, and therefore their mutually exclusive claims would have to be rejected. But the judge in Nathan's parable moves beyond this deist position; instead of a judgment, he offers advice: although the validity of religious beliefs cannot be demonstrated, their value can be established through the virtuous life of the believer. The absence of transcendental certainty becomes the incentive to strive toward moral autonomy.

In *Die Erziehung des Menschengeschlechts* (1780; translated as *The Education of the Human Race*, 1858) Lessing seems to provide a more definitive answer regarding his stand toward Christianity. He sent the manuscript to his publisher, Voß, with the condition that his authorship be withheld; instead, he was described on the title page as the book's editor. The work describes the Old and New Testaments as schoolbooks that have served their purpose in the continuing progress of mankind toward ultimate enlightenment; Christianity is an imperfect but necessary stage along the way. The work does not focus on the irrelevance or the absence of divine guidance in the education of mankind, however, but on those accomplishments which man, individually or collectively, has achieved for himself. It ends with the conviction that the ultimate goal, the moral

autonomy of man, will be reached: "sie wird gewiß kommen, die Zeit der Vollendung, da der Mensch ... das Gute tun wird, weil es das Gute ist" (the time of perfection will surely come, when man ... will act virtuously for virtue's sake).

Lessing died in Brunswick on 15 February 1781, in the presence of his stepdaughter Amalie and his friend Alexander Daveson.

WRITINGS BY THE AUTHOR:

- ◎ *Der Eremit: Eine Erzählung* anonymous (Kerapolis [actually Stuttgart: Mezler], 1749).
- ◎ *Die alte Jungfer: Ein Lustspiel in drei Aufzügen*, anonymous (Berlin: Voß 1749).
- ◎ *Tarantula: Eine Poszen Oper*, anonymous (Teltow an der Tyber [actually Berlin], 1749).
- ◎ *Weiber sind Weiber: Ein Lustspiel in fünf Aufzügen*, anonymous (Berlin, 1749).
- ◎ *Critische Nachrichten aus dem Reiche der Gelehrsamkeit*, 2 volumes, anonymous (Berlin: Haude & Spener, 1750-1751).
- ◎ *Palaion: Comédie en un Acte*, anonymous (Berlin, 1750).
- ◎ *Kleinigkeiten*, anonymous (Frankfurt am Main & Leipzig [actually Stuttgart: Mezler], 1751).
- ◎ *Das Neueste aus dem Reiche des Witzes*, anonymous (Berlin, 1751).
- ◎ *Schriften*, 6 volumes (Berlin: Voß, 1753-1755)--volume 6 (1755) includes *Der junge Gelehrte in der Einbildung: Ein Lustspiel in drey Aufzügen*, *Die Juden*, *Der Freygeist*, *Der Schatz*, *Miß Sara Sampson*, *Der Misogyne oder Der Feind des weiblichen Geschlechts: Ein Lustspiel in zwey Aufzügen*.
- ◎ *Ein Vade Mecum für den Hrn. Sam. Gotth. Lange, Pastor in Laublingen, in dessen Taschenformate angefertigt* (Berlin: Voß 1754).
- ◎ *Theatralische Bibliothek*, 4 volumes (Berlin: Voß 1754-1758).
- ◎ *Miß Sara Sampson: Ein Trauerspiel in fünf Aufzügen* (Berlin: Voß 1755).
- ◎ *Pope--ein Metaphysiker!*, anonymous, by Lessing and Moses Mendelssohn (Danzig: Schuster, 1755).

- ⊙ *Philotas: Ein Trauerspiel*, anonymous (Berlin: Voß, 1759).
- ⊙ *Fabeln: Drey Bücher. Nebst Abhandlungen mit dieser Dichtungsart verwandten Inhalts* (Berlin: Voß, 1759); translated anonymously as *Fables: In Three Books* (London: Taylor, 1829); German version republished, edited by Walther Killy (Hamburg: Maximilian-Gesellschaft, 1979).
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