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H. B. NISBET

GOTTHOLD EPHRAIM LESSING

His Life, Works & Thought

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H. B. NISBET

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UNIVERSITY PRESS

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Great Clarendon Street, Oxford, OX2 6DP,
United Kingdom

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© Verlag C.H. Beck oHG, München, 2008
Originally published as *Lessing: Eine Biographie*, By Hugh Barr Nisbet.

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First Edition published in 2013
Impression: 1

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Published in the United States of America by Oxford University Press
198 Madison Avenue, New York, NY 10016, Unites States of America

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
Data available

ISBN 978–0–19–967947–8

As printed and bound by
CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY

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For Karl S. Guthke

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Preface

A German version of this book (*Lessing. Eine Biographie*), translated from the English original by Karl S. Guthke, was published in 2008 by the C. H. Beck Verlag, Munich. Since then, I have revised and updated the original manuscript to make it available to English-speaking readers. Unless otherwise stated, all translations from languages other than English are my own.

I am indebted to numerous institutions and individuals for help and support in my studies of Lessing over several decades. I am grateful to the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) for supporting me on three extended visits to German libraries. I am likewise grateful to the Alexander von Humboldt Stiftung for awarding me a research scholarship for four months of study in Germany, and subsequently for the award of a Humboldt Prize which enabled me to begin work on the present book in 1998. I am no less grateful to the Gerda Henkel Stiftung for subsidizing the translation of the book into German, and to the C. H. Beck Verlag for facilitating the preparation of the present edition. My thanks are also due for all kinds of help from the staff of various university libraries, particularly those of Bristol, St Andrews, Cambridge, Göttingen, and Cologne, and from the staff of the Bavarian State Library in Munich, the British Library, the Herzog August Library and Lessing-Akademie in Wolfenbüttel, and the Lessing Museum in Kamenz. I am also grateful to the University of Cambridge and particularly to my colleagues in the Department of German for allowing me to take regular periods of study leave, and to the Master and Fellows of Sidney Sussex College for providing me with a congenial working environment.

The following individuals have helped me in ways more numerous and diverse than I can adequately acknowledge here, but to whom I am extremely grateful: Wilfried Barner, Derek Beales, Raimund Bezold, Tim Blanning, Nicholas Boyle, Nigel DeSouza, Manuel Dries, Markus Fauser, Monika Fick, Dieter Fratzke, Heinz Fuchs, Matthias Hanke, Istvan Hont, Peter Hutchinson, Béla Kapossy, Alison Kasparek, Alexander Košenina, Johannes Kunisch, Roman Lach, Francis Lamport, Josef Ludwig, Haydn Mason, Rosemarie Mayr, Michael Multhammer, Sharon Nevill, Arnold, Marcus, and Monika Nisbet, Paul Raabe, Jim Reed, Hans Reiss, Ute Rieger-Kunesch, Ritchie Robertson, Gerhard Sauder, Ann Schmiesing, Marsha Schuchard, Birka Siwczyk, Jürgen Stenzel, Ingrid Strohschneider-Kohrs, Friedrich Vollhardt, Joachim Whaley, Ernst-Peter Wieckenberg, John Williams, and Romira Worvill.

To four scholars in particular I am greatly indebted. Firstly to Roger Paulin, who read every chapter as I wrote it, and whose criticisms and suggestions enabled me to make significant improvements. Secondly, to the late Peter Michelsen, whose writings on Lessing have long been an inspiration to me and whose wise advice to avoid glossing over or seeking to eliminate the many contradictions in Lessing's personality and works I have tried to follow. Thirdly, to the late Hans Dietrich Irmscher, without whose intervention and encouragement at a decisive moment this book, the writing of which had too often been postponed, would never have

been completed. And finally, to Karl S. Guthke, from whose friendship, conversations, and manifold contributions to Lessing scholarship I have repeatedly benefited, and who generously volunteered to take on the formidable task of translating this book into German. My debt to him is greater than I can ever hope to repay, and it is to him that this English edition of the book is gratefully dedicated.

Last but not least, my thanks are due to my wife Angela, for whose forebearance over the long hours and years during which my attention was so often directed to life in eighteenth-century Germany rather than that in present-day England I am profoundly grateful.

Cambridge, June 2013

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List of Abbrevations

Abbreviations used in bibliography and notes. (Further abbreviations are to be found in bibliography.)

AA	Kant, Akademie-Ausgabe
ADB	Allgemeine Deutsche Biographie, 56 vols, Leipzig 1875–1912
BPZ	Berlinische Privilegierte Zeitung
DVjs	Deutsche Vierteljahrsschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Geistesgeschichte
EdM	*Die Erziehung des Menschengeschlechts*
EG	*Emilia Galotti*
EuF	*Ernst und Falk. Gespräche für Freimaurer*
GEL	Gotthold Ephraim Lessing
HA	Goethes Werke, Hamburger-Ausgabe
JA	Moses Mendelssohn, Gesammelte Schriften. Jubiläums-Ausgabe
JEGP	Journal of English and Germanic Philology
L.	Lessing
LYB	Lessing Yearbook
MLR	Modern Language Review
MvB	*Minna von Barnhelm*
NdW	*Nathan der Weise*
PEGS	Publications of the English Goethe Society
PMLA	Publications of the Modern Language Association of America
SWS	Herder, Sämtliche Werke, ed. Suphan

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Introduction: Why Lessing?

For more than sixty years, both in German-speaking and English-speaking countries, there have been repeated calls for a new and comprehensive biography of Lessing.[1] This introductory chapter will try to explain why these calls are justified.

There is, first of all, the intrinsic importance of Lessing as a representative of the European Enlightenment. The range of his interests is exceptionally wide, and rivals that of Diderot, Voltaire, and Rousseau. He was a poet, dramatist, and journalist, a literary theorist and critic, a historian of literature, art, and religion, a classical and medieval philologist, a palaeographer, librarian and archivist, a lay expert in theology and patristics, a philosopher and aesthetician, a translator from several languages, and a prolific reviewer and editor. The genres of literature in which he wrote include the ode, song, didactic poem, verse tale, epigram, fable, aphorism, comedy, tragedy, parable play, dialogue, satire, and polemic; the only significant omissions among genres current in his lifetime are the novel and verse epic.

He was a member of the first generation in Germany to come seriously to terms with English literature and culture and a pioneer of Hispanic studies in Germany; he was also conversant with the main languages of antiquity and most languages of western and southern Europe. His scholarship and outlook were international, and by translation, commentary, and other means, he brought many of the cultural achievements of antiquity and of several modern European nations into circulation in Germany. He was a cosmopolitan and one of the first to use the neologisms *Kosmopolit* and *Weltbürger* (citizen of the world).[2] Like Diderot, whom he in many ways resembles, he was open to the world and its cultures at large,[3] and his attitude was Eurocentric only inasmuch as he wrote, of necessity, for a European public and for the most part about European affairs. What he wrote was only a fraction of what he could have written if his health and circumstances had so permitted (he died at the age of fifty-two). As his friend Leisewitz put it:[4]

> We do not sufficiently admire him if we merely know what he became. We should also know that he could have become anything, but a human lifetime was too limited for him to develop all his talents.

Lessing is also the earliest secular German writer to remain directly accessible today, and his last three plays are still regularly performed. He owes this fact to his

[1] See, for example, H. Schneider (1951) 7–10; Guthke (1965) 99; Dvoretzky (1971–2) II, 531; Albrecht (1997) 132.

[2] LM I, 318; Barner (1986) 616. [3] See Guthke (2000b) *passim*. [4] D 553.

innovative use of the German language, which his contemporaries immediately recognized as distinctive and which is at the same time closer to modern usage than that of most of his contemporaries. It is clear, vivid, incisive, entertaining, down-to- earth and often colloquial; it captures and holds the attention. He is the central and most representative literary figure of the German *Aufklärung*—central inasmuch as his life (1729–81) spans both halves of his century, and representative by virtue of the range and influence of his work. He was born little more than a decade after the death of Leibniz and at a time when Wolff and Gottsched were at the height of their powers; he died in the year in which Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* and Schiller's *The Robbers* were published, and two years after Goethe completed the first version of *Iphigenie in Tauris*. He became the leading literary critic in Germany during the 1750s, effectively destroying the authority of Gottsched and his followers, and he was the most respected German dramatist and foremost literary figure throughout the second half of his life. His antiquarian studies gave him an authority comparable to that of Winckelmann; he immediately recognized the poetic distinction of Klopstock, who later became his friend; and the young Herder looked up to him and modelled his first major works on equivalent works by Lessing. The Storm and Stress movement, whose dramas are superficially very different from Lessing's, was greatly influenced by his work, especially by *Emilia Galotti*. No German writer since Luther had achieved greater public resonance, and Lessing did much to create the growing public of largely middle-class readers for whom he wrote. As in literature, his writings on philosophical and theological topics profoundly influenced subsequent developments in both of these disciplines.

Lessing was close to some of the main events of his time, and he met, or observed at close quarters, several of the main political figures of the period. He had the opportunity to observe Frederick the Great in Breslau during the darkest moments of the Seven Years War, and he handled the correspondence of General Tauentzien, military commandant of that city and subsequently governer of Silesia, with the king from 1760 to 1764; he must also have seen the monarch on numerous occasions in Berlin and Potsdam. He was personally received in Vienna by the Emperor Joseph II and the Empress Maria Theresa, in Saxony by the Elector Friedrich August III, and in Mannheim by the Elector Karl Theodor of the Palatinate. In the company of Prince Leopold of Brunswick, he was received in Rome by Pope Pius VI, in Naples by King Ferdinand and Queen Maria Carolina of the Two Sicilies, and by the rulers of several other Italian principalities. It is one of the many paradoxes in his life, which will be examined later in this book, that he said or wrote very little about such encounters. It is enough to note here that—in contrast to other leading figures of the Enlightenment—he is habitually reticent with regard to his own inner life and personal reactions to his experience.

Here, then, is a life which certainly merits a biography. But this does not explain why a work of the present kind is desirable now, given that there has been no shortage of Lessing biographies in the past: well over seventy such works, mostly in German, have appeared since his death. The majority of these are relatively short introductions of a more or less popular character, many of which have served their

purpose well. Karl Lessing's biography of 1793 is uniquely valuable as the most informative original account of Lessing's personal life; in more recent times, the fullest and most readable account in German is Dieter Hildebrandt's *Lessing. Biographie einer Emanzipation*, first published in 1979. There have, however, been no large-scale biographies since the two-volume works by Theodor Wilhelm Danzel and Gottschalk Eduard Guhrauer (1849–54), Erich Schmidt (1884–92), and Waldemar Oehlke (1919). The first of these, patchily completed by Guhrauer after Danzel's death, retains its usefulness as a mine of positivistic information, but it lacks shape and continuity. Erich Schmidt's massive work remains a monument of thorough scholarship and stylistic flair; it is particularly strong on literary sources and parallels, and on the literary networks of Lessing's time. But the discoveries of over a century's research (the last edition overseen by Schmidt appeared in 1909) have rendered it in many respects obsolete, and its hagiographical attitude and nationalistic bias greatly reduce its appeal to present-day readers. Waldemar Oehlke's work, though strong on social history and personal relationships, must be used with particular caution, for the multiple inaccuracies noticed by early reviewers remained uncorrected in the second edition of 1929. The situation for biographies in English is considerably worse. All of them are short and derivative, and none is remotely comprehensive. The most recent ones are out of date[5] or full of inaccuracies.[6]

Until recent times, the majority of biographies in German—with the notable exceptions of Karl Lessing's unvarnished account of Lessing's private life and Danzel's positivistic compilation—have suffered from an idealizing tendency which seeks to blame most of Lessing's misfortunes on others and to impose a greater coherence on his life than it in fact possessed. This tendency, with its concomitant exaggerations and distortions, began with the comments of friends and admirers soon after his death. Johann Friedrich Schink, in his biography of 1795, likens Lessing's achievement to those of Columbus and Cook as world explorers,[7] and Moses Mendelssohn, after likening Lessing's creation of *Nathan the Wise* to Copernicus's *De Revolutionibus orbium coelestium*, compares his death to the ascension of Elijah:[8]

> He could ascend no higher without entering a region completely inaccessible to our sensory vision, and this he duly did. We now stand here, like the prophet's disciples, and gaze in amazement at the place where he rose up and disappeared.

Such sentiments, understandable enough as manifestations of recent loss, have no place in serious biography, although similar examples (some of which will be mentioned in Chapter 22) became commonplace during the nineteenth century.

The biographer traditionally looks for an overall pattern or telos in the life depicted, and often finds it—sometimes even when it is not in fact present. In German biography before the middle of the twentieth century, the model applied

[5] Garland (1962); Brown (1971). [6] Batley (1990).
[7] Schink 5–6. [8] Cited in KGL 249.

was often that of the *Bildungsroman* as a supposedly realistic description of individual development towards personal fulfilment. There is no such development in Lessing's life, nor should its absence be held against him. There is indeed a qualitative progression in his literary production from his earliest dramas to his late works, but it is by no means an even one. And in his mental and physical well-being, there is a marked decline from the time of his move to Hamburg until the end of his life. The overall pattern is certainly not one of organic development: it is rather an episodic series of actions and impulses, of sudden departures and impromptu responses to situations or opinions which arouse his enthusiasm—or more often, his opposition. As boredom sets in (Lessing was unusually susceptible to boredom) or new and stronger interests supervene, he readily abandons the project in hand in favour of another—on some occasions even when the project is halfway through the process of publication: there is a substantial amount of unfinished business in Lessing's personal and literary life. In his later years, he brought his own theory of knowledge into line with his preferred way of living: its development is not one of linear progress towards a definable goal, but a series of always provisional responses to new problems and changing situations. As such, it gains rather than loses in variety and complexity.

Another reason why a major new biography is justified at the present time is the remarkable renaissance of biography in Germany as a reputable branch of history. Not so long ago, biography was described there as 'the mongrel of the liberal arts' (i.e. a hybrid of history and fiction) and 'academic suicide' on the part of those who indulged in it;[9] the works they produced, one writer claimed, were 'novels with an index of names' rather than serious works of history.[10] But with the decline of narrowly structural interpretations of history in recent times, the role of the individual as intentional agent—as distinct from an unstable and fragmentary self—has once more gained recognition, thereby lending new respectability to historical biography. One German observer accordingly notes 'that biographies now clearly dominate the market in historical literature'.[11] Works such as Ian Kershaw's life of Hitler and Johannes Kunisch's biography of Frederick the Great amply justify the pluralistic approach they employ. The same applies to literary biography; but although it has the added advantage of literary as well as biographical evidence to draw upon in reconstructing its subject's inner life, such evidence must be used with extreme caution.[12] Biographers writing in English have faced fewer difficulties than their German counterparts, for at least since the eighteenth century, biography has in principle been regarded as a respectable literary genre in the English-speaking world.

The task of the biographer has been greatly facilitated over the last few decades by the publication of major aids to Lessing scholarship, some of which have appeared very recently. To name but a few, they include the indispensable bibliographies by Siegfried Seifert (1973) and Doris Kuhles (1988), and the collected

[9] Klein 1 and 5.
[10] France/St Clair 8.
[11] Ullrich 51.
[12] On this and related problems see Nisbet (2005a).

editions of Lessing's works by Herbert G. Göpfert and others (1970–1979) and by Wilfried Barner and others (1985–2003), both of which—especially the latter—contain extensive notes and commentaries incorporating many new insights. These works have more recently been supplemented by Wolfgang Albrecht's excellent anthologies *Lessing im Spiegel zeitgenössicher Briefe* (2003) and *Lessing. Gespräche, Begegnungen, Lebenszeugnisse* (2005), both of which contain numerous documents not included in their predecessor, Richard Daunicht's *Lessing im Gespräch* (1971). Albrecht's detailed chronology *Lessing. Chronik zu Leben und Werk* (2008) likewise supersedes all earlier equivalents. Though none of the three auction catalogues of Lessing's library (sold between 1768 and 1770) survives, Paul Raabe and Barbara Strutz have thrown much light on his scholarly interests and multifarious reading during the last decade of his life: their detailed inventories, published in 2004 and 2007 respectively, list books and periodicals ordered by him for the ducal library (*Lessings Bucherwerbungen* 1770–81) and books found in his house after his death (*Lessings Büchernachlass*). Lessing's Italian journey has also been thoroughly documented in the two splendidly illustrated volumes *Lessing in Italien*, edited by Lea Ritter Santini (1993). Several useful handbooks, namely Wolfgang Albrecht's *Gotthold Ephraim Lessing* in the Sammlung Metzler series (1997), *Lessing. Epoche, Werk, Wirkung* (sixth edition, 1998) by Wilfried Barner and others, and Monika Fick's excellent *Lessing-Handbuch* (third edition, 2010) introduce the reader to a wide spectrum of opinion in Lessing scholarship; the *Companion to the Works of Gotthold Ephraim Lessing* (2005), edited by Barbara Fischer and Thomas C. Fox, and Ritchie Robertson's anthology *Lessing and the German Enlightenment* (2013), are useful commentaries on Lessing's works for English-speaking readers. Most of these works contain short biographical sections, but they underline rather than remove the need for a comprehensive biography.

The present biography makes no claim to have avoided all the inadequacies of its predecessors; it does, however, attempt to fulfil as many as possible of the requirements specified by those who have called for a work of this kind since the mid-twentieth century. Nor does it claim to have attained complete objectivity in assessing Lessing's work and personality. I make no secret of the fact that I have long regarded Lessing as one of the most impressive and sympathetic figures of the European Enlightenment. I nevertheless believe that such admiration is not incompatible with acknowledgement of his deficiencies as well as his very considerable strengths.

The aim of this biography is to provide a circumstantial account of Lessing's life and works and their reciprocal interaction. The advantage of this approach is that it brings together as many elements of its subject's life and work as possible, thereby—if all goes well—revealing numerous hitherto overlooked connections between them. As will in due course become evident, a considerable number of omissions and misunderstandings in Lessing scholarship result from failure to consider his writings in their full biographical context (in so far as the available evidence allows that context to be reconstructed). This procedure should not be confused with the one-dimensional 'biographism' of an earlier era, which sought to reduce literary works to their supposed biographical determinants. While Lessing's inner life and

personal experiences do often find indirect expression in his literary works, it is equally true that the latter not infrequently throw light on the former. The two can and should interrogate one another, enabling the biographer to ask new and potentially illuminating questions of both. The subject's life must also be understood in the widest sense, incorporating not just his immediate personal experience, but also the intellectual, social, and cultural climate of his age. It is, however, essential not to lose sight of the limitations of such procedures: imponderables will inevitably remain, and psychological interpretations in particular are necessarily speculative and provisional.

Although I have attempted throughout to relate Lessing's works to their biographical context, I have dealt with most of his major works and the corresponding phases of his biography separately, devoting whole chapters, or sub-sections within them, to each; the chapter headings in the table of contents should make it easy to locate the relevant material. It is also worth pointing out that one of the aims of this book is to supply as comprehensive an account of Lessing's life, work, and thought as possible, so that it may serve not just as a biography, but as an up-to-date reference work on Lessing's achievement as a whole. For this reason, a full account is given not only of his best known works, but also of his various journalistic, fragmentary, and minor writings (especially in the first half of his career), some of which are plainly remote from present-day concerns. Readers who prefer to concentrate on his central achievements may find the table of contents and indexes helpful in locating the material they seek.

1

Kamenz, Meissen, Leipzig 1729–1748

At the time of Lessing's birth in 1729, his native state of Saxony was enjoying one of the most flourishing periods in its history, especially in the cultural sphere.[1] It owed its cultural prominence in Germany not least to the fact that it was the home of the Lutheran Reformation: Luther's translation of the Bible, for several centuries the most widely read document in the German language, was written in the Saxon dialect, on which the modern literary language is based. Though it was already one of the largest and most densely populated states in the Holy Roman Empire, of the same order of magnitude as Brandenburg and Bavaria, Saxony gained enhanced status in 1697 when its current ruler, the Elector Augustus the Strong, also became King of Poland. The conversion to Catholicism which his accession to the Polish throne required of him did not, however, pose a threat to the Protestant subjects of his Saxon territory, for it was motivated not by religious zeal but by dynastic ambition; and coming when it did, on the threshold of the age of Enlightenment, it actually helped to further the cause of religious tolerance within the Electorate. Not that Augustus himself, who regarded Louis XIV as the ideal ruler, was by any means an enlightened monarch in the sense which that term was shortly to acquire. A protracted and fruitless war with the Swedes, who occupied Saxony in 1706, together with his own extravagance and love of ostentation, imposed heavy burdens on his subjects and seriously weakened the country's economy. His court was nevertheless amongst the most elegant and sophisticated in Europe, and his grandiose building projects transformed the aspect of the capital city, Dresden. Its baroque and rococo architecture, its superb art collections, its gardens and river terraces made it one of the most beautiful cities north of the Alps, as commemorated in the luminous canvases of Bellotto, court painter to Augustus' successor. Music likewise flourished at the Saxon court and in Dresden's magnificent churches under Hasse and Zelenka, while in Protestant Leipzig to the north-west, Johann Sebastian Bach was shortly to complete his last and greatest works.

The culture of Leipzig was very different from, but in many ways complementary to that of Dresden. One of Germany's principal commercial centres, it was also the centre of journalism and the book trade, and its three annual fairs, which attracted numerous merchants and buyers from abroad and brought in considerable revenues, gave it a cosmopolitan atmosphere. The Leipzig economy was truly progressive, partly because the Saxon rulers were shrewd enough to interfere only rarely in the internal affairs of the cities, whose civic spirit and prosperity benefited accordingly. By Lessing's time, only a quarter of the Saxon populace were peasants,

[1] See Blanning (2002) 60–72.

and the remainder were free from feudal ties. Urbanization was already far advanced, and around one-third of the population lived in towns. The educational system was among the best in Germany, and a large and literate middle class was emerging, many of its members engaged in commercial activities; in Leipzig in particular, the aristocracy was no longer a dominant force. Like Wittenberg in the north, Leipzig was also the seat of an ancient university, then among the most distinguished in Europe: Leibniz and Thomasius, themselves the sons of Leipzig professors, both studied there, and it was in Leipzig, more than any other city in Germany, that the foundations of the German Enlightenment were laid. With its expanding literate public and its greater openness to wider cultural influences than was possible in the courtly and convention-bound society of Dresden, Leipzig also provided a favourable environment for new developments in literature, and several major writers of the mid-eighteenth century besides Lessing began their careers there. In short, the Saxony in which Lessing grew up was the cultural leader among the states of the German Empire, and Leipzig was the centre of the emergent *Aufklärung* and the German literary revival.[2]

For all his individualism and independence of mind, Lessing was very much a product of his Saxon homeland, as the following account of his childhood and adolescence will show; his early career was shaped, or at least profoundly affected, by many of the factors outlined above. He began life, however, not in any of the major centres, but in the small town of Kamenz some twenty-five miles north-east of Dresden. His father, Johann Gottfried Lessing, was then Archdeacon at St Mary's, the principal church of the community.

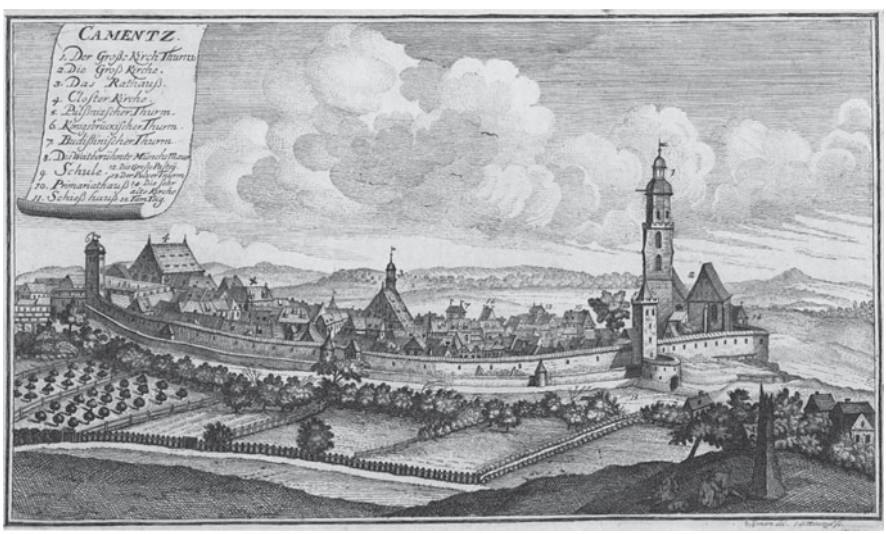

Fig. 1. Kamenz in the eighteenth century, engraving after a painting by Christoph Gottlob Glymann.

[2] See Martens (1990) *passim*.

Kamenz lies on the Via Regia, an ancient trade route running from Cologne in the west to Leipzig and on to Breslau and Cracow in the east. Since the Middle Ages, it had been a member, along with Bautzen, Görlitz, Zittau, Lauban and Löbau, of the League of Six Towns in the Margravate of Upper Lusatia, formerly under Bohemian rule but governed by Saxony since 1620. Loss of privileges in the Reformation era had, however, made Kamenz the poorest of the six, and it suffered further deprivation in the Thirty Years War, followed by plagues in the 1680s and a disastrous fire in 1707. In Lessing's time, the populace of under 3,000 souls earned a modest livelihood, mainly from agriculture and linen-weaving. The old town, which stands on a granite eminence, still retains much of its original character. Defended by steep slopes and a river valley to the north and east, it was surrounded, in the eighteenth century, by its medieval walls, which enclosed a rectangular grid of narrow streets on the hilltop and an irregular extension spilling down the slope to the east. Most of the houses were small, no more than two storeys in height, and the skyline was dominated by three major buildings: at the northern end the Church of St Anne, once part of a Franciscan monastery but now sharing the site with the town's grammar school; the Town Hall in the centre, with its gabled and arcaded facade overlooking the marketplace; and at the southern extremity, at the highest point within the walls, the town's most eminent building, the fine Gothic Church of St Mary, whose massive tower and multiple roofs still command a pleasing outlook over wooded hills and cultivated fields to the south. The little archdeaconry in which Lessing was born stood just opposite the churchyard, as did the nearby vicarage to which the family moved when his father became the senior pastor. Both of these buildings, like the Town Hall, the grammar school and numerous others, were destroyed by a second conflagration in 1842, in which the two churches were among the few major structures to survive.

Lessing's ancestors had played a prominent part in the affairs of Kamenz for several generations, and it is fitting that their funeral monuments, including those of his parents, are the first objects one sees on entering the porch of St Mary's. There were professional men and scholars on both sides of the family, all of them staunch Lutherans who had studied at Leipzig, Wittenberg, or Halle.[3] Two of Lessing's great-grandfathers had been mayors of Kamenz, and at the time of his birth, this office was held by his grandfather Theophilus Lessing, who was followed soon afterwards by his uncle Christian Gottlob Lessing, the elder half-brother of his father. It is a happy coincidence that his grandfather Theophilus, while still a student of law and philosophy at Leipzig, had defended a thesis entitled *De religionum tolerantia*,[4] whose advocacy of religious tolerance and opposition to enforced conversion—though not its legalistic approach and dry, scholastic manner—are untypical of their age and foreshadow one of Lessing's own central preoccupations. His other grandfather, Johann Gottfried Feller, was senior Pastor at St Mary's when the young Johann Gottfried Lessing, who shared Pastor Feller's scholarly inclinations and eventually succeeded him in office, joined him as junior preacher and married his daughter, Justina Salome.

[3] On L.'s family see Buchholtz; Loewenthal; G. Stephan.

[4] See Lessing, Theophil (1991).

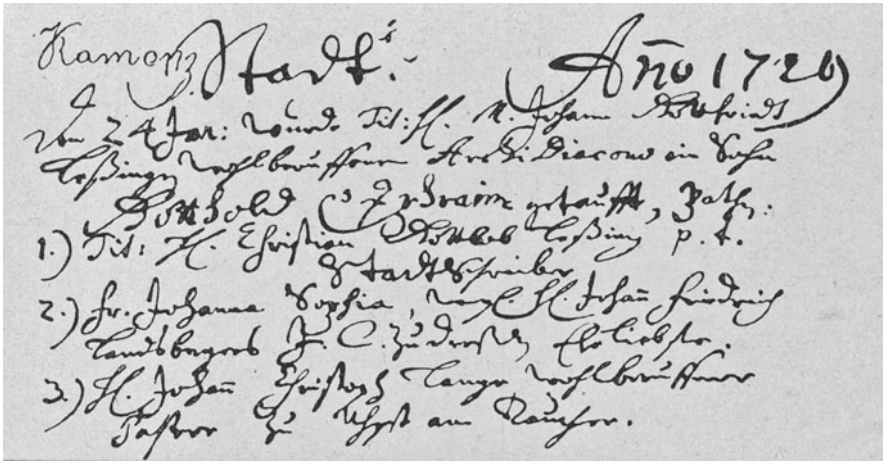

Fig. 2. Baptismal record in Kamenz parish register, 1729.

Justina Salome Lessing bore with fortitude the onerous lot then shared by women even in the professional classes. She could read and count, and wrote well enough to compose an unpunctuated, semi-literate letter. Her education was rounded off by religious instruction and training in practical skills, whereupon she married, gave birth to twelve children, and devotedly supported her difficult husband through forty-five years of increasing privations. Her surviving letters reveal a loving but over-anxious mother with little or no understanding of her son Gotthold's literary and theatrical interests. In later years, when Saxony was visited by inflation and famine, they are filled with pleas for financial support—she received no pension—and a pious desire to perpetuate her late husband's memory.

Five of the twelve Lessing children died in infancy—a not untypical mortality rate for the time, and, in view of the family's meagre income, a merciful lightening of what remained a scarcely tolerable burden. Gotthold Ephraim, born on 22 January 1729, was the eldest surviving son. His elder sister Dorothea Salome, who was born in 1727, never married but stayed with her parents for the rest of their lives; she outlived her brother by over twenty years and died in 1803. The five remaining children who lived to reach adulthood were all brothers, with two of whom Lessing remained at least intermittently in contact: these were Johann Theophilus, born in 1732, who became a clergyman in Pirna near Dresden, and Karl Gotthelf, born in 1740, who idolized his famous brother and sought for a time to emulate him as a dramatist. Karl eventually made a career for himself in the Prussian civil service, and redirected his literary ambitions into writing the earliest biography of his brother, which remains the most important single source on Lessing's private life;[5] he also edited the latter's works and posthumous papers, and died in 1812.

[5] KGL [1888].

Lessing's father was a deeply serious man with strong moral convictions and a forthright, even overbearing manner. As his son recalls in a rare autobiographical note,[6] Pastor Lessing was aware of, but increasingly unable to control, his hot temper, which the frustrations and petty irritations of provincial existence were all too liable to provoke. His greatest mistake was his decision—perhaps influenced by financial considerations—to accept the call, which reached him in 1717 while he was still at university, to return to his native Kamenz as catechist, a newly created post and the most junior of the four clerical offices at St Mary's; promotion followed in 1724 to the second most senior office of Archdeacon, and finally to that of Pastor Primarius on his father-in-law's death in 1733. In opting for this course, he abandoned his original plan of an academic career, for which he had seemed admirably suited on the strength of his progress at university. His scholarly interests remained alive, however, for many years, and since they have a bearing on the life of his eldest son, through whom he hoped for vicarious fulfilment, some account must be given of them here.

Johann Gottfried Lessing studied theology at Wittenberg, together with classical and oriental languages. Like his son, he had a pronounced linguistic aptitude, and he added not only French—knowledge of which was then obligatory in polite society in Germany—to his repertoire, but also English, which was much more unusual. He had already completed his theological training and gained a master's degree before he broke off his continued studies to accept the call to the ministry. But the contacts he had established in Wittenberg allowed him to enter into learned correspondence with various divines, including the distinguished theologian Johann Lorenz Mosheim, and he reviewed regularly for more than one theological journal; this allowed him to amass a modest library, which in 1765 contained some 1,800 volumes.[7] He published numerous works between 1717 and 1738: Karl Lessing lists fifteen treatises, four translations, and seven articles in periodicals,[8] in addition to which there were numerous published sermons and other occasional pieces, a catechism, and a number of hymns whose laborious verses show none of the poetic facility which his son was shortly to display.[9] His writings cover a wide spectrum, from assorted aspects of practical theology to liturgical matters, dogmatics, and church history; but his most substantial work was his Wittenberg dissertation of 1717, the *Defence of Luther's Reformation against Some Prejudices of the Innovators* (*Vindiciae Reformationis Lutheri a nonnullis novatorum praejudiciis*), written to commemorate the bicentenary of Luther's ninety-five theses. The dissertation, which was well received in orthodox circles, addresses a range of current anxieties in the Lutheran Church, including the spread of Calvinism, the recrudescence of Catholicism in the Protestant territories, and in particular certain demands for change from within Lutheranism itself; among these was the work of Gottfried Arnold, a radical Pietist who admired Luther's early aims but believed he had subsequently betrayed them by excessive deference to church tradition and secular authority.[10] Against such views, the elder Lessing defends the exemplary quality of Luther's character

[6] LM XVI, 424–5. [7] J. G. Lessing to L., 11 October 1765. [8] KGL 14–17.
[9] See G. Stephan 26. [10] See J. G. Lessing (1966; see Bibliography 'Primary literature').

and the definitive nature of his Reformation—both of which propositions his son was later to attack. Another of Johann Gottfried's scholarly achievements met, however, with greater approval, and even praise, from his son:[11] this was his translation into German of several works by John Tillotson, preacher in Restoration England and later Archbishop of Canterbury, including a selection of his sermons and his *Rule of Faith*, an anti-Catholic treatise to which Johann Gottfried added a preface embodying his own theological opinions. He admired Tillotson especially for his latitudinarian moderation and his resolute opposition to the Church of Rome. The Pastor's translations are fluent and accomplished, with few inaccuracies and only a handful of outright errors:[12] like his son, who later translated many works from several languages, he seeks to convey the spirit rather than the letter of the original. As various commentators have suggested, it is not unlikely that he introduced his linguistically gifted son to English before he left home, for no formal instruction in that language was provided at either of the schools he attended. At all events, the young Lessing was already reading and translating English texts without difficulty soon after he entered university.

Like other Lutheran theologians of his generation, Johann Gottfried Lessing belongs to a transitional phase in which older, orthodox beliefs competed or combined with attitudes associated with the emergent *Aufklärung*. His dislike of narrow literalism in the interpretation of Scripture and his relative tolerance of new developments such as Pietism, so long as they showed no schismatic tendency, aligned him with progressive forces, as did his admiration of Anglicanism and his openness to English influences. The same is true of his humane impulses and rejection of persecution—not only in religious contexts, but in ordinary life as well, as illustrated by his quaintly titled treatise *A Serious and Necessary Depiction of Harsh and Bitter Husbands as Genuine—though Unrecognised and Subtle—Wife-Murderers*.[13] His son could readily associate himself with this more progressive side of his father's work. But in other respects, Johann Gottfried's instincts were conservative and utterly at odds with his son's. Unlike Baumgarten and the Halle school of theology in neighbouring Prussia, he condemned not only deism and freethinking, but Christian Wolff's rationalism as well, despite its professed support for the Lutheran faith; and he was not prepared to deny outright the reality of witchcraft, possession, and magic. Inevitably, he grew more rather than less conservative as the years went by: his guarded respect for early Pietism[14] and the Moravian Brethren in the nearby community of Herrnhut, and for their founder, Count Zinzendorf, whom he met on several occasions,[15] gave way to strong opposition, especially after the movement was granted official recognition in 1748.[16]

Johann Gottfried Lessing is a good example of the *pastor doctus*, the German scholar-clergyman of a type which owed its existence to the Lutheran veneration of the written word, and his son is among that host of German writers and intellectuals who grew up in a Lutheran parsonage. But even within his class, Pastor Lessing

[11] L. to Johann David Michaelis, 16 October 1754. [12] See Vail (1945) *passim*.
[13] KGL 15; Hildebrandt (1982) 93. [14] E. Schmidt I, 669–71.
[15] Buchholtz I, 113. [16] Loewenthal 8; PO XVII, Pt. 20, 53.

stands out for his breadth of learning and scholarly achievement—at least until he ceased to publish in the late 1730s. Thereafter, the latter part of his life—that is, the time during which his son knew him—forms a sad epilogue to a career which had begun so promisingly.[17] His impatience with Kamenz and the local Council mounted as the latter took exception to his wilful behaviour and instituted legal proceedings against him. This happened, for example, in 1743, when the Pastor, in announcing the remarriage of the widow of a prominent citizen, omitted the customary but meaningless courtesy titles for whose inclusion an extra payment, withheld on this occasion, was normally made to the officiating clergyman. A further dispute arose when he abbreviated a formula which the Council had instructed him to employ in Sunday prayers, adding its own members to those, such as the royal family and government ministers, on whom the divine blessing was invoked. He began to denounce local abuses, and even specific individuals, from the pulpit, and eventually took issue in his sermons with the Council itself;[18] the latter retaliated by making transcripts of the sermons to back up its complaints to the district authorities. One can well imagine the scene in St Mary's as the Councillors, in their raised box diagonally opposite the pulpit, glared across the bemused congregation at the Pastor as he fulminated against them. Admittedly, he was sorely provoked. Inferior candidates were appointed as his juniors, and the local authorities were not only petty-minded but corrupt and devious: they even succeeded in cutting his stipend. Belated consolation came in 1767 when two of his principal adversaries were arrested and prosecuted for corrupt practices; but by that time, the Pastor was reduced to penury and had only three years to live. This, then, was the redoubtable figure who dominated the young Lessing's early life. If, as soon became apparent, the boy was not prepared to follow the course which his parent had mapped out for him, a hard struggle lay ahead. Fortunately, he had inherited not only his father's scholarly aptitudes, but also his strength of character.

Despite his father's tribulations, Lessing's childhood was a happy one, as he himself declared some thirty years later.[19] There is in fact little doubt that this exceptional child, the eldest of the six brothers, was a great solace to his father, for his brother Karl ungrudgingly describes Gotthold as his father's favourite son. His parents certainly had high expectations of him, and his mother fervently hoped that he would follow in his (and her own) father's footsteps as a minister of the church.[20] He was fascinated by books from an early age, as testified by Karl's famous anecdote of how the five-year-old Gotthold, when a painter came to portray him with his infant brother Theophilus, refused to pose beside a birdcage and sat beside a pile of heavy tomes instead.[21] (The painting in question, if it ever existed, must have been lost long ago, for it has been shown that the surviving version, with its grotesquely adult heads, is based on later likenesses: in other words, the painting is inspired by the anecdote and not vice versa.)[22] Pastor Lessing himself supervised Gotthold's early education, in which religion inevitably bulked large, and additional tuition was provided by a relative. At the age of nine, he was admitted to the

[17] See Schnappauf *passim*. [18] Buchholtz I, 122. [19] L. to Eva König, 5 March 1771.
[20] KGL 175. [21] KGL 22. [22] See Rudloff-Hille (1991) 14.

Fig. 3. Portrait of Lessing (right) and his brother Theophilus (wrongly described on inset inscription as his much younger brother Karl) as children, freely invented in later years by an unknown painter.

local grammar school at the opposite end of the town, and he no doubt appreciated his daily walks across the market, where traders and travellers from far afield mingled with the local populace.

The grammar school or lyceum, founded soon after the Reformation, had five classes and five teachers.[23] The language of instruction was Latin, which, together with religion, itself occupied a large part of the curriculum. Such schools prepared pupils for university, but the level of preparation was much lower than at the elite schools of Saxony, one of which the young Lessing would shortly attend. He meanwhile completed the first three classes at Kamenz between 1738 and 1741, a time during which the school was experiencing major changes, for the young and recently appointed headmaster, Johann Gottfried Heinitz, was in the process of modernizing the school's antiquated curriculum. Heinitz was a man of the Enlightenment, schooled in Wolffian philosophy and an admirer of the literary reformer Johann Christoph Gottsched. His first task was to streamline the school's teaching, as there had hitherto been little continuity from one class to the next. He also favoured greater use of the German language, teaching it personally to the upper class and even introducing his pupils to German literature, and he replaced the Latin grammar used by the lower classes, itself written in Latin, with a more modern

[23] See Schwabe *passim*.

equivalent in German. But his proposal likewise to replace the Latin compendium of theology which had been in use for over a century at once ran into opposition—not least from Pastor Lessing. By the time the young Lessing started school, both his father and his uncle, the mayor, were beginning to regret Heinitz's appointment and attempting to limit his reforms. One innovation in particular, which may have had profound effects on the young Lessing's development, aroused their disapproval and even produced a rare degree of unanimity between the Pastor and the Kamenz Council: this was the introduction of dramatic performances in school, with the pupils themselves as actors. School dramas, originally mainly in Latin, had actually enjoyed a long tradition in Germany, but they had encountered criticism in recent times, perhaps because popular theatre in general had fallen into disrepute in an increasingly moralistic age. Heinitz, however, attached great importance to such exercises, and he published a treatise entitled *The Stage as a School of Eloquence*.[24] In 1740, he organized a production of Gottsched's *The Dying Cato* (a German reworking of Addison's tragedy on the same subject), followed by a pastoral play written by himself. The young Lessing did not participate, but several of his relatives were involved, as was Christlob Mylius, a young man who would subsequently play a major part in Lessing's life. This performance, and other productions by Heinitz, were probably Lessing's earliest contact with the theatre, and it is likely that his reaction to them was as positive as his father's was negative. The controversy which they gave rise to in Kamenz eventually led, soon after Lessing left the school, to Heinitz's resignation; he moved to a similar appointment in Löbau, where his talents were better appreciated, taking some of his best pupils with him. This unfortunate episode, as will shortly be seen, had adverse repercussions a few years later on Lessing's relations with his parents.

Even before Lessing started school in Kamenz, his father had resolved to send him, if possible, to one of the three 'Prince's schools', so named after the Elector Moritz of Saxony who had founded them in 1543 and endowed them with the revenues of former monasteries. Though it was the least well endowed, St Afra in Meissen was the obvious choice, since two of the boy's uncles—the mayor of Kamenz and Johann Gotthelf Lindner, Pastor in nearby Putzkau—had attended the school and spoke warmly of it.[25] Lessing's father accordingly petitioned the Elector Friedrich August for a subsidised place for his son, which was duly promised for 1740, subject to a satisfactory performance in the entrance examination;[26] the offer was held over for one year at Johann Gottfried's request, and Pastor Lindner agreed to prepare the boy for the examination, which was scheduled for 21 June 1741. As the time approached, young Gotthold and his father took the coach to Dresden and proceeded down the Elbe to Meissen, where they stayed overnight in the town.

St Afra stands above the old town on a steep hill, connected by a bridge with the neighbouring hill from which the great cathedral and the Albrechtsburg, the splendid late-Gothic castle, look out across the river. The hilltop site has fine views of

[24] Schwabe 39. [25] Peter 376. [26] D 9.

Fig. 4. Meissen with the Albrechtsburg and River Elbe, seventeenth century.

the Elbe valley to the north and south, and is linked to the streets and marketplace below by steep flights of steps and cobbled lanes. The elevated position of the old monastic precinct gives it an air of isolation, which was reinforced in Lessing's time by its still intact surrounding wall. Although the original school buildings were replaced in the nineteenth century by the spacious neo-classical quadrangle of the present school, the site retains something of its monastic atmosphere, especially around the old Church of St Afra where the Augustinian canons once worshipped, now in use as a parish church. The school routine and its terminology still had strong affinities, in the eighteenth century, with their monastic equivalents; but the Horatian injunction *sapere aude* ('dare to know!'), inscribed in the courtyard wall and now adorning a portal of the present school, had in the century of the Enlightenment acquired a distinctly modern meaning which Lessing, no less than Kant, would later pursue to its limits.

The modern era had meanwhile arrived in another part of Meissen. The Albrechtsburg, built in the fifteenth century as a residence for the Saxon rulers but rejected in favour of Dresden and left unoccupied for over two centuries, had since 1710 housed a major industrial enterprise. After the failed alchemist Johann Friedrich Böttger was seized by Augustus the Strong and held prisoner until he discovered how to produce the 'white gold' of fine porcelain instead, the galleries, halls, and cellars of the Gothic castle, in a futile effort to preserve the secret of the new process, had become the unlikely site of Saxony's most prestigious export industry.[27] From the cloisters of St Afra, a permanent plume of smoke could be seen as the wood which arrived in great rafts on the Elbe was conveyed by a hoist to the castle basement and thence to the furnaces which fired the kilns; in these, the exquisite Meissen figurines of Kändler and Höroldt, then at the height of their powers, were given their finished shape. Before long, Lessing would render—and ironize—in poetic form the elegant and frivolous spirit of this archetypal expression of the Saxon rococo.

[27] See D. Fuhrmann *passim* and Gleeson *passim*.

Academic standards at St Afra were high, and many distinguished writers and scholars were among its alumni. The poet and moralist Gellert and the satirist Rabener had recently attended the school, and the classicist Christian Adolf Klotz, with whom Lessing would subsequently cross swords, studied there a few years later. The entrance examination which the twelve-year-old Lessing faced when he arrived on midsummer morning was accordingly no mere formality: it began with a German dictation, which he had to translate into Latin before discussing and correcting it in the presence of the Rector and his assembled staff, followed by tests in Greek, religion, and mathematics.[28] He passed with distinction, and was duly exempted from the first *decuria*, or six-month unit, of the fourth and lowest class (there were four classes, and twelve *decuriae*, in the entire six-year course). He also won a free place (that is, free board and lodging), which was supplemented, at the end of the first year, by a bursary endowed by the Carlowitz family, aristocrats who lived near Kamenz. This left his relieved father with only the boy's clothing to pay for.

In Lessing's time, the school had 118 pupils,[29] who lived in two large and semi-dilapidated buildings with narrow stairs and dark rooms. Groups of four boys, one from each class, shared sets of two rooms, one a dormitory and the other a study. Few rooms had any heating, and a single heated room was provided in winter for communal study. The pupils rose at 5 a.m. in summer and 6 a.m. in winter and washed at a well in the courtyard; they wore short black gowns and wigs in class, at prayers, and at table, and their meals were accompanied—as in monastic times—by readings from the Bible and other works of edification. Religion took up even more time than at the Kamenz grammar school: twenty-five hours per week, including the whole of Sundays, were devoted to religious exercises, and the New Testament was the basic text employed for the study of Greek. (Reformation studies were generally avoided, as the Catholic government of Saxony was sensitive to possible criticism.) Most classes were conducted in Latin, which also formed the core of the curriculum: Virgil, Horace, Cicero, Livy, and Phaedrus were the main authors covered, and advanced pupils studied Sophocles and Plutarch in Greek. French, mathematics, history, and geography were also taught, and tuition was available in Italian, drawing, and music; pupils in the upper classes could also study theology, Hebrew, rhetoric, philosophy, astronomy, chronology, and geometry. Both the Rector Theophilus Grabener and his deputy Johann Gottfried Hoere—like Heinitz in Kamenz—admired Gottsched's campaign to reform German literature, and Hoere had himself edited an anthology of German poetry; he discussed literary history in his classes, and the pupils composed and recited poems in German as well as in Latin. But for a pupil as insatiable as Lessing—the Rector once described him as 'a horse which needs a double ration of fodder'[30]—perhaps the greatest benefit of St Afra was the special emphasis placed on independent study, to which generous time (amounting to one sixth of the year in all) was allotted.

[28] Peter 377; the Latin sentences in praise of religious tolerance which, according to E. A. Diller, Erinnerungen an GEL, Meissen 1841, the young L. added below his dictation exercise and which others, including Aner 14, later cited as authentic, were in fact Diller's own invention: see LM XIV, vi.

[29] On the following see Flathe; Peter; Döring (1998).

[30] D 18.

The young Lessing immersed himself in the comedies of Plautus and Terence and read Homer and Theophrastus in the original, and he made full use of the school's excellent library. There were no vacations as such, but teaching stopped on public holidays and in examination weeks, and the school made regular excursions to a forest clearing for games and recreation. Pupils were allowed home for only a fortnight every two years, which meant that Lessing returned to Kamenz only twice during his time at St Afra, at Easter in 1743 and 1745.

One of Lessing's teachers made a particular impression on him. This was Johann Albert Klimm, who was appointed in 1729 to place the teaching of mathematics and related subjects, hitherto neglected, on a proper foundation. Klimm was a mathematician of some distinction: he had edited some of Kepler's unpublished writings and produced a German edition of La Hire's astronomical tables, and had twice turned down offers of employment from the St Petersburg Academy of Sciences. He also possessed three qualities of special appeal to the young Lessing. In the first place, he was an inspirational teacher who was always ready to arrange extra classes for interested pupils, and even to teach them in their free time until late at night. So successful was he in Lessing's case that mathematics rapidly became his favourite subject, and as Karl Lessing recalls,[31] his brother collected data on the history of mathematics and made his own translation of Books II to IV of Euclid's geometry. Secondly, Klimm was something of a polymath, familiar with numerous languages (including English) and interested both in philosophy—he was a disciple of Wolff—and in German literature. He introduced Lessing to logic and astronomy, and allowed him to consult the literary journals to which he subscribed. And thirdly, Klimm was an outsider, awkward in speech and manner, who had little standing in a school in which he was the only teacher of non-humanities subjects.[32] His colleagues resented the demands he made on the pupils' time and on school funds for the purchase of astronomical instruments; his long self-defence against such charges is preserved in the St Afra archives. Lessing's liking for Klimm is the earliest documented example of a feature of his character which remains conspicuous throughout his life: his predilection for, and readiness to defend, unconventional people and opinions. This trait shows itself at St Afra not only in his choice of Klimm's subject—although Lessing was really a philologist through and through. It is also evident in his valedictory Latin address on leaving school, entitled *De mathematica barbarorum*; for in focusing on the barbarians rather than the Greeks, he seems to have taken the opportunity of thumbing his nose at the classical establishment. (In a similar spirit, he had replied a year earlier to another pupil's oration on the longevity of the patriarchs with a poem, in German, on the blessings of a short life.)[33]

Lessing had already begun to conduct his first literary experiments at St Afra, and the earliest versions of several of his published works date from that period. He himself mentions that the original draft of his first drama, *The Young Scholar* (*Der junge Gelehrte*) was written in Meissen,[34] and some of his Anacreontic poems were

[31] KGL 28. [32] KGL 27–8. [33] D 16. [34] LM V, 268.

also written at that time.[35] His fragmentary poem 'On the Plurality of Worlds' shows the influence of Klimm's astronomy lessons, and was likewise written before he left school.[36] But the most characteristic of his writings from those years are his communications with his family. His earliest surviving letter, written to his sister before his fifteenth birthday, is a playful exercise in wit, irony, and paradox, speculating on—and rebutting—her possible excuses for not writing to him.[37] His skill in dialectics is already apparent, and his advice to his sister on how to write ('Write as you speak, and you will write well') shows him already rejecting the formal conventions of letter-writing as taught at school in favour of that relaxed informality which his own letters—for all their rhetorical mastery—display from the start.

His *Address, with Good Wishes for the New Year 1743, on the Identical Nature of Successive Years*[38] is an even more remarkable document: addressed to his father and composed when Lessing was not yet fourteen, it is of more than stylistic interest. As Karl Lessing tells us,[39] Pastor Lessing used to complain regularly that the world was changing for the worse—a sentiment which, given his experiences in Kamenz, is not difficult to understand. The young Gotthold responded with this New Year salutation, arguing that reason, religion, and experience all confirm that there is no such deterioration, since both the universe itself and human nature remain essentially unchanging. By 'reason' (*Vernunft*), he clearly understands the rational metaphysics of Leibniz and Wolff, according to which the world is a finely adjusted system in which local disturbances do not upset the harmony of the whole; by religion, he means our knowledge of the divine being who created this system, and whose beneficent providence sustains it (there is no mention here of original sin, or of Christ and his work of atonement); and by experience, he means principally his own (necessarily limited) experience of life so far. In short, this precocious essay, whose structure and argument display an impressive grasp of the rules of disputation, confirms that the young Lessing was already imbued with the rational optimism of the early *Aufklärung*; and despite its obviously good intentions, which Pastor Lessing must surely have recognized, it nevertheless amounts to an early declaration of independence—as yet only ideological—from his father, who had no sympathy whatsoever with Wolff's teachings and for whom faith alone offered hope of salvation to an unregenerate humanity.

The reports of Lessing's teachers on his progress and conduct have survived, and despite their brevity, they afford further glimpses of his developing personality.[40] Not surprisingly, the comments on his academic progress are, with few exceptions, extremely positive (although a warning from the Rector that he must avoid dissipating his energies reflects a tendency which Lessing was never wholly to overcome). His irreverent side is also noted in an early comment by the school inspector, who describes him as 'a good boy, but inclined to mockery', and a reference to his 'in no way perverse, but somewhat fiery temperament' will surprise no one with knowledge of his subsequent career. That habitual reticence with regard to his

[35] KGL 26; LM I, 128. [36] LM I, 271–3.
[37] L. to Dorothea Salome Lessing, 30 September 1743.
[38] LM XIV, 135–42. [39] KGL 25. [40] A (2005) 13–29; D 10–18.

personal emotions (with the exception of anger) which he practised in later years, even towards his closest friends, is likewise hinted at in the comment: 'in moral matters, he is too reserved to be described as wholly free from dissimulation'. Judged in the light of later evidence, these remarks indicate that the teachers at St Afra were shrewd and accurate observers.

The regime at the school was far from oppressive, and the Rector disapproved of the harsher punishments formerly imposed for breaches of discipline. The school records refer to a range of misdemeanours in the early eighteenth century, such as 'climbing out' and visits to 'improper places' in the town, and town-gown clashes, usually between pupils of noble family who boarded out and workers at the porcelain manufactory, were not uncommon. There is no record of Lessing's involvement in such activities. Dice and card games (i.e. gambling) and smoking were prohibited on pain of expulsion, and although there is nothing to suggest that Lessing indulged in the former, he did become addicted to gambling in later years; he also declared towards the end of his life that he had never smoked 'except at school, because it was at that time forbidden'.[41] The most serious incident during his years at St Afra was a riot in 1743 over manifestly inadequate food; the administrator in charge of catering was, it appears, diverting funds to the construction of his new house, and a celebration for his workmen triggered the riot, with stone-throwing and chants on the part of the pupils. Lessing's name was among those cited at the ensuing enquiry, but no action was taken for lack of evidence.[42] The young Lessing was accordingly no delinquent; but there are indications that his attitude to authority was already by no means submissive.

Life at St Afra was, however, generally tranquil and predictable—so much so that, in the New Year address to his father, the young Gotthold declared 'I can already see in the coming year so much similarity with last year and the year to follow that I almost hesitate to call it a New Year at all.'[43] These predictions were rudely shattered in December 1745 by historical events, and by a force which was to change Lessing's life dramatically on several occasions: the army of Frederick the Great. The new Prussian monarch, whose seizure of Silesia in 1740 had shocked the continent, looked down with contempt from his Spartan state in the north on the sybarites of Dresden, and he had no compunction in invading Saxony when it allied itself with his enemy Austria in the War of the Austrian Succession (or Second Silesian War) of 1744–45. On 9 December 1745, a Prussian contingent under General Lehwaldt approached from Silesia and, finding the bridge on the Elbe at Meissen destroyed, bombarded the town from the vineyards opposite.[44] Though St Afra stood well back from the river, nearby buildings were damaged by the Prussian artillery, and the pupils were herded into the vaulted dining hall for safety. When Prince Leopold of Anhalt-Dessau entered Meissen from the west with another twenty-six batallions of blue-coated troops four days later, Rector Grabener petitioned him to spare the school, and although no one in it was harmed, part of the school was turned into a field-hospital. Classes continued as usual, and when

[41] D 615. [42] A (2005) 22; D 14. [43] LM XIV, 141.
[44] On the following, see Flathe 280–1.

Frederick arrived in person soon afterwards, he confirmed the school's protected status. Prince Leopold meanwhile marched south to defeat the combined Saxon and Austrian force at Kesselsdorf outside Dresden on 15 December. This victory effectively terminated the war, and the Peace of Dresden was signed on Christmas Day: it recognized Frederick's possession of most of Silesia in exchange for his recognition of Maria Theresa's husband, the Archduke Francis, as Holy Roman Emperor.

This event gave the young Lessing his first major lesson in that unpredictability of existence of which he later became firmly convinced. The Prussian invasion made a deep impression on him, and his graphic account of the aftermath in a letter to his father some weeks later is one of the few detailed descriptions of his personal surroundings in all of his writings.[45] The whole of Meissen had now become the main hospital for the Prussian wounded, 750 of whom died there between December and April, and the school, overflowing with wounded men and with its supplies and income cut off, had by now sent around a third of its pupils home. But the young Lessing's uncharacteristically graphic description had an ulterior motive. Some time before, he had unsuccessfully urged his father to allow him to leave school a year early and proceed to university, and the headmaster himself confirmed that the school had little more to teach him.[46] Gotthold's letter informs his father of the fever now raging among the wounded, and suggests that the coming summer heat may bring even worse afflictions such as the plague; after a vivid evocation of the chaos in the school, he breaks off with a seemingly casual reference to an ear-infection which makes it impossible for him to continue. As a further incentive to his father to act, he also agreed to rework a verse epistle which his father had urged him to write to the head of the Carlowitz family, thanking him for the bursary which he had enjoyed; the epistle contains another harrowing account of the Prussian invasion, and concludes with an appeal to Carlowitz to transfer the bursary to Lessing's brother Theophilus.[47] These documents gave the

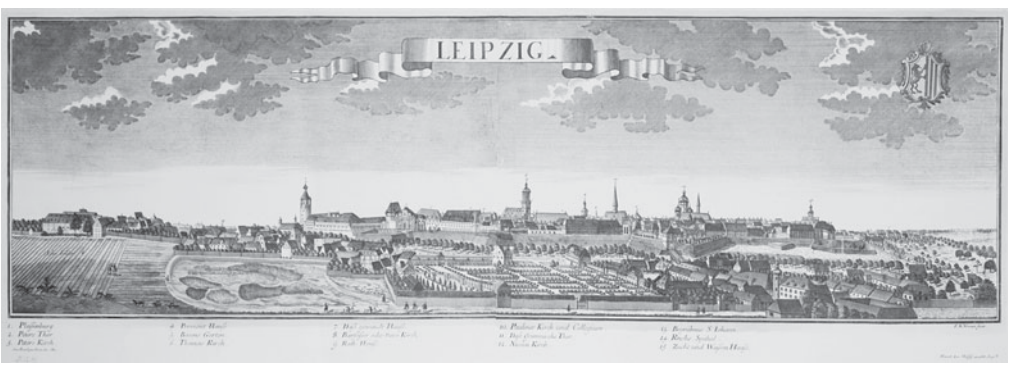

Fig. 5. Leipzig, c. 1720.

[45] L. to J. G. Lessing. 1 February 1746. [46] A (2005) 27. [47] LM I, 274–8.

young Lessing an early confirmation of his powers as a writer. Pastor Lessing duly abandoned his opposition and petitioned the Elector for the boy's early release, and when this was refused, he reapplied at once, this time successfully. Carl Leonhard von Carlowitz also reassigned his family's bursary to Theophilus.

Eight years later, Lessing looked back on his schooldays at St Afra as the only period to date when he had been truly happy—that is, when he had been able to study at leisure, without the need to do uncongenial work to support himself.[48] It was there, even more than at university, that he laid the basis of his future scholarship—especially his classical scholarship. He left the school with a profound respect for classical antiquity and an enviable command of Latin and Greek. Another benefit he gained was the ability to live frugally, on the barest of necessities—an ability which stood him in good stead on many future occasions. He was, and remained, indifferent to wealth and luxury, and when he did for a time enjoy a substantial income, he made no effort to retain or capitalise on it. But in June 1746, his thoughts were focused on the coming transition to university. It was decided that he should go to Leipzig rather than to his father's university of Wittenberg, probably because scholarships were available at the former for pupils from the 'Prince's schools'.[49] After a few weeks at home in Kamenz, he made his way to Leipzig, and matriculated on 20 September—in the faculty of theology, just as his mother had always wished. A month later, the award of a named scholarship from Meissen and of a further scholarship from the Kamenz Town Council was confirmed.[50]

Extra Lipsium non est vita; si est vita, non est ita.[51] This dictum of the Leipzig professor, lawyer, and magistrate Johann Benedict Carpzov expresses a civic pride which was widely shared by his fellow-citizens. Like Frankfurt and Hamburg, Leipzig owed its prosperity to commerce, and the absence of a court like those of Dresden, Munich, and Vienna allowed it to develop a corporate identity of its own; significantly, when the Saxon rulers visited the city, they lived and held court not in a palace or official residence, but in a commoner's house (albeit a well-appointed one) on the marketplace.[52] This thriving city was a centre of middle-class culture, and most of its leading citizens were engaged in commercial activity. Their level of education and literacy was high—some of them ran major publishing houses—and relations between the city authorities and the university were close and generally cordial: the civic guard presented arms whenever the Rector of the university appeared.

This, then, was a very different environment from the provincial backwater of Kamenz and the monastic seclusion of St Afra.[53] When Lessing arrived in Leipzig, the city had close to 30,000 inhabitants, and their numbers were swollen, during the Easter and Michaelmas Fairs, by up to 7,000 visitors from Germany, Bohemia, Poland, Russia, France, and even Greece. To accommodate its increasing population, the city had over the centuries expanded upwards within its walls rather than

[48] LM V, 268. [49] Oehlke I, 56. [50] Rudloff-Hille (1982) 16.
[51] Hammerstein 127: 'Away from Leipzig, there is no life, and if there is, it is no life at all.'
[52] Blaschke 27. [53] On the following, see Martens (1990) 14–15.

outwards, and tall buildings of up to six storeys, still mainly timber-framed but with a growing number of stone-built houses inhabited by affluent citizens, lined the squares and narrow streets. The streets themselves and the broad marketplace, with the grand Renaissance Town Hall along its eastern side, thronged with vehicles and people, and textiles and other goods from all over Europe were displayed in the huge warehouses in which much of the business was transacted. (The name of one of these, the Clothmerchants' Hall or *Gewandhaus*, lives on through its later association with concert performances.) Lessing lodged for a time near the heart of the city, in the Grimmaische Strasse, which links the marketplace with the university quarter a few hundred yards away. It was a far from quiet neighbourhood—street-lighting had been introduced in 1701, and the streets remained busy with students and revellers until late at night—but the Grimmaische Strasse was home to ten of the city's twenty-four booksellers, on whose premises Lessing could view the latest publications, even if he could not afford to buy them.[54]

Thanks to Leipzig's wealth and cosmopolitanism, its society was the most fashionable and elegant of any city in Germany,[55] and bourgeoisie and aristocracy adopted each other's conventions to a degree then rarely encountered in continental Europe. French was widely used in polite society, and even middle-class circles cultivated a rococo modishness in dress, deportment, design, and decor. Conversely, Leipzig university was favoured by students of noble family, and the leading exponent of middle-class morality and sensibility in the English style, Christian Fürchtegott Gellert, was lionized by the nobility. For followers of fashion, the places to see and be seen in were the coffee-houses (there were eight in 1725, most of them with musical entertainment) and the promenade along the city walls, which no longer served their original defensive purpose but were lined with well-clipped lime-trees and afforded pleasant prospects of formal gardens, new suburban developments, and meadows along the little River Pleisse.

In this liberal and increasingly secular society, the older Lutheran orthodoxy was losing its traditional dominance. It was losing ground not only to the easy rational optimism of Leibniz and Wolff—which, while claiming to support the traditional faith, left little room for religious mystery in its well-oiled clockwork universe—but also to other religious groupings. The town authorities in Leipzig faced mounting demands, both from the commercial visitors on whom the city's prosperity depended and from the government in Dresden, to allow freedom of worship to other confessions: a reformed (Calvinist) chapel was instituted in 1702, followed by Catholic and Greek Orthodox churches in 1710, and Jewish worship was tacitly tolerated from 1737. These developments may help to explain why so cultivated and sophisticated a community as this paid little attention to the greatest artist within its walls. For part of his stay in Leipzig, Lessing had lodgings in the Burgstrasse, and his route to the university led directly past St Thomas's Church and its adjoining school. He had little ear for music, and is therefore unlikely to have stopped to listen as the Cantor and Director of Music at St Thomas's rehearsed his choir or improvised at

[54] See Rosenstrauch (1990) 103.
[55] Cf. the young Goethe's reactions to the city in *Dichtung und Wahrheit* (HA IX, 252–3).

the organ. But the Lutheran spirituality of Johann Sebastian Bach was in any case no longer in tune with the times, and Bach himself, overworked and cantankerous, was constantly at odds with town and church authorities. The musical idiom which he had brought to its complex perfection was that of an earlier, baroque age, and lighter, more melodic and 'galant' forms were now replacing it. His son Carl Philipp Emanuel, with whom Lessing was later friendly in Berlin and Hamburg, was already composing in a new, expressive mode of secular sensibility as harpsichordist to the King of Prussia.

Fortunately for Lessing, Leipzig's greatest cultural strength in the mid-eighteenth century lay in the fields of literature and learning. If Dresden was the Florence of Germany, Leipzig was its Athens (at least for the learned, for fashionable society knew it as 'Little Paris'). The nation's first scholarly periodical, the *Acta eruditorum*, was founded there in 1682 and served an international readership throughout the next hundred years.[56] It was informed by wide learning, a respect for empirical fact, and a concern with practical utility—characteristics of Leipzig scholarship which are also encountered in many of the works of reference published there, such as the ponderous German counterpart to the French *Encyclopédie*, Zedler's *Large and Complete Universal Lexicon of All the Sciences and Arts* (1732–50), whose sixty-eight volumes were still appearing while Lessing was a student. Nearly one-third of all German publications in the mid-eighteenth century was published in Leipzig, and a huge translation industry produced German versions of works in other European languages, often within a few months of the appearance of the original. A tolerant censorship, exercised not by church or state but by scholars at the university, allowed Gottsched—he was in fact himself a censor—to produce or sponsor German editions of such basic works of the French Enlightenment as Bayle's *Dictionnaire* and Helvétius' *De l'Esprit*.[57] Admittedly, the thought of the French Enlightenment, as well as several of its leading figures, was more at home in Frederick's Potsdam than in Leipzig; but it was through the latter city, its publications, its university, and its literary societies, that the European Enlightenment at large was made known to a wider public who spoke and read German as their primary language.

Leipzig University was one of the best in Europe. Germany, with its numerous separate states, had no shortage of universities: there were no fewer than twenty-eight in Lessing's day, excluding those in Austria, but most of them were small and undistinguished. A handful, however, stood out. Among them was Halle, founded in 1694 just across the border from Leipzig in Prussian territory: Halle was the stronghold of Pietism, that distinctive form of Lutheran piety which placed more emphasis on soul-searching introspection and practical charity than on systematic theology, and the home—since his recall from exile by the new Prussian monarch—of Christian Wolff, whose immensely influential philosophy more than compensated for any lack of system among his Pietist colleagues. Another was the new Hanoverian—i.e. British—foundation of Göttingen (1737),

[56] See Mühlpfordt 40. [57] See Gawlick (1990) 188.

which was already building a reputation for its stimulating teaching, its innovative approach to science (including the emergent social sciences), its liberal politics, and its excellent and well-organized library. But of the older universities, the most eminent was certainly Leipzig, which was founded in 1409.

Although Lessing had matriculated as a student of theology, there is no evidence that he undertook any serious studies within that faculty; on the contrary, his brother Karl reports that he showed 'no inclination whatsoever, but rather all possible disinclination' to pursue the subject.[58] His main interests lay rather in the philosophical (or arts) faculty, and especially in philology as he had come to understand it at St Afra—that is, as the critical study of (mainly but not exclusively) literary texts and their historical, cultural, linguistic, and aesthetic significance. One might consequently have expected him to take a special interest in the classes of Johann Christoph Gottsched, by far the best-known figure in the philosophical faculty, who in 1746 was lecturing on poetics and on ancient philosophy.[59]

Gottsched's initial appointment at Leipzig in 1729 was as supernumerary professor of poetry, after which he was elected to the chair of logic and metaphysics in 1734. He held the office of Rector five times between 1738 and 1756, and was Dean of the faculty when Lessing first encountered him. His work as a literary reformer had given him a nationwide reputation, a reputation of which Lessing must have been fully aware long before he came to Leipzig: Rector Heinitz in Kamenz, it will be remembered, as well as Rector Grabener and Deputy Rector Hoere at St Afra, were keen admirers of Gottsched's work. Furthermore, his reputation was fully deserved, notwithstanding Lessing's later attacks on him. His fundamental aim was in fact not very different from that of Lessing a few years later: he sought to raise German literary culture to a level at least comparable with that of the other major nations of Europe; and he did more towards realizing this aim than any other German writer of the eighteenth century before Lessing himself. Since he is in several respects Lessing's immediate precursor, and since his own contributions are regularly overlooked when the two writers are compared, some account of his positive achievements will not be out of place here.

If German political nationalism received its greatest stimulus from Napoleon, German cultural nationalism owed much to Louis XIV. Dazzled by the brilliance of French culture in the later seventeenth century, the rulers, courts, and nobility of German states both large and small adopted the French language and French manners to such a degree that native cultural traditions became for the most part the preserve of the lower classes and were looked down upon by the educated. But even before the latter decades of the eighteenth century, when Herder defined national culture as a value in itself—indeed as the highest expression of humanity at any given moment in history—sporadic voices were raised in Germany challenging the cultural hegemony of France and calling on Germans to use and develop their language as an essential step towards creating an autonomous culture of their own. One of these voices was that of Gottsched, although his patriotic aspirations have

[58] KGL 22.

[59] On the following see also the article 'Gottsched' in ADB IX, 497–508.

been obscured by the fact that, in literary theory at least, he generally favoured the opposite strategy to that which Lessing adopted: he proposed to imitate the French, at least initially, in order to inspire a German literary revival, whereas Lessing looked—or claimed to look—to other models instead. But Gottsched did much more than this to raise the literary consciousness of his compatriots. In the late 1720s, he reconstituted an existing literary society in Leipzig—significantly renamed the 'Deutsche Gesellschaft'—at which members from all walks of life met weekly to read and discuss their own literary productions, all of which had to employ the standard Saxon dialect (or so-called 'Meissen German'). So successful was this initiative that branches of the society, with similar rules and procedures, were soon established in such varied locations as Jena, Göttingen, Greifswald, Königsberg, Helmstedt, Bremen, and Erlangen.[60] Gottsched undertook extensive historical and linguistic research in order to discover and analyse the strengths of older German literature, and in so doing became a pioneer of German medieval studies, reading the great medieval epics and other early works in their original manuscripts and publishing his findings both in Latin (for academic readers) and in German (for the wider public).[61] His work was not without influence: Goethe, for example, used Gottsched's edition and translation of the Low German epic *Reynard the Fox* as the basis for his own poem of 1793 on the same theme. Admittedly, Gottsched's plan to write a complete history of the German language and of German poetry was never realized; but he did assemble, and publish in part, a wealth of materials towards this project, including a catalogue of all German dramas written between 1450 and 1750 which was used by generations of scholars. It is also true that many of the numerous periodicals he founded or edited were of purely ephemeral interest; but a great deal of substantial literary history went into one in particular—the *Contributions towards a Critical History of the German Language and of German Poetry and Eloquence*, published in eight volumes under his editorship between 1732 and 1744. And far from being an uncritical admirer of all things French, Gottsched included in his six-volume dramatic anthology *The German Stage*, which aimed to encourage and to supply models for dramas in German, Johann Elias Schlegel's patriotic drama *Hermann* as a response to the dismissive challenge of the French historian and linguist Eléazar de Mauvillon: 'nommez moi un Esprit créateur sur votre Parnasse, c'est à dire, nommez moi un poète Allemand qui ait tiré de son propre fond un ouvrage de quelque réputation!'[62]

All this, together with Gottsched's philosophical allegiance to Wolff, his respect for the ancients, his liberal and critical views on theology, and his editions of the French *philosophes*, might have been expected to make the young Lessing his enthusiastic disciple. But Lessing was constitutionally averse to becoming anyone's disciple—let alone the disciple of someone like Gottsched, who positively craved disciples (and ruthlessly exploited them) in order to affirm and bolster his own authority, and who could declare that comedies ought not to include characters of

[60] See also Witkowski 366–72. [61] See Liebertz-Grün 327–9.

[62] 'Name me one creative spirit on your Parnassus! In other words, name me one German poet who has produced a work of some stature out of his own resources.'

high social station 'because it is incompatible with the respect we owe them if they are made to seem ridiculous'.[63] Lessing was, of course, shrewd enough to recognise Gottsched's scholarly achievements and to make use of them for his own purposes—but he soon ceased to attend his lectures. He did so because he disliked their style rather than their substance. He liked *ex cathedra* pronouncements in lectures no more than he liked them in sermons. His attitude to authority, especially to dogmatic and self-important authority, was now taking firmer shape, and this process would shortly come to a head in his dealings with his father.

One of the few whose lectures Lessing did attend—albeit sporadically—was Johann August Ernesti, professor of philology, whose solid humanistic scholarship and close reading of classical texts accorded well with the methods Lessing had learned at St Afra. Ernesti's Wolffian conviction that all knowledge forms a systematic whole led him to favour an interdisciplinary approach, in which the historical and philosophical significance of a text was as important as its stylistic features. But he was already moving away from classical philology into Biblical studies, and he was subsequently appointed to a chair of theology. His approach to that subject was innovative, for he became one of the first in Germany to apply the techniques of classical philology to scriptural exegesis, and he was one of the few to applaud Lessing's own initiatives in that area in the 1770s: he even declared that he would like to propose him for a doctorate in theology if he could be persuaded to come and receive it in Leipzig.[64]

The two teachers who made the most profound impression on Lessing were the classicist Johann Friedrich Christ and the mathematician Abraham Gotthelf Kästner. Both of them were unconventional figures, untypical of the university establishment; and just as with his old teacher Klimm at St Afra, it was not so much the content of what they taught that impressed him—Lessing could discover most of that through his own reading—as their personality, attitudes, and style.

Christ held the professorship of poetry, but he was a man of multiple interests, even more committed than Ernesti to interdisciplinary studies.[65] He was among the founders of classical archaeology and art history as academic disciplines in Germany, and was deservedly respected by Winckelmann. Not only was he a superb Latinist, who read the complete works of Tacitus once every year and knew those of Horace by heart; his lectures on classical texts also made frequent reference to epigraphy, numismatics, gemmology, sculpture, architecture, diplomatics, early printed books, and other more specialized areas. These lectures, attended by the small number of students who were capable of following them, were unsystematic and full of digressions—Christ was no Wolffian, and he had long since fallen out with Gottsched, who envied him his established chair of poetry. He published sparingly, preferring the medium of the short essay to the definitive tome; transcripts of his lectures, which were packed with original insights, were much in demand, and were drawn on heavily by others—including Ernesti—after his premature death in 1756. He was, besides, an urbane man who had travelled widely

[63] Gottsched (1968–87) VI/2, 351. [64] See Karl Lessing to L., 4 June 1771.
[65] On the following, see also Justi I, 344–50 and the article 'Christ' in ADB IV, 140–2.

and moved in aristocratic circles. His lectures on Roman antiquities were designed in part to prepare his more affluent students for sightseeing in Rome, and there is little doubt that it was he who inspired Lessing with his long-cherished wish, finally realized in 1775, to visit Italy; Lessing's treatise *Laocoön* is in many ways a monument to his old teacher, whose style and attitudes it clearly reflects. Appropriately for a citizen of modish Leipzig, Christ dressed elegantly and declared that good taste was of the essence in scholarship, and he possessed a fine collection of rare books and manuscripts, gems and other antiquities. But he was no posturing aesthete: he had a combative side to him, and he enjoyed defending paradoxical propositions and unpopular causes: he wrote an apology for Machiavelli—in intriguing contrast to Frederick II's condemnation of the same thinker a few years later—as well as defences of the heretics Hutten and Cardano, and it was on the model of these works that Lessing developed his 'vindications' (*Rettungen*) of maligned figures as a distinctive literary form. Christ's political principles were correspondingly libertarian: he defended freedom of expression and was opposed on principle to censorship. It is easy to see why Lessing was drawn to this man and made a point of visiting him ten years later during his second period in Leipzig.

Lessing appears to have made himself known to the mathematician Kästner as soon as he arrived at university (one suspects that an introduction was effected through Klimm), for Kästner was able to issue a glowing testimonial for him on 12 October 1746, enabling him to secure his scholarship from St Afra.[66] The testimonial was written on the strength of Lessing's performance at Kästner's colloquium on philosophical disputation, the only class which he continued to attend throughout his two years in Leipzig.[67] There was nothing Lessing liked better than controversy, and it was in these exercises, which Kästner himself much enjoyed, that he perfected his skill in logical argument. In the process, he doubtless learned a good deal about other subjects too. Kästner had a keen interest in the sciences and in metaphysics (he lectured on Wolff's system in 1747), and he was well versed in German and European literature: he augmented his income by translating works from several languages, including Montesquieu's *L'Esprit des lois* and part of Richardson's *Pamela*, and he published epigrams, didactic poems, and lighthearted occasional verse of his own. Still in his twenties and without an established post, he probably still felt closer to his students than to his (mainly older) colleagues, and he took as much interest in their literary efforts as in their academic progress: Lessing tells us that Kästner read and commented constructively on the manuscript of his first play, *The Young Scholar*,[68] and his own early poetry shows signs of familiarity with Kästner's didactic poems, verse parodies, and wickedly humorous epigrams. He remained on friendly terms with Kästner for the rest of his life, corresponding intermittently with him and visiting him in later years when he held the chair of physics and geometry in Göttingen. The two were kindred spirits, not only in their strengths but also in their weaknesses: both were inclined, for example, to spread their energies too widely. But Kästner's writings lacked the brilliance

[66] On the following, see also Baasner *passim*.
[67] KGL 36; D 23. [68] LM V, 269.

and originality of Lessing at his best, and the fittingly epigrammatic verdict of his other most celebrated pupil, Carl Friedrich Gauss, is probably a fair one: 'He was the best mathematician among the poets of his time, and the best poet among the mathematicians.'[69]

Lessing's choice of society outside the lecture rooms follows a pattern analogous to that in his choice of teachers: he avoided established groups and conventional circles. In the literary world of Leipzig, the most notable figure (apart from Gottsched) was the popular poet and moralist Christian Fürchtegott Gellert, who had attended St Afra some twelve years before Lessing.[70] Gellert did not yet hold a university post, but offered informal classes in rhetoric and stylistics for interested students. He was the first major exponent of the cult of *Empfindsamkeit* or literary sensibility which flooded into Germany in those years from England and France, and had made a reputation for himself through his collection of moral fables in 1746 and a series of sentimental comedies in 1747. He already had a devoted following, but his popularity reached its peak in the next decade, when he delivered his famous 'moral lectures' to spellbound audiences after his appointment to a supernumerary chair of philosophy in 1751. Lessing was certainly familiar with Gellert's works from an early date, and his own collections of fables and some of his dramas are plainly indebted to them. He respected Gellert as a writer and called on him several times in 1756, but there is no evidence that he sought to make contact with him during his student years. One reason why he kept his distance may have been Gellert's association with a group to which Lessing felt no attraction, the *Bremer Beiträger* (literally, 'Bremen Contributors'), so called after their periodical, the *New Contributions to the Gratification of the Understanding and Wit* (1745–48), which was set up by disaffected followers of Gottsched in opposition to a similarly titled periodical of his own and published in Bremen to emphasize its editors' independence of Gottsched's empire in Leipzig. This group, consisting mainly of older students and graduates, included not only Gellert but also the poet Klopstock, whose odes and Biblical epic *The Messiah* (*Der Messias*) would soon make him the most celebrated poet in Germany before Goethe. Lessing was undoubtedly aware of the *Bremer Beiträger* and their weekly gatherings, and he became a personal friend of several of them, including Klopstock, in later years. But he studiously avoided them in Leipzig. For although the kind of literary sensibility they were cultivating would shortly become a basic ingredient of his own early dramas and even of his theory of tragedy, he did not care for its real-life manifestations of lachrymose sentimentality and an effusive cult of friendship. He doubtless regarded the *Bremer Beiträger*, who formed a fairly closed group, as cliquish and sanctimonious: in contrast to the company he was now keeping (and of which the *Beiträger* would certainly not have approved), they took themselves too seriously for his liking.[71]

Lessing did not fit into any of the more obvious categories within the student community[72]—but he never would fit into obvious categories. There were the rich

[69] Baasner 597. [70] See Meyer-Krentler *passim*.
[71] KGL 35. [72] On these, see Gagliardo 195.

and elegant *Stutzer* or fops, often of noble family, for which Leipig university was famous, and whose antics and affectations are immortalized in the comic epic *The Braggart* (*Der Renommist*, 1744) by Just Friedrich Wilhelm Zachariä (perhaps the least typical member of the *Bremer Beiträger* and a future drinking companion of Lessing's in Brunswick); Lessing had neither the means nor the inclination to join this fraternity. The same applied to the *Renommisten*, the duelling and beer-swilling set who were in any case commoner in Jena than in Leipzig, and whose lifestyle became institutionalized in the student corporations of the following century. Nor was he—except perhaps in his first weeks in Leipzig—one of the *Krassen* or *Konviktoristen*, the bookish freshmen and impecunious scholarship students who rarely left their rooms except to attend lectures: Karl Lessing tells us that his brother initially shared lodgings with a student of the former type whom he had known at school, but soon sought other accommodation because his irregular hours and erratic mode of study proved incompatible with his room-mate's inflexible routine.[73]

Unfortunately, none of Lessing's letters from his Leipzig period survives. But in his remarkable letter to his mother of 20 January 1749—remarkable because it is the most substantial of all his autobiographical statements, which are otherwise infrequent and usually laconic—he looks back over his short career in Leipzig and enumerates the personal benefits he gained from it despite his failure to take a degree. He spent the first months, he tells his mother, immersed in books and even more withdrawn from the world than he had been in St Afra. (One suspects some exaggeration here, and the transference of some of his original room-mate's characteristics to himself.) In due course, he continues, 'I came to realise that, while books might well make me learned, they would never make me a human being', and his consequent self-examination filled him with shame at his 'boorish diffidence, uncouth and undeveloped physique, total ignorance of manners and social life, and a truculent expression which others interpreted as contemptuous'. He promptly set about correcting these deficiencies, and took lessons in dancing, fencing, and *Voltigieren* (vaulting exercises as an adjunct to fencing),[74] before launching himself into Leipzig society. The means whereby the supposed student of theology had transformed himself into a man of the world must have raised eyebrows, and possibly tempers, in Kamenz, for the activities in question were traditional accomplishments of the well-to-do and the aristocracy. They also help to explain why Lessing had run up the considerable debts which had been paid off by a benevolent relative,[75] for the requisite lessons were not cheap.

We have no detailed information on the social life on which Lessing now embarked, but we do know the identity of his closest associates and the main direction which his interests took. His friends all had literary interests, not so much in the new sensibility as in the somewhat earlier fashion, now in its final stages, of 'Anacreontic' poetry, and two of them were particularly interested in the theatre. The students in question, all of whom were older than Lessing, included Heinrich August Ossenfelder from Dresden (paronymously nicknamed 'Knochenacker'),

[73] KGL 33. [74] See Stenzel 22–3. [75] See R IX, 14, note 7.

whom Lessing had known at St Afra, and Christian Nicolaus Naumann from Bautzen, a disorganized character whose wit and ebullience more than made up for his lack of judgement, and with whom Lessing remained on familiar terms for several years.[76] Both of these individuals wrote humorous verse in the Anacreontic mode, invariably on women and wine—poems of no great originality and full of student humour, sometimes overstepping the bounds of decency. There is little doubt that these young men, and Lessing with them, enjoyed the pleasures of student life as far as—and often further than—their means allowed. But a closer and longer-lasting friendship united Lessing with another student of philology and clergyman's son like himself, namely Christian Felix Weisse, whom he met through Johann Heinrich Schlegel. Weisse, who later became a successful popular writer and much-loved figure on the Leipzig literary scene, looked back in his autobiography on the year which he and Lessing spent together at university as the most significant experience of his life. They quickly discovered a shared passion for drama and the theatre, and Weisse began his own career as a dramatist in close association with Lessing, who was already by far the more knowledgeable and inventive of the two; according to Weisse, it was Lessing who taught him English. Weisse had some experience of live drama, and before long, he and Lessing found a means of gaining free admission to theatre performances by translating plays from the French.[77] But Lessing had by this time acquired another companion in whom the literary interests of himself and all the others converged: this was Christlob Mylius, a strange and eccentric figure who, in the remaining years of his short life, played a decisive role in Lessing's development.

Mylius was a regular participant in Kästner's colloquium on philosophical disputation, and it was there that Lessing met him, presumably soon after he arrived in Leipzig. He must, however, have known him to some extent already, because the two were connected by family ties in Kamenz. The first wife of Mylius' father, himself a pastor in Reichenau a few miles from Kamenz, was a half-sister of Lessing's father, and Christlob was his son by his second marriage.[78] According to Karl Lessing, Christlob's elder half-brother Christlieb, who was a full cousin of the Lessing children, had given tuition to the young Lessing before he went to the local grammar school.[79] Christlob also attended this school, and although he was in his final year when Lessing, who was over six years younger, became a pupil, he stayed on for a further two years as a teaching assistant.[80] (He took part, it will be remembered, in Rector Heinitz's production of Gottsched's tragedy *The Dying Cato*.) Fate had not dealt kindly with the young Mylius. No sooner had he matriculated at Leipzig to study medicine than his father died, forcing him to pay his way by tutoring and journalistic hackwork.[81] His attendance at lectures, like Lessing's, was irregular and eclectic, but his passion for natural history brought him into contact with Kästner, whom he accompanied on field trips and who became his close friend.[82]

[76] On Ossenfelder and Naumann see Witkowski 414–15 and KGL 34–5.
[77] D 25–8; KGL 33–4.
[78] See G. Stephan 36; also the article 'Christlob Mylius' in ADB LII, 545–58.
[79] KGL 21.
[80] See Thyssen 9; Rudloff-Hille (1982) 11.
[81] Trillmich 14.
[82] Trillmich 16–17.

Mylius was a colourful figure who made no attempt to conform to Leipzig conventions: in fact, he took a delight in defying them. He went around, as Karl Lessing tells us, 'in down-at-heel shoes, with holes in his stockings and tattered clothes, to the annoyance of the galant world of Leipzig'.[83] His room, in his own words, was 'more like primeval chaos than a living room',[84] strewn with mineralogical specimens, plants, stuffed and preserved mammals and reptiles, fossils, shells, skulls, and jars full of caterpillars and other live insects, while all manner of dead insects were pinned to the walls. For some of his time at university, Mylius was too poor to afford lodgings at all; but he was used to living by his wits and would usually persuade some other student to take him in—whereupon, as Kästner wryly recalls, it was Mylius rather than his host who took charge.[85] Not surprisingly, he was widely regarded as a disreputable character, and he undoubtedly fell short of the standards then expected in respectable circles: his writings are full of erotic material, playful but often risqué, and the theme of prostitution is a recurrent one in his diaries and journalism.[86] But he was amusing and intelligent, and full of ever-changing enthusiasms. In short, he was far more interesting and entertaining than the vast majority of students, and Lessing took to him at once; for as Karl Lessing says,[87]

> he [Lessing] always preferred people with certain idiosyncrasies, even if these were weaknesses, to those who trudged along the well-worn paths of scholarship and seemed attached to a slavish punctiliousness in moral matters—for if one examines it closely, the latter usually boils down to hypocrisy and lack of perception.

But Lessing's association with Mylius was based on more than mutual sympathy. They had plenty of intellectual and artistic interests in common, and they were soon collaborating in journalistic enterprises.

The first half of the eighteenth century witnessed a massive growth of periodical publications in Germany: 724 new periodicals were founded between 1720 and 1754; many of these were devoted to literary topics and most were aimed at the expanding middle-class public.[88] The impecunious Mylius was drawn into this activity shortly after he arrived in Leipzig, and he edited (or co-edited) at least nine journals and contributed to several others in the course of his brief career. Gottsched recruited him in 1743 to co-edit a periodical, the *Endeavours to Promote Criticism and Good Taste*, whose sole function was to satirize and refute Gottsched's literary enemies, especially the Swiss critics Johann Jakob Bodmer and Johann Jakob Breitinger, along with those poets whose works conformed to the theories of the Swiss rather than to Gottsched's own poetics.[89] To create an illusion of impartiality, the journal was published anonymously in Prussian Halle rather than in Leipzig (it was popularly known as the *Hällische Bemühungen* or *Halle Endeavours*). In keeping with Gottsched's preference for French models in poetry, Mylius and his co-editor Johann Andreas Cramer poured scorn on Bodmer's translation of Milton's

[83] KGL 37. [84] Trillmich 17. [85] Krätzer 513.
[86] See Hildebrandt (1981) 81–96. [87] KGL 35.
[88] See Krätzer 506. [89] Trillmich 36–47; Hildebrandt (1981) 21–2.

Fig. 6. Caroline Neuber, engraving after a painting by Elias Gottlob Haussmann, c. 1750.

Paradise Lost and on English models in general (including Shakespeare), and ridiculed the innovative and historically important work of the Swiss poet Albrecht von Haller, whose sublime alpine visions and brooding didacticism were likewise incompatible with Gottsched's narrowly classicistic poetics. Cramer withdrew from this unworthy enterprise in 1744, leaving Mylius to continue single-handed; but Mylius adopted an increasingly independent line, and abandoned the journal himself after it was disowned by Gottsched.

Mylius subsequently founded and edited a series of journals of his own, cultivating the popular epistolary style of Steele and Addison's *Spectator* and commenting on literature, manners, fashions, and topical issues in the arts and sciences in an easy and jocular, often satirical tone.[90] The first of these periodicals, a weekly which ran throughout most of 1745, was provocatively entitled *The Freethinker*, an appellation which was soon transferred to Mylius himself. Despite its title, the content of this journal was by no means confined to religious matters: as Mylius explained, he understood 'free thought' to mean not a wholesale rejection of religion but simply a judicious use of one's own reason and a refusal to accept unquestioned dogma of any kind. His own religious position is not that of the radical Enlightenment (although he was plainly familiar with some of its writings), but it is by no means orthodox either: it is basically deistic, and his god is the god of natural religion and physico-theology, the designer, creator, and mover of Wolff's rational universe rather than the god of Scriptural revelation.[91] Like Lessing in later years, he denies the literal inspiration of the Scriptures, arguing that they were produced by natural means, and he finds words of approval for such heretics as Toland, Woolston, and Spinoza, the latter of whom he apostrophizes with the words 'No

[90] Trillmich 60–4.

[91] On Mylius' religion see Mylius, ed. GEL (1754) 88–123; Pons (1964) 41–2; Danzel/Guhrauer I, 94; E. Schmidt I, 62.

freethinker thought as thoroughly, no religionist so piously as you.' It may well have been through Mylius that Lessing first gained closer acquaintance with the ideas of freethinkers of a more radical colouring than the Wolffian rationalists of Halle and Leipzig.

When Lessing began to associate with him, Mylius' interests were turning increasingly to popular science, and one of his periodicals was entitled *The Scientist* (*Der Naturforscher*, 1747–48). It contained articles on natural history and scientific theory, as well as others with little or no connection with science—leavened, as usual, by humorous and satirical pieces, not infrequently in verse. Mylius was always short of copy, and Kästner, Naumann, and Ossenfelder all helped out. So, too, did Lessing, who regularly featured as the editor's 'Anacreontic friend', delivering light-hearted poems which wittily turned scientific topics into pretexts for ever-renewed praises of wine, women, and song.[92] Contributions to this journal and other similar ones were usually anonymous, so that Lessing's authorship is often difficult to identify; but for a supposed student of theology dependent on support from Kamenz, anonymity had obvious advantages.

In addition to his teachers and fellow-students, the last major group within Leipzig society with which Lessing frequently came into contact was the theatre company of the famous actress and director Friederike Caroline Neuber, which had performed intermittently in Leipzig for many years, especially during the annual fairs. It may well have been Mylius who introduced him to the company, for like Weisse, he shared Lessing's enthusiasm for the theatre: he had himself published a comedy entitled *The Doctors* (1745), a scurrilous satire on the medical profession, and two of his minor dramatic pieces were expressly written for Caroline Neuber's company during the time of his friendship with Lessing.[93] When Lessing completed the first of his own comedies, *The Young Scholar*, in 1747, he likewise submitted it to Neuber, who warmly acclaimed it and performed it in January 1748. Since the contemporary theatre, and Caroline Neuber's company in particular, was an important factor in his personal as well as literary development during these years, some account must be given here of the state of the German theatre and of the Leipzig personalities who influenced its destiny at the time when Lessing first became involved with it.

The German theatre had been in a state of flux throughout the previous decade, and stood at a turning-point in its history.[94] Like most of the other arts, it was under pressure to live up to the ideals of the Enlightenment—that is, it was expected not just to provide entertainment, but also to promote the moral and cultural welfare of its audience, especially the expanding middle-class public. Judged by this criterion, the theatre of the early eighteenth century was woefully inadequate: it was either too courtly, catering primarily for the tastes of the nobility, or too vulgar, catering for the uneducated mass, and hence failed to cater adequately for the interests of the new literate public in between. For the court theatres of the major princes were chiefly dedicated either to Italian opera, or to French drama performed in French by resident

[92] KGL 41. [93] Trillmich 80; Krätzer 507.
[94] On general aspects of theatre history, see also Maurer-Schmoock; R. Meyer (1980).

companies of French actors, with ballet, again usually performed by foreigners, as a possible extra. Admittedly, the German companies, which were invariably peripatetic, also performed on occasion at court, but they did so only for short seasons; they were, so to speak, the proletariat of the theatrical world, and they were paid and treated accordingly, rarely retaining their identity for long and forming and reforming with an ever-changing personnel. The popular theatre in the larger towns depended, however, almost exclusively on these touring companies. They required a wide range of skills from their members, some of whom might be acrobats, tightrope walkers, and dancers as well as actors; they performed in barns and makeshift or temporary booths at fairs and on marketplaces, or at best in semi-permanent structures with seats at the front and benches in side-galleries, some standing room at the rear, and a few seats on the stage itself for those prepared to pay extra. Performances were subject to constant interruptions from unruly spectators, children, dogs, and continual audience turnover. The place of tragedy was filled by the so-called *Haupt- und Staatsaktion*, a debased form of baroque tragedy of German or English origin dealing with rulers and affairs of state; such plays, whose texts could be modified or extemporized at will, were declamatory, violent, and often gruesome. Comedies were for the most part harlequinades in the *commedia dell'arte* tradition, largely improvised and often vulgar. The companies in question lived a precarious existence, and even when they were granted a so-called 'privilege' by the state or local authorities to perform in specified places, this could be revoked at any time without notice and was in any case rarely exclusive: two or three companies might be performing simultaneously during the Leipzig fairs.[95]

The social status of the actors in the 1740s remained unenviable. They still belonged, together with executioners, knackers, and barber-surgeons, to the so-called 'dishonourable professions' whose rights were severely limited.[96] They generally married others of their kind, as they had no real access either to noble or bourgeois circles (although attractive actresses were always welcome as a sexual diversion at court); they were treated as outsiders by the clergy and regularly denied communion and refused burial on consecrated ground.[97] Moral suspicion of the touring companies was compounded, in the age of mercantilism, by official resentment of them as a potential drain of currency from the territory in question, and theatre seasons (and actors' incomes) could be terminated abruptly at any time by civil or clerical protests.[98] Not surprisingly, the commonest disease among actors was consumption. Conditions in university towns were, if anything, even more precarious than elsewhere,[99] for the theatre was viewed with deep distrust by the university authorities as a distraction from study and, like gaming, a threat to the students' finances and morals. The universities of Wittenberg and Leipzig appealed successfully in 1742 to the government in Dresden to ban dramatic performances altogether in the former town and restrict them to the times of the annual fairs in the latter; gambling was outlawed in public houses and inns at the same universities'

[95] See R. Meyer (1980) 195–7. [96] See Martens (1990) 20.
[97] Maurer-Schmoock 107; cf. LM IV, 269–70. [98] See Bauer/Wertheimer 104.
[99] On the following, see Reden-Esbeck 274 and 292–308.

request. The restriction of theatrical performances to fair times in Leipzig, which came into effect in 1744, was lifted again in 1745 only through the intervention of the arts-loving Saxon minister Count Brühl, just in time for Lessing's arrival in the city; but a request by Caroline Neuber at the end of the following year for permission to perform on Sundays and holidays was rejected, and when students were found attending a Sunday performance by her company in May 1748, she was able to escape serious consequences only by claiming that the occasion was a private one.

By this time, however, the fortunes of the German theatre were gradually improving, and the Enlightenment, in the person of Johann Christoph Gottsched, had already taken a hand in the process of reform. When he first arrived in Leipzig in 1724, Gottsched was shocked at the theatre as he found it, and soon afterwards, he took the bold step of approaching Caroline Neuber and her husband, whose company currently held a royal 'privilege' from Dresden, in furtherance of his grand campaign 'to raise the German theatre to the level of that of ancient Greece and modern France'.[100] He recommended French drama as a model not because of its prestige with the upper classes—for he had no hesitation in condemning the Italian opera, which was equally favoured at court—but because its stricter form and polished diction supplied an antidote to the shapeless and vulgar dramas of the German touring companies: the three unities made for tighter plots, and rhyming Alexandrines forced actors to memorize their lines properly and abandon improvisation. Gottsched also favoured greater verisimilitude, for plays had to appear credible to the audience if their morally improving function—on which he also insisted—was to have any effect. In keeping with these precepts, farce and vulgar comedies were outlawed (even Molière was too close to the *commedia dell'arte* tradition for Gottsched's liking).[101] The Neubers accordingly agreed to co-operate in implementing Gottsched's reforms, and to underline their commitment, they enacted their famous banishment of Harlequin in a temporary booth near the Grimma Gate in Leipzig in October 1737. In this specially written prelude, the clown or Harlequin was put on trial for his theatrical misdeeds and burned in effigy; and in a kind of *damnatio memoriae*, his name (Hans or Hanswurst in German) was henceforth banned from the theatre. It may be that this prohibition was directed primarily at tragedy and the *Haupt- und Staatsaktion*,[102] for thinly disguised Harlequin figures continued to appear thereafter even in Caroline Neuber's comedies; but the old improvised harlequinade, like the *Haupt- und Staatsaktion*, was now effectively discredited.

These, then, were the first, tentative beginnings of that movement towards a so-called 'national theatre' in Germany in which Lessing was later to play a central part. Admittedly, Gottsched soon ran into opposition from the theatre companies, who were not always able or willing to implement his reforms as quickly or completely as he wished (his collaboration with Caroline Neuber came to an end in 1740, and he was ridiculed by her in a burlesque of the following year);[103] he subsequently faced growing hostility from the critics—above all from Lessing—for his

[100] See Münz 172; also ADB IX, 505. [101] See R. Meyer (1980) 203.
[102] See Haider-Pregler 232–3. [103] See Reden-Esbeck 249 and 268.

excessive reliance on French models. Nevertheless, he did set in motion a process without which the kind of serious German theatre in which Lessing made his reputation could never have come into existence.

Lessing, of course, avoided personal contact with Gottsched during his Leipzig period, although he did not openly criticize him until some years after he had left the university. But his reasons for disliking Gottsched did not apply to Caroline Neuber, whose approval he eagerly sought. Apart from her achievement as a key figure in the theatre of the German Enlightenment, she calls for some discussion here as the producer of Lessing's earliest drama and as the first of a number of cultured women of strong character and exceptional abilities from whose support he benefited at crucial moments in his life. Although she was in her fiftieth year when he first met her, she still retained her attractiveness; with her full figure, which she displayed to advantage in roles requiring male costume, and a warm and expansive personality, she could still enthral her audiences, especially in comedy. She treated her company as her family, and, mindful of her own traumatic youth, took a special interest in the welfare of young actresses. Only through remarkable strength of character had she survived a career full of vicissitudes, from her early experience of a violent and tyrannical father and an unsuccessful elopement at the age of fifteen followed by seven months in prison (during which, for the sake of her feckless lover, she claimed sole responsibility for their joint actions and declared that she bore no grudge against her father for instituting the prosecution)[104] to more than twenty years of travels with theatre companies throughout Germany and as far afield as Russia; she endured frequent hardship and repeated battles with the authorities, in which she received little support from her husband. When she resumed her performances in Leipzig in 1741 after a year's absence, she henceforth found herself in competition with Schönemann's company, which Gottsched now supported; but she continued to perform dramas translated from the French (her most memorable productions were of Voltaire's tragedies and Molière's comedies), as well as works by aspiring German writers such as Lessing and Weisse. By the time Lessing knew her, she was approaching the end of her career. She lost her voice and fell into poverty during the 1750s, and died near Dresden in 1760 amidst the turmoil of the Seven Years War; the pallbearers had to lift her coffin over the churchyard wall when the local clergyman refused to open the gates for an actress.

The attraction of the theatre for middle-class German youth in the mid- to late eighteenth century is well documented—the writer Karl Philipp Moritz and Goethe's fictional hero Wilhelm Meister are the most familiar examples—and is not difficult to explain: it promised an escape into a glamorous world of heroism and fantasy, away from the petty and oppressive provinciality of typical middle-class existence. Students were particularly at risk, for the theatre and army were among the few alternatives open to young men who failed or ran out of money at university: according to one authority, student drop-outs were the largest single source of recruits to the acting profession.[105] One can well imagine the enthusiasm

[104] See Reden-Esbeck 5–30. [105] Maurer-Schmoock 106.

with which the nineteen-year-old Lessing was fired when the famous Caroline Neuber accepted and produced his first play. By this time, as his brother informs us, 'the theatre was his sole activity and sole enjoyment',[106] and he was writing or drafting one comedy after another. He was now on friendly terms with several actors in Neuber's company, including two of her main specialists in tragedy, Johann Heinrich Koch and Karl Gottlob Heydrich, and was a regular visitor behind the scenes; like all the young men in his circle, he also admired the beautiful young Christiane Friederike Lorenz, who later attained celebrity on the Viennese stage, and he may well be the author of the poetic tribute 'To Miss L***', first published in Mylius' journal *The Scientist* and included in most editions of Lessing's works.[107] Nevertheless, the pull of the theatre had little in common, in his case, with the fantasies of a stage-struck Moritz or Wilhelm Meister, and there is no evidence that he ever contemplated a career in acting himself. Apart from his well-established interest in drama, which developed while he was still at school, what drew him to the theatrical world (and subsequently to other groups on the fringes of society) was its relative freedom from pressure to conform to institutional norms, not so much in matters of behaviour and decorum—for Lessing was never a bohemian—as in attitudes and beliefs. For the theatrical community was excluded not only from many of the benefits, but also from some of the oppressive conventions of contemporary society, and it provided the independent-minded Lessing with an agreeably liberal environment: to give only one example, the equal importance of male and female roles led to a *de facto* equality of the sexes among actors (Caroline Neuber was not the only woman director of a theatre company during the period).[108] That Lessing's association with the actors was nevertheless a bold step, even by student standards, is confirmed by the fact that his friend Weisse, who shared his enthusiasm for drama and the theatre, voiced his disapproval of this association and took no part in it himself.[109]

Late in 1747, shortly before the first performance of *The Young Scholar*, the pressures of conventional society rudely reasserted themselves in the shape of a letter from Kamenz; for Lessing's father, through his personal contacts in Leipzig, had finally got wind of his son's new lifestyle. This episode and its sequel are described in humorous tones by Karl Lessing[110]—who was too young at the time to have understood what was happening, and looked back on the affair with family affection from a distance of nearly half a century—and they have been treated in similar fashion by most of Lessing's biographers ever since. Yet to judge both by Lessing's immediate reaction and by the fact that echoes of the incident can be detected in his works and correspondence for many years afterwards, the clash which he now had with his father represented a major crisis in his attempts to fashion his own identity, and its effects remained with him for the rest of his life.

[106] KGL 43. [107] See, for example, LM XXII, 19 and B I, 110.
[108] See R. Meyer (1980) 194; other female directors included Sophie Ackermann (1714–92) and Maria Barbara Wäser (1750–97).
[109] D 27. [110] KGL 44–9.

According to Karl Lessing (whose information was supplied by Weisse and no doubt supplemented by family recollections), Lessing's father took him sternly to task for his neglect of theology, his fraternization with actors, and his association with the 'freethinker' Mylius; he probably also warned his son that his conduct had placed his scholarship from the Kamenz Town Council at risk. The association with Mylius was a particularly sore point, for the latter had been *persona non grata* in Kamenz for several years past. After completing his schooling there in 1740, Mylius had stayed on for two further years as a teaching assistant to Rector Heinitz before proceeding to university.[111] On hearing of Heinitz's enforced resignation in 1743, he published a satirical poem of commiseration and sent copies of it to Heinitz. The poem took the form of a dream visit to Kamenz, in which various unnamed (but instantly recognizable) local worthies were held up to ridicule; they included, of course, Pastor Lessing, who appeared as a ranting and bigoted preacher.[112] Copies of the poem reached Kamenz, to which Mylius was foolhardy enough to return for the Easter vacation of that year, with the result that he was arrested, fined twenty talers with the alternative of a week in jail, and required to pay costs and make a public apology. The young Lessing must have been informed of this episode, for one of his two biennial visits home from St Afra took place at Easter 1743; at the very least, he can have been in no doubt as to his father's opinion of Mylius.

Pastor Lessing's letter of reprimand is unfortunately lost. But he plainly did not mince his words,[113] for Karl Lessing reports that Lessing went in a rage to Weisse's lodgings, threw his father's letter on the table with the words 'Read this *** letter I've just received from my father!', and declared that he would promptly send a copy of the theatre bill for the forthcoming production of *The Young Scholar*, appending his own name as author, to all members of the Kamenz Town Council. Weisse prevailed upon him to desist; but in his (likewise lost) reply to his father, he seems at least to have defended his conduct. Shortly afterwards, he received a further note from his father which Karl Lessing quotes as follows: 'On receipt of this, take the mail coach at once and come home. Your mother is mortally ill and wishes to speak to you before she dies.' This mortal illness, as Lessing himself suspected, was simply invented by his father in order to ensure his return home; for his parents had just heard, through a friend who had taken young Gotthold a Christmas cake from his mother, that Gotthold had promptly shared the cake—and a bottle of wine—with his actor-friends. When the prodigal duly returned, half frozen from a severe New Year's frost, his parents (Karl Lessing speaks from personal recollection now) were more relieved than angry. Nevertheless, the seriousness of his father's concern is evident not only from the fact that this stern moralist had felt obliged to resort to a pious fraud to snatch his son from the jaws of perdition, but also from the fact that he detained him at home for over three months, with daily interrogations and arguments over the worth—or worthlessness—of drama, theatre, and secular literature in general. Lessing returned to Leipzig after Easter only on the understanding that he would henceforth dedicate himself to academic pursuits. But despite Karl Lessing's

[111] See Thyssen 18–23. [112] The poem is reprinted in G. Stephan 36–8.
[113] On the following see KGL 45–9.

assurance that 'his enthusiasm [for poetry and the theatre] did cool down' in face of his father's criticisms, it seems that Lessing managed to hold his own in argument and gave little, if any, ground: he composed Anacreontic poetry during his stay in Kamenz, and on his return to Leipzig, he re-enrolled as a student of medicine rather than theology, devoted himself wholeheartedly to the theatre—in his brother's words 'as if a chair of theatre studies were about to be established for him in Leipzig'—and immediately resumed his contact with Mylius.

Lessing had now gone against his parents' wishes in almost all respects, and he would before long take issue even with his father's theological opinions. But his relationship with his father was not simply one of rejection and defiance. If it had been, he would presumably have overcome his difficulties by breaking off contact altogether. Instead, he continued for years to criticize and defy his father while simultaneously trying to justify himself in his eyes, rejecting his father's authority while secretly longing to be accepted and approved by him. For there can be no doubt that, while he greatly resented his father's demands, he also loved and respected him. These conflicting impulses, which must have been present from an early date, became generalized and internalized as permanent features of his personality.

On the one hand, his resistance to pressure from authority, already apparent at school, soon became acute and inveterate: Lessing could not bear being told what to do (or not to do) by anyone. As late as the 1760s, but plainly still with reference to the 'good advice' he had been compelled to listen to some fifteen years before, he on two occasions rebuffs his father's requests that he advise his younger brothers on their future, saying:[114]

> Just as I have always been reluctant to accept so-called good advice from other people, I am equally reluctant to give such advice myself. I would rather give my last penny to someone who needed it than tell him 'Do this or that'. Anyone of mature years must himself know what he can and must do.

He remains distrustful of authority—parental, official, or conventional—for the rest of his life, and reacts with particular hostility to all who claim superior wisdom or expect to be believed or obeyed simply because of their position in society. Most of his polemics are directed against such individuals, and for the same reason, he reacts unfavourably to sermons and sermonizing. By the same token, he is always eager to defend victims of dogmatic or arbitrary authority, and he made a speciality of scholarly 'vindications' (*Rettungen*) of such figures shortly after leaving Leipzig. His dramas regularly embody criticisms of patriarchal figures and the patriarchal family as an institution, and his alternative model of the ideal family in his last play, *Nathan the Wise*, is based not on biological ties but on equality and mutual respect.[115] In our own day, there is of course nothing unusual about independent-mindedness and a desire on the part of the individual for self-determination, nor indeed about distrust of authority on principle: such attitudes are enshrined in and

[114] L. to J. G. Lessing, 30 November 1763 and 10 January 1765.
[115] See Lorey *passim*; Flavell 88.

encouraged by our economic and political institutions. But they were relatively unusual in Lessing's day, at least among the middle classes in continental Europe (only a few kindred spirits, such as Rousseau, displayed them to a comparable extent, and in Rousseau's case, for rather different reasons), and they were particularly unusual in Germany. The conspicuous presence of these qualities in Lessing is one of several reasons why his countrymen, at least until the latter half of the twentieth century, have often found him an uncomfortable and unsettling figure.

Lessing's ambivalent attitude towards paternal authority led not only to defiance and self-assertion, however, but to other less obvious traits which are largely—and no doubt intentionally—obscured by his outwardly self-assured manner. One of these is a degree of reticence with regard to his inner life and personal feelings (with the notable exception of anger, which he found it no easier than his father to control) which is unusual by modern European standards, and doubly unusual in the age of sensibility—especially in one in whose writings the culture of sensibility is prominently represented. This reticence, which may partly account for Lessing's habitual reluctance to write or reply to letters, is accompanied by a degree of inner reserve which never left him even in relaxed and informal company, and which enabled him—as Goethe noticed—to frequent the most uninhibited tavern society without losing the ability to reassert his personal dignity at a moment's notice.[116] This same characteristic may partly account for the fact that, unlike such literary contemporaries as Gellert or Klopstock, he nowhere uses the familiar 'Du' in his correspondence with his friends, reserving it for members of his immediate family: even Mylius seems to have addressed him with the polite 'Sie',[117] and Lessing would later use it in his letters to his own fiancée. All of this may indicate a fear of intimacy and a measure of emotional vulnerability induced by his early struggles to free himself from oppressive parental solicitude. It may even be the case, as one commentator has suggested, that his failure to marry and settle down until the age of forty-seven reflects an unconscious fear of usurping his father's position.[118] It is at any rate striking that he did not finally become engaged, at the age of forty-two, until a year after his father's death, which affected him profoundly; and it is equally noteworthy that, once his father could no longer be perceived as a threat, his example powerfully reasserted itself in the following years as Lessing threw himself into theological studies, defended Lutheran orthodoxy against the neologists, developed his own mode of sermonizing from, as he puts it, 'my old pulpit, the theatre', and explicitly identified his emotional state during his late theological polemics with that of his father.[119]

While these future developments fall outside the chronological framework of Lessing's student years, they deserve mention here as casting retrospective light on his relationship with his father and its role in the formation of his personality. But it is time to return to his student years in Leipzig, and to the circumstances which brought them to an end. His university studies were virtually over before his recall to Kamenz, for within three months of returning to Leipzig, he was abruptly

[116] Goethe HA IX, 281. [117] See Mylius to L., January 1752.
[118] Rattner 82. [119] LM XVI, 422–3.

compelled to leave the university and the city. He had been rash enough to stand guarantor for the debts of some of Caroline Neuber's actors who had moved to Vienna (his lifelong characteristics of spontaneous generosity and financial improvidence are already apparent here), and when they defaulted on their payments, he was himself obliged to leave.[120] A rumour to the effect that he briefly followed the beautiful Christiane Lorenz to Vienna is rebutted by Karl Lessing,[121] and although the story has been resuscitated more than once, it remains no more than an unconfirmed rumour. What is certain is that, in early July, he headed north to Wittenberg, accompanied by his cousin Theophilus Gottlieb Lessing, who was currently studying at that university, and promptly fell ill.[122] On his recovery, he matriculated in the faculty of medicine, but then abandoned his studies early in November and left Wittenberg for Berlin. He did so in order to rejoin his old friend Mylius, who was about to begin work as a journalist in the Prussian capital.

[120] D 27. [121] KGL 49–50.
[122] See L. to Justina Salome Lessing, 20 January 1749.

2

Early Dramas and Poetry

Lessing's literary precocity first showed itself at St Afra when he wrote the earliest draft of his comedy *The Young Scholar* (*Der junge Gelehrte*) and began to compose Anacreontic and didactic verse. A burst of creative activity followed his move to Leipzig, and his literary ambitions quickly became intense. As he told his father soon after he left Leipzig, he had sought to gain proficiency 'in all varieties of poetry',[1] and he had indeed tried his hand by that time at most of the literary forms currently in vogue, with the exception of prose fiction (which then occupied the lowest rank in the literary hierarchy). He wrote, or drafted, lyric poems in the Anacreontic mode, epigrams, short verse narratives, fables in prose and verse, philosophical and religious poems, and, of course, dramas—especially comedies. He also went into print at the earliest opportunity: over thirty of his poems, as well as the sentimental comedy *Damon, or True Friendship (Damon, oder die wahre Freundschaft)*, appeared in Mylius' periodicals during 1747 and 1748,[2] and in 1749, he began to approach publishers on his own initiative. These literary activities, soon augmented by reviews and other works of criticism, continued from the moment he arrived in Berlin; but since their inspiration goes back in most cases to his student years, the bulk of his early literary productions will be discussed at this point, at the end of the Leipzig period and before his move to the Prussian capital.

The focus of Lessing's interests in Leipzig was drama, which he viewed almost from the start in the context of theatrical performance. He concentrated on comedy, as he told his parents,[3] since this was the area in which he could most readily make his mark, given that few of his fellow-countrymen had as yet distinguished themselves in it. (He might have added that the irreverent attitude inherent in true comedy was deeply congenial to him, and that he had enjoyed the advantage of close and regular contact with actors and the stage.) At any rate, he now confessed to his father—from the safe distance of Berlin—that his ambition was to become a German Molière; and although his letter makes clear that he did not underestimate the magnitude of this challenge, he eventually came as close as any of his German contemporaries to meeting it.[4]

During the 1740s, the literary arts were in rapid flux in Germany, in response to Enlightenment aspirations and the demands of an increasingly sophisticated middle-class public. Such pressures were especially acute in comedy, which traditionally drew its themes from common life and directed much of its satire at

[1] L. to J. G. Lessing, 28 April 1749.
[2] See B I, 977 for further details.
[3] L. to Justina Salome Lessing, 20 January 1749.
[4] L. to J. G. Lessing, 28 April 1749.

contemporary manners and fashions. Such comic theatre as there was in the vernacular during the opening decades of the century was for the most part subliterary, and no longer considered respectable by a public which sought edification in the moral weeklies of the 1720s and 1730s. From the mid-1730s onwards, writers of comedies responded with a series of experiments, combining traditional and popular elements, in various permutations, with literary models of mainly foreign provenance and with *Aufklärung* didacticism. Since it was out of this ferment that Lessing's early comedies arose, its principal ingredients must be outlined here before his own productions can be understood in their historical context.

Before the reforms of Gottsched, German comedy was based almost exclusively on the *commedia dell' arte*, that popular form of Italian comedy which emerged in Renaissance times and was exported by travelling companies to France and other countries in the course of the sixteenth century.[5] It became established, in a semi-Gallicized form, as the standard repertoire of the *Théâtre italien* in Paris during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, providing a lighter and less demanding alternative to the rhetorical theatre of French classicism. It proved capable of endless metamorphoses and refinements, and the literary comedy of Molière, Goldoni, Holberg, Marivaux, and many others is in varying degrees indebted to it. In its original form, it consisted of broad farce performed by a fixed complement of instantly recognizable characters in masks and standard costumes; its improvised episodes were strung together by a simple plot, typically a love intrigue in which a young couple, aided by clownish but resourceful servants—who are the true heroes of the play—outwit the opposition of obdurate fathers or bumbling guardians. It depended heavily on mime, and on the set-piece jokes (or *lazzi*), magical feats, and acrobatic antics of Harlequin and his consorts. Its stock figures—including the foolish old man Pantaloon, the pedantic Doctor, the blustering Captain or Scaramouche, the maidservant Columbine and her male counterpart Harlequin in his chequered suit—had attained almost mythological status by the early eighteenth century, and their images live on in Watteau's *fêtes galantes* and in the porcelain figurines of Meissen.

The Italian comedy was present in various guises in Germany, most of them derived from France, from the knockabout farces of street theatre to translations of literary comedies embodying some or other of its elements. The anarchic morality of Harlequin and his allies was, however, distasteful to moralists such as Gottsched, who banished him from the stage as incompatible with that edifying didacticism which, in his opinion, could alone make comedy respectable. Even Molière was frowned upon as too close to Italian farce, although the robust comedies of Holberg, who was much influenced both by Molière and the *commedia*, was tolerated for patriotic reasons as a Germanic rival to the French, and because

[5] For detailed surveys see Hinck; Stellmacher; Wicke.

of the moral slant he gave to his plays in deference to the new middle-class morality.

Lessing knew and liked the *commedia* from an early date, and he characteristically went back to the sources. None of the plays in question existed as published texts, of course, for they relied by definition on improvisation; but a large collection of scenarios or plot summaries had been published around the beginning of the century by Evaristo Gherardi, a member of the *Théâtre italien*, and Lessing read and drew upon it during his Leipzig period. Ten years later, in his *Theatrical Library (Theatralische Bibliothek)*, a periodical devoted to drama and the stage, he himself translated and published a more recent collection of similar scenarios compiled by another member of the *Théâtre italien*, Lodovico Riccoboni, presenting them, as he put it, 'as a kind of archive for our comic writers'.[6] Despite—and to some extent even because of—Gottsched's strictures, Lessing always retained an affection for the Italian theatre, with its endless fund of comic situations and healthy disrespect for authority, and he drew on it freely in his early comedies.

The new kind of literary comedy which emerged in Germany, and particularly in Leipzig, during the 1730s and 1740s was a satirical comedy of character, usually with an overtly moral purpose. German literary historians have called it 'Saxon comedy of types' (*sächsische Typenkomödie*) in view of the stereotyped, if not caricatured, characters who predominate in it.[7] Such comedy has a long ancestry, including the sketches of morally negative personalities in Theophrastus' *Characters*, and equivalent figures in ancient comedy such as the miser in Plautus' *Aulularia*. Similar characters are satirized in various of Molière's comedies, such as *L'Avare, Le Malade imaginaire*, and *Le Misanthrope*, and likewise in those of his successor Regnard (*Le Joueur, Le Distrait*); but there is a shift of emphasis between these and the character comedies of Saxony—especially those approved or originated by Gottsched—in that the primary aim of the latter is not amusement or entertainment, which are incidental to the true purpose of promoting the moral welfare of the audience. Such comedies attain their end by affording rational insight into the follies or vices of the characters who embody them, and in this respect, they are not unlike dramatized fables. As Gottsched puts it in the famous definition of comedy in his *Critical Ars Poetica (Kritische Dichtkunst)* of 1730: 'Comedy is simply an imitation of an immoral [*lasterhaften*] action which, by its ridiculous nature, can entertain yet at the same time edify the spectator.'[8] Appropriate comedies by foreign writers, such as Destouches and Holberg, were translated on Gottsched's initiative to serve as models, and a series of German comedies on similar lines, such as *Pietism in Petticoats (Die Pietisterei im Fischbeinrock*, 1736), adapted by Gottsched's talented wife Luise from a French original, and *The Hypochondriac* (*Der Hypochondrist*, 1745) by his protégé T. J. Quistorp, appeared during the 1730s and 1740s. The degree to which these type-comedies achieved the desired moral end was, of course, variable: for example, *The Doctors* (*Die Ärzte*, 1745) and *The Insufferable Man* (*Der Unerträgliche*,

[6] LM VI, 294–391. [7] Steinmetz (1971) 1–44; G II, 632–3; Wicke 13–46.
[8] Gottsched (1968–87) VI/2, 348.

1746) by Lessing's friend Christlob Mylius are crude satires, often descending into farce, with no serious moral purpose whatsoever.

The trouble with those comedies which do conform well to Gottsched's specifications—J. E. Schlegel's *The Busy Idler* (*Der geschäftige Müssiggänger*, 1741) is a good example—is that their obsessive, monomaniac heroes, who are often little more than personified abstractions, lack credibility and quickly become tedious as they reveal the same characteristics in episode after episode. Towards the middle of the century, the characters in such plays accordingly tend to become more individualized, as in Luise Gottsched's *The Testament* (*Das Testament*) of 1745. There was in any case a movement in continental European comedy as a whole around this time towards greater realism: whereas Molière, for example, had written comedies in both verse and prose, prose had become the norm by the time of Marivaux, and even the conservative Gottsched accepts it in comedy.[9] Most comedies of his circle are set in recognizably German contexts, and Luise Gottsched even ventures to introduce dialect speech on occasion.[10] There is accordingly a growing tension in German Enlightenment comedy between the stereotyped characters and situations required by moral didacticism, and an increasing degree of realism in language, setting, and characterization. This tension is clearly visible in Lessing's early comedies, in which the stylized conventions of type-comedy and his own concern with topical issues and credible characters frequently come into conflict. He is perfectly happy to endorse Gottsched's definition of comedy when it comes to defending the genre's moral respectability—as in his letter to his father of 28 April 1749, in which he defines the comic dramatist as 'a person who presents vice in a ridiculous light'. He again echoes Gottsched a year later in defending Plautus' comedies against moral strictures, but this time with a significant addition: 'What, then, is the purpose of comedy? To educate and improve the audience's morals. It does so by presenting vice as detestable and virtue as attractive.' In other words, it is not sufficient simply to ridicule vices and provide rational insight into their causes and remedies; it is also necessary—and realistically more credible—to depict virtuous characters as well. This, in fact, had already begun to happen shortly before Lessing's first works appeared, in particular in a new and third variety of comedy pioneered by another Leipzig author, namely Gellert, who introduced sentimental or 'affecting' comedy (*rührendes Lustspiel*) to Germany. But whereas virtuous characters had played no major part in the earlier satirical comedies, Gellert moved towards the opposite extreme and virtually eliminated morally despicable characters altogether.

As Lessing himself notes in a discussion of the new kind of comedy in 1754, touching and heartwarming scenes can be found in comedies from antiquity onwards,[11] but 'affecting' or sentimental comedy is a recent development.[12] A product of eighteenth-century sensibility, it first emerged in England as early as

[9] Gottsched (1968–87) VI/2, 356.
[10] In *Pietism in Petticoats*; see also Wicke 30–1.
[11] LM VI, 50. [12] See Wicke 47–74; Steinmetz (1971) 45–50; Kies (1932) *passim*.

1705 with Richard Steele's drama *The Tender Husband*. It was subsequently adopted by French dramatists as *comédie attendrissante;* satire begins to give way to delicate sentiments in the comedies of Destouches and Marivaux, and the tide of sensibility reaches full flood in the *comédie larmoyante* of Nivelle de La Chaussée, whose plays include a dramatization (1743) of Richardson's *Pamela*. The new style of comedy was brought to Germany by Gellert, whose *The Pious Woman* (*Die Betschwester*, 1745) combines sensibility with elements of the type-comedy, and it reaches its definitive expression in the same author's *The Tender Sisters* (*Die zärtlichen Schwestern*, 1747).

The aim of these comedies is no less moral than that of the satirical comedy favoured by Gottsched; but the means employed to realize it are radically different. In keeping with the ethics of Shaftesbury and Hutcheson, who provided the philosophical foundation of literary sensibility by deriving virtuous impulses from an innate 'moral sense' common to all human beings, the sentimental comedy perceives virtue as a product not of rational cognition but of natural feeling. The characters of such comedies accordingly express themselves not so much in rational dialogues as in introspective monologues and emotional outpourings, and the main function of the plot—usually a simple intrigue no more substantial than that of most type-comedies—is to reveal their true moral attitudes by testing their sincerity in critical situations. Touching scenes of kindness, friendship, gratitude, forgiveness, or repentance follow in quick succession, and since most of the characters are paragons of virtue, such conflicts as there are are often no more than contests of magnanimity.

In its fully developed form, sentimental comedy is the obverse of satirical type-comedy, employing positive in place of negative stereotypes. Self-centred folly is replaced by selfless virtue, which can become even more tedious than the former, for it is unrelieved even by the antics of those comic servants who feature in most satirical comedies. Even the villain in Gellert's *Tender Sisters* lacks colour and presence: he is indecisive and feckless rather than genuinely wicked. It is by no means easy for the modern reader—and such plays are only read, but never performed, nowadays—to take any of the characters seriously, or to regard a heroine who declares 'I am so humble in my own eyes that I must consider even a father's praise as flattery' as anything other than a prig.[13] But our negative judgement is inevitably influenced by our familiarity with the mawkish derivatives of eighteenth-century sensibility in the popular fiction of more recent times, and it must not be forgotten that this sensibility had a far more positive resonance for the audiences who first encountered it in the 1740s. It gave expression to the attempts of an increasingly literate middle class to redefine its image, and to identify itself with a moral ethos superior both to that of its own less sophisticated parents and grandparents and to that of the more glamorous, but ethically suspect, nobility. We can afford to be cynical today about the virtuous postures of sensibility only because the ideal of self-conscious secular virtue is no longer necessary as a means of affirming our recent entry into enlightened society.

[13] Gellert III, 199.

Gottsched condemned the sentimental comedy, but for aesthetic rather than ethical reasons. He described it as tragi-comedy, on the grounds that it did not conform to the definition of either comedy or tragedy as he understood them, although it had certain affinities with both, and he considered such hybrids unacceptable.[14] Lessing, on the other hand, regarded it as a positive development, and in his discussion of the new form in 1754, he endorses Gellert's defence of its legitimacy. He does so not just because he had himself written a drama of this kind at the beginning of his literary career (*Damon, or True Friendship*), but because he believes that the introduction of moral sentiment and virtuous protagonists to comedy has enriched it and decisively separated it from the pre-Enlightenment farces of the first part of the century;[15] his only reservation is that these qualities should not be allowed to squeeze humour and satire out altogether. He rightly points out that Gellert's comedies avoid the sustained tearfulness of La Chaussée's *comédie larmoyante*: there is indeed a good deal of humour and satire as well as sentiment in Gellert's *The Pious Woman* and *The Lottery Ticket* (*Das Los in der Lotterie*, 1746), and even in *The Tender Sisters*, there is an element of gentle irony and comedy of situation. Lessing can therefore conclude that these 'affecting' comedies are closer than either La Chaussée's lachrymose sentimentality or Gottsched's unrelenting satire to that ideal of mixed—and consequently more realistic—comedy that he had himself been working towards as he experimented with the existing varieties of comedy during his student days in Leipzig and his initial period in Berlin. In his own words:[16]

> I venture to assert that the only true comedies are those which depict both virtues and vices, both decency and absurdity, because this very mixture brings them closer to their original model, namely human life.

These, then, were the principal modes of comedy current in Germany when Lessing began his career as a dramatist. Apart from popular farce in the *commedia* tradition, they were recent innovations, heavily influenced by foreign models as critics and dramatists strove to create a native comedy of literary merit for the new enlightened public. The first German comedy written in the service of *Aufklärung* ideals, Luise Gottsched's *Pietism in Petticoats*, appeared only ten years before Lessing's first dramatic efforts, and his sentimental comedy *Damon* was published in the same year as Gellert's definitive comedy of sensibility *The Tender Sisters*. Lessing was thus at the forefront of literary developments in Germany, and he maintained that position for the rest of his life. Although he was also well versed in current literary theory, most of his own theoretical pronouncements on comedy are of later date than his own early comedies. But the latter were in any case less influenced by poetic theory than by his growing knowledge of dramatic practice, and not least by his insight into Caroline Neuber's work for the Leipzig theatre. As he later acknowledged of this experience, 'I learned there a hundred important details which a dramatic poet has to learn, and can never learn merely by reading his models'.[17]

[14] Gottsched (1968–87) VI/2, 348; Steinmetz (1971) 46. [15] LM VI, 6.
[16] LM VI, 51. [17] LM V, 268; cf. Lappert 9.

Some of the chief merits of his early dramas, including their rapid pace, fluent dialogue, and well-articulated scene changes, doubtless owe much to his observation of Neuber's productions.

Apart from his theatrical experience, the other main inspiration of his early plays was his extensive reading of European drama. He had already immersed himself in Plautus and Terence at St Afra, and he for a time regarded Plautus' *Captivi* and *Trinummus*, of which he published a translation and a German adaptation respectively, as embodying the ideal of comedy.[18] He of course read all the major comic writers of France, including those recommended as models by Gottsched; but he concluded before long that Gottsched's call for German writers to emulate the French masterpieces had probably done more harm than good, by intimidating the German beginners to whom it was addressed.[19] This may help to explain why Lessing himself turned to other dramatic traditions for inspiration, including not only the *commedia dell'arte* and other Italian drama but also English comedy, neither of which Gottsched approved of.[20] It has been shown that, during 1748 and 1749, he immersed himself in the English comedy of manners and read most of the Restoration dramatists, including Wycherley, Shadwell, Congreve, Farquar, Granville, and Etherage, in the original (there were virtually no translations).[21] He acquired a vast stock of themes, motifs, and plots in the course of this reading, and utilized many of them in his own completed or projected works. This later prompted the eccentric scholar Paul Albrecht, in the six volumes of his unfinished work *Lessing's Plagiarisms* (*Lessings Plagiate*, Hamburg, 1890–91) to allege that Lessing's dramas, as well as most of his other works, are simply a pastiche of materials lifted without acknowledgement from earlier writers, a claim which has occasionally been revived in less extreme form by other critics.[22] There are few major writers who could not be convicted on similar charges by positivistically-minded source hunters. What matters, however, is whether the wholes they have created with the help of borrowed materials are more than the sum of their parts, as they are in the vast majority of Lessing's works. Like Shakespeare and Brecht, he stamped his individuality on everything he borrowed, and his authorship is instantly recognizable in most of his dramatic dialogues.

So absorbed did he become in theatre and drama during the Leipzig period that, as he later recollected, everything that entered his head was transformed into a comedy.[23] Very few of the resulting projects came to fruition, but the large number of surviving sketches, scenarios, and fragments—and many more have not survived—testifies to the fertility of his dramatic imagination.[24] That so few of his plans were carried out was the result of a fundamental character trait: for all his supposed rationality, Lessing worked most easily in the first flush of enthusiasm, and he once admitted 'I know myself; I have to utilize my initial inspiration [*Hitze*] if I want to get anything

[18] LM IV, 79, 83, 192. [19] LM V, 269–70.
[20] Gottsched (1968–87) VI/2, 341–4. [21] See Kies (1929) *passim*.
[22] Kies (1929) 33. [23] LM V, 270. [24] LM III, 235–500.

finished.'[25] His student friend Weisse confirms this characteristic, and adds further details about Lessing's method of composition:[26]

> He was always in the habit of drafting his theatrical productions very precisely, act by act and scene by scene, and then declaring that he had completed them. Only when he was about to have them printed would he prepare the draft for press, slowly and with much deliberation, which never came easily to him but cost him extreme effort.

He stuck to this mode of working throughout his life, not only with his dramas, and he regularly relied on printers' deadlines to force him to complete works he had put on one side after the basic conception—for that was what interested him most—had become clear in his mind and been eclipsed by some new inspiration. But it is time to look in more detail at the six early comedies which he did complete, and which established his reputation as a dramatist of unusual promise.

One of the factors which gave some of Lessing's early comedies their individual stamp has not so far been mentioned, namely their autobiographical associations. Lessing was at no time a confessional writer, but there are significant traces of his personal experience and preoccupations in at least three of the comedies in question. This is most obvious in the earliest of these (though not the first to be published), namely *The Young Scholar*. The genesis of this play is more complex than that of the other early comedies, for it extends over eight or more years. We know that Lessing began work on it before he left Meissen in 1746,[27] that he revised and completed it in Leipzig in 1747, that this version was performed by Caroline Neuber's company in January 1748, and that it was finally published, possibly with further revisions, in 1754. Its subject—the satirical portrayal of a pedant—was nothing new in comedy: the pedantic Doctor was a stock figure of the *commedia dell'arte*, and the schoolmaster Sempronius in Andreas Gryphius' *Horribilicribrifax* (1663), originally written for school performance, has similar characteristics. The immediate literary precedents for Lessing's hero Damis are, however, the eponymous hero of Holberg's fine character comedy *Erasmus Montanus* (1731), whose philosophical learning is sophistical and superficial,[28] and the hero of J. E. Schlegel's *The Busy Idler*, who clutches at every distraction to avoid getting down to serious business.[29] Despite possible debts to these two plays, *The Young Scholar* nevertheless bears the imprint of Lessing's creative intelligence and Leipzig milieu.

The hero Damis is not just a bore and pedant: he is also insufferably conceited, boorish, and devoid of common sense. The plot of which he is the focus has two strands, not unlike those of Lessing's greatest comedy, *Minna von Barnhelm*. On the one hand there is a love intrigue reminiscent of the *comédie italienne* and its literary derivatives: Damis's father, the miserly and self-important Chrysander, has just discovered that his penniless ward Juliane is about to inherit a fortune, and resolves to marry her off to his son in order to get hold of her money, even if this means brushing aside her worthy suitor Valer, with whom she is already in love.

[25] To Mendelssohn, 2 April 1758. [26] KGL 44; cf. ibid. 150–1.
[27] LM V, 268. [28] See B I, 1055. [29] Wicke 40–1.

Needless to say, this scheme is eventually thwarted, mainly by the wily servants Lisette and Anton, thus enabling the lovers to be united at the end. The other strand of the plot has topical significance, for it concerns Damis' expectation of a letter informing him that a philosophical treatise he has submitted to the Berlin Academy's essay competition has been awarded the prize; this creates a further element of tension, until it finally emerges that the friend whom Damis had asked to submit the essay for him did not do so, since its weak and inapposite content could only expose the author to public ridicule. Incorrigible to the last, Damis resolves to abandon his native country to punish it for its failure to recognize his genius.

This play has obvious links with Lessing's personal experience, and he points out himself that he grew up among young pedants (he describes them as 'vermin') of the kind he satirizes here.[30] Critics have also observed that the report in the play that Juliane's suitor Valer has put books aside in order to learn how to live in society sounds remarkably like the letter in which Lessing explains to his mother why he had put his studies on one side in order to learn the social graces.[31] (The letter, written in January 1749, may in fact be echoing the play.) It has likewise been pointed out that some of Damis's ridicule of his father ('the old idiot') for parading his own snippets of classical learning may incorporate sly digs at Lessing's own father,[32] and there may even be a hint of wish-fulfilment in Chrysander's switch from urging his son to study diligently to advising him to forget his books and turn his attention to women:[33]

DAMIS: I'm amazed [...] to hear you talk in terms which certainly don't reflect the precepts with which you sent me to university.

CHRYSANDER: *Tempora mutantur*, my son.

The play was certainly calculated to appeal to student audiences, as one early reviewer remarked.[34] No one seems, however, to have noticed its obvious relationship with the one academic course which Lessing did attend consistently at Leipzig, namely Kästner's Latin colloquium on philosophical disputation: Damis's dialogues with his father and with the servants regularly parody the formal disputation, with their fallacious proofs and Latin formulas such as *contra principia negantem non est disputandum*.[35] It was therefore quite natural for Lessing to seek Kästner's advice on revising his original draft, and Kästner readily gave it.[36] The Berlin Academy's prize-essay topic for 1747, on Leibniz's theory of monads, was also the same as that referred to in the comedy, and Karl Lessing reports that his brother may have decided to complete the play on hearing that a young Leipzig scholar had boasted of his chances of success in the competition, only

[30] LM V, 270; cf. LM I, 322.
[31] Cf. Wiedemann (1967b) 234–5 and R. C. Zimmermann (1992) 290–2.
[32] LM I, 282–3; cf. Krätzer 510–11.
[33] LM I, 287.
[34] Braun I, 180.
[35] See, for example, LM I, 287–8, 323, 330, 335.
[36] LM V, 269.

to end up last.[37] (Lessing's friend Mylius, who was already cultivating his contacts with Berlin, had actually been *proxime accessit* to d'Alembert in a previous competition, and his essay was the only German entry published by the Academy in 1746.)[38] *The Young Scholar* is accordingly very much a product of Lessing's Leipzig experiences.

As to the form of the play, its closest affinities are with the satirical type-comedy as promoted by Gottsched and performed by Caroline Neuber during their period of collaboration. The hero typifies a vice which disqualifies him from membership of enlightened society, and is duly held up to ridicule. His defect is not so much his preoccupation with learning itself as his imagined superiority over others and his failure to apply his energies to any socially constructive purpose. It has been argued, however, that Damis is satirized because he embodies a late and degenerate version of the baroque ideal of the polyhistor, of learning reduced to an indiscriminate collecting of mainly trivial facts, as opposed to the *Aufklärung* ideal of learning in the service of social improvement.[39] This angle may indeed be present (although the term 'polyhistor' is nowhere used); but even if it is, it is less important than the more basic human failings which make Damis impossible to live with. Lessing nevertheless continued to view the relationship between scholarship and ordinary living as problematic, and he returns to the theme more than once in later years.[40]

It is at all events clear that *The Young Scholar* conforms fairly closely to Gottsched's definition of comedy, at least in general terms. It adheres strictly to the unities, and Lessing shows considerable ingenuity in confining the entire action to Damis's study. It is, however, significant that he already feels free to ignore several of Gottsched's prescriptions: he uses asides, and at least one (overheard) soliloquy, both of which devices were outlawed by Gottsched as lacking in verisimilitude,[41] and the play has only three acts instead of Gottsched's obligatory five. Some of the characters also show their *commedia dell'arte* ancestry, especially Lisette, the literary descendant of Columbine, and Chrysander, a latter-day Pantaloon, who displays characteristics of several traditional comic types including the pompous fool, the armchair politician, and the *irrésolu*. No Harlequin figure is present, however, and the love intrigue could just as well have come from Destouches or Marivaux as from the *commedia*.

The Young Scholar is in some respects the most entertaining of the early comedies, although the dialogue contains too many learned allusions to be fully effective with non-academic audiences. But it was well received in its day, and critics were struck by its language in particular. Herder, reading it for the second time in 1768, declared: 'I am relishing the original flavour of his characters, the lively merriment of his dialogue, and the consistently natural and appropriate language of the speakers'; he

[37] See B I, 1070–1; KGL 42; Oehlke I, 107–8.
[38] Trillmich 74; Krätzer 510–11; Goldenbaum (1989) 274.
[39] See Wiedemann (1967b) *passim*; Förster 211; Rädle *passim*.
[40] See Pons (1979) and Barner (1981).
[41] LM I, 292, 301, 316; Gottsched (1968–87) VI/2, 352–3.

added that, although the tone was more down to earth than some critics might wish, he was himself perfectly happy with it.[42] The play is in fact an early example of that natural and informal, often colloquial and pungent, at times rhetorically heightened, but invariably lucid style which characterizes even Lessing's learned works (especially the polemical ones), as well as most of his dramas. It is all part of a move, for which he more than anyone was responsible, away from the heavy formality of German prose during the baroque and early Enlightenment periods towards a more relaxed and versatile medium. Another early critic of *The Young Scholar* sums up these qualities admirably:[43]

> Natural yet well chosen, familiar yet witty, forceful yet flexible, his dialogue has all the main qualities of the dramatic style, while at the same time gaining elegant precision through the most scrupulous attention to detail.

Lessing stood out from the start among German writers not so much for what he said, but for the way in which he said it.

His first published drama, *Damon, or True Friendship*, appeared late in 1747 in Mylius' periodical *Ermunterungen zum Vergnügen des Gemüts*. A short, one-act play, it is very much an apprentice piece, and Lessing did not consider it worthy of inclusion in the collected edition of his comedies in 1767;[44] he reacted indignantly when an unauthorized reprint appeared in 1770, affording his enemy C. A. Klotz the opportunity to publish a patronizing review of its weaknesses.[45] The plot, in which the matrimonial prospects of the two friends Damon and Leander, who are rivals for the hand of a young widow, rest on the safe return of the two ships in which they have respectively invested their assets, is once again derived from Holberg—in this case from his comedy *The Fortunate Shipwreck* of 1743.[46] The falsity of Leander's professions of friendship is unmasked when, on hearing a report—later shown to be inaccurate—that his ship is lost, he attempts to exchange investments with his loyal friend, only to forfeit the widow's hand when she learns of his treachery. The play also has affinities with La Chaussée's *L'Ecole des amis* (1737) and Thomas Shadwell' *Bury Fair* (1689),[47] but its chief inspiration was almost certainly Gellert's *The Tender Sisters*, which it resembles in theme, style, and tone. Gellert's play, which was likewise published in 1747, was first performed shortly after Easter of that year by Caroline Neuber's company in Leipzig; it was a great success, and Christiane Lorenz played one of the sisters.[48] It may confidently be assumed that Lessing wrote his own play shortly after seeing this production. Just as in Gellert's play, one of two young men contemplating marriage proves unworthy when put to the test by an apparent change in financial circumstances; Lessing's Leander strongly resembles the faithless Siegmund in Gellert's play, and the meddling older relative Oronte in *Damon* is a coarser version of Gellert's pedantic Magister.[49]

Lessing presumably welcomed the incentive to try his hand at the new style of comedy with its emphasis on virtue and sentiment, having already experimented

[42] Herder SWS II, 365. [43] B I, 1268. [44] See L. to C. F. Voss, 5 January 1770.
[45] Braun I, 320–2. [46] See E. Schmidt I, 131; B I, 1009.
[47] See B I, 1009; Kies (1929) 19. [48] Gellert III, 410. [49] See B I, 1009.

with satirical comedy in his original version of *The Young Scholar*. He successfully reproduces the extravagant rhetoric of friendship which Gellert and his circle of *Bremer Beiträger* were just bringing into fashion, for example in Leander's declaration to Damon:[50]

> Would to God that you would offend me, and the sooner the better, in a manner which others might consider unpardonable! How gratified and delighted I would be to inflict on you the sweet revenge of a magnanimous forgiveness!

But although he made regular use in his literary works of the language of sensibility, Lessing never employed or reciprocated it in his correspondence or personal relationships, despite the fact that several of his friends in later years (above all Gleim) cultivated it to excess. His basic distaste for it is evident in the moral proposition with which the play concludes, when Damon, in the act of forgiving his disloyal friend, declares: 'Well, admit at least, dear Leander, that it is rather more difficult to fulfil the duties of friendship than to go into raptures about it.'[51]

Despite this final concession to Gottsched's requirement that drama should provide moral instruction, and despite various echoes of the *comédie italienne* (particularly in the minor characters Lisette and Oronte),[52] *Damon* is predominantly an exercise in sentimental comedy. It is also the weakest of Lessing's early plays. Its psychology is unconvincing, as when the apparently high-minded widow readily accedes to her servant's suggestion that she allow the success or otherwise of her suitors' commercial enterprises to determine her choice of spouse, and the symmetrical actions and reactions of the two friends lend the action a schematic, mechanical quality. Although the play was performed several times in the 1750s, it is not hard to see why Lessing excluded it from his collected works.[53]

The same fate befell the next of his early comedies, *The Old Maid (Die alte Jungfer)*, though for quite different reasons. Published in Berlin in the spring of 1749, but probably written before Lessing left Leipzig (the year 1748 is referred to in the text as the present time),[54] it forms a complete contrast to its predecessor in both style and idiom: from the high ground of sensibility Lessing now descends to the kind of popular farce which was still performed at the lower end of Neuber's repertoire. It incorporates characters, situations, and jokes from numerous earlier comedies, especially the *comédie italienne*, but also from Congreve's *Way of the World* and plays by Plautus, Molière, Holberg, Gellert, and others;[55] but the sheer number of parallels and sources which critics claim to have discovered is testimony to the play's originality, in that it manages to assimilate so many derivative elements into a non-discordant whole unified by robust humour and a fast-moving dialogue.

In a plot typical of the *commedia*, the rich and man-hungry Miss Ohldin (her name is from the English 'old') is notified of a forthcoming marriage proposal from the debt-ridden Captain von Schlag, to the consternation of her heir, the spendthrift

[50] LM III, 190. [51] LM I, 200. [52] See Hinck 269.
[53] See, however, Kornbacher-Meyer 125–42, who rates the play more highly.
[54] LM III, 204. [55] See Kies (1929) 24; E. Schmidt I, 133; B I, 1092.

Lelio. Aided by the indispensable Lisette, Lelio persuades the street-vendor Peter to impersonate von Schlag in so offensive a manner as to cure Ohldin of all thoughts of marriage. Even Peter's grossest effrontery fails, however, to alienate her completely; and the real von Schlag arrives just in time to claim his delighted bride, pacifying Lelio by promising him a share of Ohldin's wealth and turning his attentions to Lisette while Ohldin prepares for the wedding.

This three-act farce represents Lessing's closest approach to the *commedia dell'arte*.[56] Its characters are familiar stereotypes, with the ex-warrior von Schlag as the Captain or Scaramouche, and Peter (whose name recalls Pierrot) as a surrogate Harlequin, with his usual accomplice Lisette. Ohldin is another standard type, less fully developed than she would be in a character comedy, but nevertheless an object of satire and ridicule—not because she is an old maid, but because she pretends she is far younger than she is. The language is unusually coarse for Lessing ('she looks as if she's been in the grave for three years already'), and the broad jokes on marriage and the scurrilous behaviour of Ohldin's tormentors (stage direction: *He lifts her skirt up a little*)[57] are on the outer edge of propriety by the standards of the time: in these respects, the play is less characteristic of Lessing than of Mylius, who reviewed it in fulsome terms when it was published. It is unique among Lessing's dramas in that it contains no hint of virtue, sentiment, or edification: all the characters are morally flawed.[58]

This is doubtless why Lessing disowned it in later years. Its complete lack of moral purpose and its cynical ending, not unfairly described by one critic as a 'triumph of vice and amorality',[59] nevertheless remain puzzling; for moral considerations are prominent in both of Lessing's previous comedies, and as already mentioned, he affirmed the moral purpose of comedy on two occasions in 1749 and 1750. There may be an element of defiance or rebellion at work here, for *The Old Maid* was almost certainly the first play he completed after his summons home and enforced stay in Kamenz during the early months of 1748. On the other hand, he may simply have decided to try his hand at popular farce in order to show his mastery of all the major modes of comedy. At all events, this play shows a better grasp of stage technique than either of its predecessors, and it was performed several times between 1753 and 1783;[60] but its pre-Enlightenment qualities ensured that it would never gain wider acceptance.

With his fourth comedy, *The Misogynist (Der Misogyn)*, Lessing reverts to the conventions of character comedy which he had followed in *The Young Scholar*, with an obsessive central figure making life difficult for the (more or less) normal people around him. We know that he wrote this play in 1748, perhaps shortly before he left Leipzig, because he names this as the year of composition in the first edition of 1755. This version is in one act, although it was later expanded to three acts by the addition of several scenes in the revised version of 1767. Lessing used the Greek form of the title rather than the more familiar German equivalent (*Der Weiberfeind*), perhaps as

[56] See Hinck 266.
[57] LM III, 202–3, 206, 211, 216, 224.
[58] Cf. Metzger 68.
[59] Hinck 268–9.
[60] See U. Schulz 173.

a reminder of the play's classical ancestry, for he got his idea for it from the fragments of Menander's lost play on the same subject.[61] Numerous other plays have been cited as parallels or possible sources, including works by Molière, Saint-Foix, La Motte, Marivaux, and Gherardi's *Théâtre italien*, as well as Bibbiena's *La Calandria* (1513) and Granville's *The She-Gallants* (1696).[62] But as with *The Old Maid*, such influences concern mainly matters of detail, and there are no comprehensive models for this play as there were for the first two comedies. The names, as usual, are mostly traditional (Valer, Lelio, Leander, etc.) and derived from the *comédie italienne*, but like Ohldin in *The Old Maid*, the central character Wumshäter takes his name from the English—in this case from the title of Francis Beaumont's comedy *The Woman Hater*.[63]

Three times widowed and now a confirmed misogynist, Wumshäter is the object of an intrigue by his son Valer, who seeks permission to marry his sweetheart Hilaria. When Valer introduces the latter, in male disguise, as Hilaria's brother Lelio, Wumshäter is favourably impressed; but when she reappears as herself, he can see nothing but faults in her. Only after her dual identity is revealed does Wumshäter reluctantly agree to his son's engagement, at the same time allowing his long-suffering daughter to accept her own suitor's proposal.

As in *The Old Maid*, several characters and motifs are based on *commedia* archetypes: the pedantic lawyer Solbit is a version of the Doctor figure, Wumshäter has qualities of Pantaloon, Lisette is her familiar self, and the motif of cross-dressing is common in Gherardi's scenarios and in French comedies inspired by the *Théâtre italien*.[64] Farce is less prominent on this occasion than satire and wit, and the play once more serves a moral purpose, though without any ponderous moralizing. In ethical terms, this comedy might even be seen as a corrective to *The Old Maid*: for while the latter work, which ridicules an inherently female weakness, might be accused of misogyny, *The Misogynist* by definition directs its satire against this inherently male deficiency itself. The function of the play is not only to ridicule Wumshäter's misogyny, however, but to show, both by rational argument and practical demonstration, that it is self-contradictory. Its self-contradictoriness is expressed in rational terms by his son:[65]

> But what would people say if it became known that you had esteemed in one person the same qualities and perfections which you disparaged in another? What would they say if they discovered that your ingrained resentment of a sex by which you thought you had been injured prevented you from recognising something which the whole world recognises?

And immediately afterwards, this self-contradiction is demonstrated in practice when the two people between whom Wumshäter had claimed to detect fundamental differences are shown to be identical. (As will shortly be seen, Lessing would soon employ this same combination of rational argument and practical demonstration to

[61] Cf. LM XV, 318–19 (*Collectanea*).
[62] B I, 1099; E. Schmidt I, 132–4; Kies (1929) 22; Hinck 270.
[63] See G II, 648. [64] See Hinck 266. [65] LM II, 44.

refute one of his own father's prejudices.) The play's rational purpose also accounts for the dialectical wit and analytical construction which give it its overall style and shape; but the constant logical absurdities ('if I were your son, Herr Wumshäter, I would do my best to multiply the race of misogynists') and false dichotomies ('the beautiful ones get seduced, and the ugly ones seduce others')[66] drive home the rational point so repeatedly that the play becomes monotonous towards the middle—always a risk in satirical comedy—until the well-tried device of disguise and its removal restores life to the final scenes.

The Misogynist is a slight work. It was performed on a few occasions in the 1760s and 1770s,[67] but like *The Old Maid*, it was soon eclipsed by Lessing's subsequent comedies. Nevertheless, it has received less attention than it deserves, for it marks a decisive stage in Lessing's development. His first three plays, like most traditional comedies, had satirized or criticized individual vices or follies with limited social consequences, such as pedantry, false friendship, and female vanity. *The Misogynist*, however, uses the framework of the type-comedy to refute a prejudice against a whole category of people, and as such, it is the first of a long series of works, by no means all of them dramatic, in which Lessing attacks some specific prejudice or injustice directed at a particular group, class, or minority within society. If one disregards its moral significance, misogyny is, of course, a time-honoured source of humour, both from the point of view of its critics and from that of the misogynist himself: indeed, Lessing's future wife would later take him to task for the misogynistic humour of some of his own epigrams.[68] But he had no sympathy with misogyny as a serious proposition, as his later attempts to dramatize the classic misogynistic tale of the widow of Ephesus confirm. It is misogyny itself which is ridiculed in *The Misogynist*, and the humour is not morally indifferent in the way that it often is in the epigrams, for Lessing goes to considerable lengths to demonstrate the logical absurdity of the ridiculed attitude (and even, at one point, the suffering it causes).[69] He followed a similar course in his next two comedies, except that he now turned his attention to more specific and topical—and therefore more controversial—prejudices than misogyny, namely those involving religious belief and ethnic identity.

Lessing had now experimented with all of the chief modes of comedy then current in Germany, and he continues to use them, in various combinations, in the last of his early comedies. Consequently, neither of these two plays incorporates major formal innovations; but the seriousness of their purpose lends them a distinctive character which has led some critics to describe them as 'problem comedies'.[70] The lightweight structures of existing comedy were not, however, equipped to contain the serious problems they now had to accommodate, and it was not until many years later that Lessing would successfully modify the conventions of comedy to deal with issues which in themselves were no laughing matter. On 28 April 1749, however, he wrote to his father as follows:

[66] LM II, 9 and 7, n. 5. [67] See U. Schulz 188. [68] Eva König to L., 10 August 1771.
[69] LM II, 10, n. 4. [70] See, for example, Albrecht (1997) 10–11.

> The proof that a writer of comedies cannot be a good Christian is beyond my comprehension. A writer of comedies is a person who depicts the ridiculous aspect of vices. Is, then, a Christian not permitted to laugh at vices? Do vices deserve so much respect? And what if I even promised to create a comedy which our esteemed theologians would not only read but also praise? Do you think my promise is impossible to fulfil? What if I were to write one directed against the freethinkers and those who despise your profession? I know for certain that you would in that case abandon much of your severity.

Lessing's next comedy, *The Freethinker*, was plainly written in fulfilment of this self-imposed challenge. The longest and most accomplished of the early comedies, it was planned from the start as a five-act play, and the detailed scenario which survives[71]—perhaps from the Leipzig period—corresponds fairly closely to the completed play as written in 1749 and published in 1755. Two young men, the freethinker Adrast and the clergyman Theophan, are respectively engaged to the sisters Henriette and Juliane, the former vivacious and worldly, the latter self-effacing and devout. The confrontation between freethinker and cleric gives the comedy its ideological substance, as Theophan vainly attempts to overcome Adrast's hostility by friendly overtures and rational argument; at the same time, the plot moves forward on an emotional level as each party comes to realize that he loves not his own, but his opponent's fiancée, and the women find themselves in a similar predicament. Ideological conflict and love intrigue are brought together and simultaneously resolved as Adrast realizes that Theophan is genuinely willing to contemplate a change of partners, and that his friendly overtures were not just a product of clerical hypocrisy.

The structure of this play, with its symmetrical and contrasting characters and relationships and interchange of partners, is characteristic of Lessing's analytical, dialectical mode of thinking but not without precedent in early Enlightenment comedy. Similar, though simpler, patterns can be detected in his earlier comedy *Damon* and in its model, Gellert's *The Tender Sisters*. Lessing himself draws attention, in his translation of Riccoboni's scenarios for the *Théâtre italien*, to an even closer similarity between the plot of *The Freethinker* and that of Delisle's comedy *Les Caprices du coeur et de l'esprit* (1739),[72] in which two couples, initially matched for their similar temperaments, change partners as the attraction of opposites proves stronger. While suggesting that this parallel is purely coincidental, Lessing does not insist on his own originality but merely asks that his play be judged on its own merits. Numerous other parallels and influences have been noted by the critics, among which Molière is perhaps the most important:[73] Adrast has a good deal in common with the hero of *Le Misanthrope*, and in its defence of the clergy against charges of hypocrisy, *The Freethinker* has aptly been described as an anti-*Tartuffe*.[74] Other plays with which affinities have been suggested include Steele's *The Conscious Lovers* (1722),[75] Otway's *The Atheist* (1683), Holberg's *Jean de France* (1723), and Dufresny's *Le faux sincère* (1731), as well as Gellert's comedies.

[71] LM III, 262–72. [72] LM VI, 344; cf. B I, 1131.
[73] See B I, 1141. [74] Hinck 279. [75] Kies (1932) 811.

As Lessing's letter to his father indicates, *The Freethinker* is directed against anti-clerical prejudice, as embodied in the figure of Adrast. This prejudice, like that of the misogynist in the previous play, is shown in practice to be absurd. But more significantly, the play challenges a second prejudice which Lessing does not mention in his letter to his father (presumably because his father shared it), namely the widespread belief among Christians of that period that a freethinker—that is, one who doubts or rejects the supernatural aspects of religion—is by definition morally unsound. Lessing's Adrast, on the contrary, is a morally admirable character. For although he is shown to be mistaken in his comprehensive prejudice against the clergy, he is by no means a figure of ridicule like the misogynist and other heroes of satirical comedy, but a serious individual with virtues as well as defects. After *The Misogynist*, Lessing never again gave stereotyped characters a central role in his dramas, partly in the interests of realism, but also because he had come to realize that such stereotypes are themselves based on, or conducive to, the very kind of prejudices he was now concerned to attack.

The Freethinker has come in for a good deal of criticism, mostly relating to Adrast's hatred of the clergy, its justification (or lack of it), and the extent to which his abandonment of this prejudice is adequately motivated.[76] Adrast is an embittered character who seems to go out of his way to oppose commonly accepted beliefs, declaring 'If my opinions were to become too widespread, I would be the first to exchange them for their opposites'.[77] There is something of Lessing's consistent non-conformism about this, but Adrast is also capable, at least initially, of an unreasoning dogmatism which Lessing would never have supported. 'I know what I know', he says as he writes off all clergymen as hypocrites. This prejudice was the consequence, we discover, not so much of his disagreement with Christian doctrine (and there is indeed no necessary connection between freethinking and anti-clericalism),[78] as of a series of unfortunate experiences involving clergymen, one of whom—Adrast's own brother-in-law—had apparently done him out of a large sum of money. This disillusion, and the double misfortune of finding that he does not love his fiancée but her sister—whose own fiancé, another clergyman, is destined to become his next brother-in-law—and that he is pursued by a creditor who is likely to leave him penniless, plunges him into feelings of misanthropy and doubts concerning providence like those later experienced at moments of crisis by the male protagonists of *Minna von Barnhelm* and *Nathan the Wise*: 'But who am I grumbling at? At a dumb and random process? At blind chance, which oppresses us without aim or intention? Ah! worthless life!'[79] But just as his hatred of the clergy and his present despondency have no rational basis (for they are the result of fortuitous circumstances), they cannot be removed by rational argument either—least of all if that argument comes, as it does in this case, from the clergyman Theophan. Besides, Adrast's suspicion that Theophan's friendly overtures are, if not hypocritical, at least far from spontaneous, is not without foundation. For Theophan more than once indicates that he has set himself a deliberate challenge to

[76] See, for example, Cases 377 and 387; Lappert 42.
[77] LM II, 98.
[78] Cf. Fricke 85.
[79] LM II, 63.

remove Adrast's prejudice: 'I have firmly resolved [...] to compel him to be my friend, whatever the cost'.[80] This also explains why Adrast abandons his hostility only after Theophan finally loses his patience and becomes hostile himself, for only now is Adrast convinced that he is dealing with genuine sentiments and not with a show of friendship dictated by ulterior motives.[81]

But the decisive factor in his change of heart is his realization that Theophan's engagement to Juliane is not indissoluble—that is, when Theophan himself assures him that he, Adrast, is the real object of Juliane's love. The realization that a change of partners is not only possible but desired by all parties finally banishes his bitterness and despair, and with it his prejudice against Theophan, as he himself confirms:[82]

> Why did we not declare ourselves sooner? O Theophan! Theophan! I would have seen your entire conduct with different eyes. You would not have been exposed to the bitterness of my suspicion and my accusations.

There is therefore no justification for regarding Adrast's sustained hostility and sudden volte-face as implausible. If anything, Lessing does too much rather than too little to explain Adrast's irrational behaviour, for Theophan promptly replies: 'No apologies, Adrast! Prejudices and unhappy love are two things even one of which is enough to turn a man into something other than himself.'[83]

While the above considerations may help to explain Adrast's behaviour, they also confirm that this behaviour has little or nothing to do with the fact that he is a freethinker, for his grudge against the clergy in general and Theophan in particular was occasioned not by their religious beliefs, but by the real or imagined harm they had done to his financial and marital interests. In other words, *The Freethinker* is not a satire on freethinking at all, but on an individual's prejudice, based on fortuitous circumstances, against a specific class of people who might just as well have been lawyers or schoolteachers; and since Adrast, despite his faults, is portrayed in a basically sympathetic light, he is rather an object of criticism than of satire. For despite Lessing's words to his father, the reason why he wrote the play was neither to defend the clergy against a manifestly arbitrary prejudice like that of Adrast, nor to ridicule Adrast himself as a freethinker. His real aim was not to satirize freethinking, but to defend it—not as a specific set of beliefs, but as a divergent point of view which can be honestly held, and which deserves respect as such.

To define Adrast's objections to religion in detail—for example, by having him expound them himself—would have defeated Lessing's purpose. Apart from antagonizing his father, it would have alienated the vast majority of his solidly Christian audience. To avoid this happening, he adopts two expedients. Firstly, he reports Adrast's beliefs in a laconic or garbled form, mainly through the mouths of uneducated characters such as Adrast's servant Johann and the Pantaloon-like figure of Lisidor, father of the two sisters, thereby reducing their impact and power to offend. And secondly, he indicates that Adrast no longer holds these beliefs in as

[80] LM II, 82; cf. II, 70 and 90.
[81] Cf. Brown (1957) 202.
[82] LM II, 118.
[83] Ibid.

extreme a form as he had done in the past. For example, there are brief references to Anthony Collins, whose *Discourse of Freethinking* (1713) first gave currency to the term, and to Balthasar Bekker, the Dutch critic of witchhunts and related superstitions, as writers whose works Adrast may have admired;[84] Lisidor also seems to have heard Adrast discoursing on ancient atomism and its deterministic implications; Adrast allegedly does not believe in a Christian afterlife; and the oafish servant Johann describes his master as 'an atheist'.[85] Johann (whose name the audience would at once associate with 'Hanswurst' or Harlequin) is indeed the principal spokesman of freethinking in the play, but the 'freethinking' of Johann is plainly a travesty of his master's beliefs, consisting essentially of crude hedonism, French profanities, and mockery of religion: 'Man is in the world', Johann declares, 'to enjoy himself and have a good time. Pleasure, laughter, womanizing and drinking are his duties'.[86] Adrast himself reacts with repugnance to Johann's attitudes, as when the latter advises him to renege on his debts or evade his creditor. In short, Johann's mindless credo has little in common with the philosophical doubts or religious scepticism which his master has by implication entertained. It conforms, in fact, to the popular image of the freethinker as defined in Gellert's comedy *The Lottery Ticket*:[87]

> All that is required [...] for the profession of a freethinker is low intelligence, a wayward disposition, a few English or French pamphlets full of bile against the Scriptures, a good glass of wine, a healthy constitution, visits to certain establishments whose name I cannot mention without embarrassment, and for good measure an unplanned and ill-conceived tour of foreign countries.

The only freethinking to be satirized in the play is that of Johann, not that of Adrast, and clear hints are dropped that any affinities which Adrast may have had with Johann's attitudes belong to the past. Johann himself tells of Adrast's earlier spendthrift ways, but adds: 'I admit he's completely changed his ways of late [...] But I'll soon get him back on course.'[88] Far from bilking his debts, Adrast actively seeks out his creditor and resolves to sell his remaining assets in order to meet his obligations. And while his doubts concerning religion remain, we learn that he has ceased to pour scorn on it; as Theophan notices, 'In argument, he no longer scoffs but does his utmost to give reasons [...]. His scorn for religion is gradually giving way to scorn for those who teach it.'[89] Indeed, far from attacking religion itself, he now acknowledges its value for untutored minds, including the ordinary mass and women in particular. The reason for this change is, of course, that he has fallen in love with the pious Juliane. Yet although Juliane disagrees with his theory that religion is only for the uneducated, her own religious beliefs seem to contain little that is likely to offend a freethinker or deist, for she makes no mention of Christ or the Scriptures, but only of the basic articles of natural religion:[90]

[84] LM II, 54 and 77. [85] LM II, 57, 73, 80. [86] LM II, 76.
[87] Gellert III, 100. [88] LM II, 76. [89] LM II, 81–2. [90] LM II, 99–100.

> What can fill our soul with more sublime ideas than those of religion? And in what else can beauty of soul reside than in such ideas? In proper ideas of God, of ourselves, of our duties, and of our destiny?

In short, if Adrast undergoes any kind of 'conversion', it is not from free thought to Christian faith, but from one kind of freethinking to another—from prodigal living and disparagement of religion (i.e. from 'freethinking' in the popular sense) to personal religious doubts coupled with moral responsibility and respect for the religious opinions of others.

What Adrast and Juliane admire most in each other are not so much beliefs as moral qualities. Adrast is described in the original scenario as 'without religion, but full of virtuous sentiments',[91] and Juliane says of him: 'His ideas of honour and natural justice are excellent.'[92] Conversely, he says of Juliane: 'All the virtues seem to have combined in her soul.'[93] This stress on morality as the most important aspect of religion, more important than any religious doctrine, is a feature of Enlightenment thought which reappears in many of Lessing's works, including *Nathan the Wise* and *The Education of the Human Race*, both of which look forward to an age when morality will no longer require any supernatural endorsement. When he refuses to deny his debts, Adrast says of the promise he had given: 'This must be sacred to an honest man, even if there is no God and no punishment.'[94] Adrast, in other words, belongs to that class of virtuous atheists or non-believers defended by two philosophers of the early Enlightenment for whom the young Lessing had the greatest respect, namely Pierre Bayle and Christian Wolff.

All this is a far cry from comedy as traditionally understood, and Lessing's main problem with this play was that of holding its comic and serious elements together as they constantly strained apart; all his skill and experience with existing varieties of comedy were applied to this end. The title and opening scenes seem to promise a satirical comedy of character, in which Adrast's obsessive anti-clericalism will be held up to ridicule and reduced to absurdity. His prejudice is indeed shown up as absurd, at least in the present circumstances. But as already noted, he is by no means ridiculed, and he comes increasingly to resemble a figure from sentimental comedy as his inner virtue is revealed. (The virtuous Theophan, of course, belongs to this category from the start.) Serious characters of this kind, with their fully drawn psychology and differentiated language, mark a further move on Lessing's part in the direction of realism. This accentuates their distance, however, from their comic environment—the world of satire, farce, and intrigue inhabited by Lisidor and the servants. The satire which, in the previous comedies, was directed at the central figures is in this case shifted to their caricatured counterparts, the servants Johann and Martin, who are helpfully introduced by Lisette as 'the very images of their masters from the unattractive side: freethinking has turned one of them into a rogue, and piety has made the other a blockhead'.[95] The scene in which Johann, having denied the devil's existence, challenges the devil to strike him blind

[91] LM III, 262. [92] LM II, 68. [93] LM II, 59.
[94] LM II, 64. [95] LM II, 73.

and then, as Lisette covers his eyes from behind, swears to repent and mend his ways, is a set piece from the *commedia dell'arte*; but it is none the less appropriate in this context. In another ingenious touch, Lisette does double duty as a female counterpart to the two manservants by serving the frivolous Henriette and the devout Juliane on alternate days. In this and innumerable other ways, the structural principle of contrast and counterpoint shapes the entire action, thereby making the basic and problematic tension between comic and serious elements, which alternate from scene to scene, appear more natural and acceptable. The cumulative impact of these polarities also lends force to the final scenes, which are technically the best in the play, as Lessing draws all the conflicting strands together, reconciling Adrast and Theophan and giving the comic figures Lisette and Lisidor a pivotal role in the final exchange of partners. The wit and banter which replace the earlier verbal duels as the last misunderstandings are removed lead naturally into the traditional comic ending, allowing us to forget, at least for the moment, the dormant religious tensions of the earlier acts.

Not surprisingly, *The Freethinker* became a standard item on the German stage for some two decades after its publication, for it is without doubt the most accomplished of Lessing's early comedies.[96] But the controversial issues it touches on could not be adequately explored within the existing varieties of comedy, or even in the medium of didactic poetry, with which Lessing was simultaneously experimenting. As a result, he soon began to tackle them more directly in historical and philosophical studies of contentious religious questions. But meanwhile, he once more addressed the issue of religious prejudice in the last of his early comedies, *The Jews* (*Die Juden*).

This short, one-act play was first published in 1754 and reissued, with minor revisions, in 1767. Its title page informs us that it was written in 1749—that is, during Lessing's first year in Berlin. There is no reason to doubt that the basic conception of the play dates from that time, although it is likely that Lessing did further work on it between then and its publication in 1754. But since it is closely associated in style and substance with the Leipzig comedies, it can appropriately be discussed at this point as the last of the early plays.

A baron and landowner is attacked by robbers and saved from death by a passing traveller, on whom he gratefully presses his hospitality. The criminals, disguised with false beards as Jews, are in fact the baron's employees, an administrator and magistrate on his estates. Welcoming the stranger as their guest, the baron and his administrator air their anti-semitic prejudices, and the administrator steals the stranger's snuffbox. In response to the stranger's suspicions, the administrator turns out his pockets and gives himself away by dropping the false beards with which he and his accomplice had disguised themselves. The baron, saved for a second time from the criminals in his household, offers the stranger his daughter's hand in marriage. This plan is frustrated when the stranger reveals that he is himself a Jew,

[96] See Barner et al. (1987) 130; U. Schulz 179.

forbidden by law to marry a Christian, whereupon the shamefaced baron takes leave of his rescuer with expressions of goodwill and regret.

Like Lessing's previous two comedies, *The Jews* has no obvious single model in earlier dramatic literature. The figure of the noble Jew may have been suggested by a parallel figure in Gellert's novel *The Swedish Countess* (1747–8), although the two works are otherwise dissimilar; but the Jew's act of rescue was no doubt modelled on that of another member of a despised minority, the good Samaritan, whose story Lessing planned to dramatize in his last years.[97] Other details are borrowed, as usual, from a variety of sources, including Vanbrugh's *The Relapse* (1696), Farquar's *The Beaux' Stratagem* (1707), Plautus' *Mostellaria*, and Molière' *Le Misanthrope*,[98] but all such borrowings are firmly subordinated to the play's didactic purpose.

Lessing defines his motive for writing the play as follows:[99]

> It [the play] was the product of very serious reflection on the shameful oppression suffered by a nation which, as I see it, a Christian cannot contemplate without a kind of reverence. In former times, I thought, it produced so many heroes and prophets, and nowadays people doubt whether it contains a single honest man.

Already in Kamenz, which lay on the trade route to Leipzig, Lessing must often have seen Jews from eastern Europe on their way to and from the annual trade fairs,[100] for over a thousand Jews regularly visited them; he no doubt saw more of them in Leipzig. This peripatetic and for the most part uneducated throng had no good reputation, and it was presumably Jews of this kind that he described in 1754 as 'that dissolute riffraff who wander round the trade fairs'.[101] His sympathies for the Jews were probably first awakened in Berlin, where they lived under particularly harsh conditions, with strict limits on numbers, punitive taxes, and prohibitions on marriage with, or employment of, Christians, on land ownership, and on most guild-based trades and professions.[102] Like his cultural mentor Voltaire, Frederick II regarded the Jews with contempt, and he tolerated a limited number in his capital only because of the financial benefits which their commercial activities yielded. (There were 2,188 in Berlin in 1750, of whom barely half enjoyed limited civil rights.)[103] Lessing's lifelong friendship with Moses Mendelssohn began only in 1754, but he must have encountered the Jewish community from his earliest days in Berlin, for the lodgings in the Spandauer Strasse which he moved into in November 1748 were close to the synagogue in an area favoured by the established (or 'privileged') Jewish families.[104] Jews from this better-off section of the community dressed in keeping with current fashion, mixed freely with cultured members of the German community, and patronized the Berlin theatre, where Lessing may first have encountered them. His sympathies with the Jews were at any rate fully

[97] See LM III, 495. [98] See Kies (1927) 406–7; BI 153–4. [99] LM V, 270.
[100] Barner (1984c) 36. [101] LM VI, 162; cf. Heuer 29–30.
[102] Cf. Stern 72–93; C. Walker (1986) 35–41.
[103] Schieder 102–3; B II, 1108.
[104] Stern 371; Oehlke I, 123.

established by 1749, the year in which he conceived the idea of his play; and he is almost certainly the author of a supportive review, published in 1753, of an anonymous pamphlet pleading for Jewish emancipation along the lines already granted in Holland and Britain, permitting ownership of property and a free choice of profession.[105] This pamphlet, and Lessing's endorsement of it, are probably the earliest pleas for Jewish emancipation in the German language, predating Dohm's more famous treatise of 1781, *On the Civil Improvement of the Jews*, by nearly thirty years; and Lessing's comedy *The Jews*, published one year after the review, contains not only the first sympathetic portrayal of a Jew (traditionally an object of satire) on the German stage, but also an implicit plea for Jewish emancipation.[106]

In one of the most illuminating insights of Lessing scholarship in recent years, Gad Freudenthal has persuasively argued, on the basis of new evidence, that the above pamphlet was almost certainly written, at Lessing's instigation, by Aaron Salomon Gumpertz.[107] It also appears that Lessing not only reviewed the work in 1753, but also arranged for its publication by Christian Friedrich Voss, who was by this time his own publisher and personal friend. By his authorship of the pamphlet and by his own example, Gumpertz was a pioneer of Jewish emancipation in Germany. The son of a prosperous Berlin merchant, he was probably the first German Jew to obtain a formal university qualification. In compliance with his mother's wish that he should become a rabbi, he received appropriate instruction from Jewish teachers, one of whom also gave him a grounding in philosophy and mathematics. He thenceforth devoted himself to secular studies, and corresponded with Gottsched on literary matters before successfully submitting his doctoral dissertation *De temperamentis* to the medical faculty of the university of Frankfurt an der Oder. Between 1747 and late 1751, Gumpertz was successively secretary to the marquis d'Argens and to Pierre Louis Moreau de Maupertuis, president of the Berlin Academy, after which he embarked on an extended tour of England, Holland, and France. In the course of this tour, he learned of the so-called 'Jew Bill' which came before the British parliament in April 1753, shortly before Gumpertz returned to Germany. The Bill (which was subsequently withdrawn) aimed to improve the already significant civil rights of the Jews in Britain, and it is cited with approval in the pamphlet reviewed by Lessing. It is likely that Lessing made Gumpertz's acquaintance during his first years in Berlin, and that the educated Jewish traveller in his play *The Jews* owes more than a little to Gumpertz's example.

The Jews has often been described as a precursor of Lessing's other play with a Jewish hero, *Nathan the Wise*.[108] Both plays deal, among other things, with anti-semitic prejudice; but whereas *Nathan* deals chiefly with religious prejudice, religion plays little part in *The Jews*. The prejudice which Lessing attacks in the early play is admittedly peculiar to Christians, and he indicates in the text that it is

[105] LM V, 186–7; cf. Guthke (2005b) 105.
[106] See on this Hinck 283–4; Och 54.
[107] On the following see Freudenthal *passim*.
[108] See B I, 1269.

actively encouraged by the Christian clergy.[109] But the prejudice itself is not so much religious as moral and ethnic (though not as yet racial, for modern racism still lay in the future), and its consequences are primarily social and political. It is defended in the play both by the baron's uncouth employees and by the more refined baron himself. The administrator Krumm (his name means 'crooked') accuses the Jews of the very crimes he himself perpetrates, namely deception, theft, and robbery with violence, and he describes them as an accursed race whom—as he declares in frighteningly prophetic tones—he would exterminate altogether if he had the power to do so.[110] The baron's views are less extreme, but his prejudice is fundamentally no different: the Jews are specialists in financial deception, and their inherent depravity is reflected in their shifty appearance (which he contrasts, ironically, with his rescuer's honest and agreeable features). That such views were widespread at the time, even among the educated, is confirmed by the most substantial early review of the play, by the Göttingen orientalist and theologian Johann David Michaelis. Michaelis's main criticism is that its Jewish hero is too good to be true, for 'even moderate virtue and honesty are so seldom encountered in this nation that the few examples there are fail to diminish to the extent one might wish the hatred which it encounters'.[111]

Michaelis's prejudice is essentially the same as that of the baron in the play, and he attributes the alleged duplicity of the Jews to the fact that they live chiefly by commerce. In his reply to the review, Lessing does not reject this explanation,[112] but he denies that it is applicable to the virtuous Jew in his play, because the latter is rich and does not have to work for a living. His trump card, however, is a dignified letter from Moses Mendelssohn, with whom he had recently become friendly, to Aaron Salomon Gumpertz, protesting with justified anger at the reviewer's condemnation of an entire people's morality. Lessing adds for good measure that both the writer of the letter (for whose authenticity he further vouches in a private letter to Michaelis) and his correspondent are men of virtue and learning, and that they acquired these assets without the advantage of personal wealth. Cultivated Jews like Mendelssohn were by no means unique in the Berlin community,[113] and against this background—and the real-life example of Gumpertz—the hero of Lessing's play seems a much more realistic figure than those, like Michaelis, who had little or no contact with such circles, were willing to credit. Even Michaelis acknowledges, however, that the hostile reactions of Jews towards Christians is largely attributable to their persecution at the hands of the latter, and Lessing likewise believes that Christian oppression, rather than commerce as such, is the deeper cause of Jewish deceitfulness. As the stranger puts it in the play,[114]

> If the Jews practise deception, no one reflects that the Christians forced them into it. I doubt whether any Christian can boast of fair dealings with a Jew; and the Jew tries at most to repay him in kind.

[109] LM I, 379. [110] LM I, 378–9. [111] B I, 1248.
[112] On the following see LM VI, 161–6. [113] See Stern 369–73.
[114] LM I, 380 (1767 version); cf. ibid. n. 4 (1754 version).

It is accordingly evident that Lessing disagreed strongly with the widespread moral prejudice against the Jews in Germany, and that he supported the cause of Jewish emancipation. It remains to be seen how he used the resources of drama, and of comedy in particular, to further these ends.

In 1749, his friend Naumann announced that Lessing would shortly publish several comedies, including one called *Der Jude* (*The Jew*).[115] If Lessing did originally use the singular in this title, it would—like *The Freethinker* before it—have led the public to expect a traditional character comedy, only to be confronted with much more serious issues. He presumably opted for the plural form in order to keep the stranger's identity secret until the end of the play. Like *The Freethinker*, *The Jews* does contain some elements of the satirical character comedy, but the satire is again directed at the secondary characters: it is the prejudices of the baron and his employees, not those of the hero, which are shown to be absurd, whereas the hero is an essentially serious figure, more reminiscent of sentimental than of satirical comedy. He is himself the victim, not the upholder, of prejudice, and he is a type only inasmuch as he is a paragon of virtue, like the heroes of sentimental comedy; but his identity and background are so unusual that he is at the same time thoroughly untypical and individualized.[116]

The most unusual formal feature of this play is its surprise ending, and the reversal of expectations that goes along with it. It is unlikely (though not impossible, as will shortly be seen) that any expectation aroused by the title that the Jews might be the object of satire will be sustained for long, for the only individual 'Jews' mentioned until near the end of the play are immediately shown to be gentiles in disguise, and such satire as does occur is largely aimed at these same non-Jewish figures. What the audience—or at least the German audience of Lessing's time—does not expect is to discover that all the anti-semitic remarks of the baron and his employees will be suddenly and drastically undermined, and shown to be utterly inappropriate to an individual from the vilified minority itself, an individual who has already gained our sympathy and admiration. The shock effect which, in *The Misogynist*, was experienced by the hero is now experienced by everyone except the hero, including the public, and we realize in retrospect that all the characters except the hero have been objects of satire from the start. Besides, all the signs which, towards the end, pointed towards a traditional comic dénouement, with a betrothal and general rejoicing, prove to be wholly misleading. The effect of this disappointment is to draw attention to the factors which render the happy ending impossible, namely the social and political obstacles which exclude the Jews from rights enjoyed by the rest of society. Basic presuppositions of Enlightenment comedy are called into question here: the belief that reason can set all wrongs right, and the expectation that virtue will gain its just reward (within the play, but ultimately in reality too) are shown to be incompatible with the institutions of a society which liked to regard itself as enlightened.[117]

[115] B I, 1152. [116] On this see Hinck 284; Guthke (2005b) 101.
[117] See Trautwein 9–13.

Lessing's early poetic works—especially his epigrams, fables, and short verse narratives—often conclude with a surprise effect or reversal of expectation, usually for comic or satirical purposes. But among his completed dramas, only *The Jews* concludes in this way, and the effect is far from comic: even the surrogate match, in the final scene, between the stranger's servant and Lisette, maidservant to the baron's daughter, cannot fully restore the lightness of comedy. Lessing explicitly calls the play a comedy (*Lustspiel*) on its title-page, presumably because it was closer to comedy than to any other form of drama then current; and since it also deals, like *The Freethinker*, with serious problems, it can fairly be described as a 'problem comedy', at least in terms of its content. But in formal terms, it does not fit neatly into any then existing category of drama, and its open ending and unresolved tensions are remarkably modern and untypical of the time. It does admittedly contain farcical elements reminiscent of the *commedia dell'arte* and of some of Lessing's own earlier comedies; but these elements—such as the pickpocketing scene, the discovery of the false beards, and the servant Christoph's wisecrack in the last line of the play with its allusion to circumcision—do not sit easily with the disquieting problems which the play ostentatiously fails to resolve. It is, of course, difficult, if not impossible, to assess the extent to which our present-day disquiet at these problems is conditioned by our knowledge of modern anti-semitism and its catastrophic consequences. But even if we lacked this knowledge, the play contains other implausible or incongruous features which are likely to leave us dissatisfied. The ease with which the apparently hardened robbers incriminate themselves, the fact that the baron ever saw fit to employ such people (one of whom boasts that his father and grandfather ended their careers on the gallows), the readiness with which the baron offers his daughter to a complete stranger whom he (albeit mistakenly) believes to be fleeing his country after a duel, the stranger's extraordinary restraint and silence concerning his identity in face of prolonged provocation—not to mention a kind of dialogue of the deaf in which the baron and the stranger express themselves in alternate asides to the audience—all of this shows a degree of awkwardness not encountered in Lessing's previous comedy, *The Freethinker*.

Nevertheless, *The Jews* is a remarkable play, of major biographical and historical significance. In its attack on prejudice and its defence of those afflicted by it, it moves beyond *The Freethinker* into a much more controversial area, for the prejudice in question is on this occasion enshrined not only in public opinion, but also in social and political institutions. This is not the place to reopen the debate over Lessing's advocacy of religious toleration, and whether or not his (and the Enlightenment's) views on this matter did the Jewish cause more harm than good; these issues will be examined later in connection with his last play, *Nathan the Wise*. In *The Jews*, his aim is not to promote religious toleration in any case, but to oppose the moral prejudice and social discrimination to which the Jews—like actors and freethinkers—were subject. It is nevertheless worth replying here to one of the critics, Hans Mayer, who, while conceding that *The Jews* was not without value to the Jewish cause, argues that Lessing is concerned only with individual emancipation through wealth and learning, with no thought of legislative reforms which might

allow the Jews to indulge in a wider range of activities than was then permitted.[118] On the contrary, Lessing explicitly states—as already mentioned—that his friends Mendelssohn and Gumpertz had attained learning and virtue (and hence social respectability) without the aid of personal wealth, and in 1753, he had favourably reviewed a work which appealed directly for Jewish civil rights, having almost certainly encouraged its composition and arranged for it to be published; the same appeal is implicit, of course, in *The Jews* itself. Besides, it cannot be said that his defence of the Jews as a persecuted minority has proved misguided in the light of later developments: this defence will retain its relevance so long as minorities continue to be persecuted.

The Jews was first performed in 1766, and again on some fifty occasions over the next two decades.[119] As a short, one-act play, it seems to have been used rather as a filler than as a drama in its own right.[120] The figure of the good Jew nevertheless reappears in various plays in the later eighteenth century, not only in Germany, although the comic Jew of popular satire likewise continues to appear.[121] All of the plays in question are overshadowed, of course, by Lessing's *Nathan the Wise* of 1779, whose admirable hero is the most memorable Jewish character in the German theatre. A report concerning a late production of *The Jews* in 1806 suggests, however, that Lessing's plays had made little headway against popular prejudice: on this occasion, the audience totally missed the point, and greeted the anti-semitic sentiments of the corrupt administrator Krumm with acclamation.[122]

This completes our survey of Lessing's early comedies. Some mention must be made, however, of his adaptation and translation of comedies by Plautus, whose works he had admired since his St Afra days. In 1750, in the periodical *Contributions to the History and Improvement of the Theatre* which he and Mylius co-edited, he published an essay on Plautus' life and works and cited some of the latter as ideal models of comedy.[123] To reinforce this point, he followed the essay up, in the second issue of the same periodical, with a translation of Plautus' *The Captives* (*Captivi*), describing it as the greatest play ever performed.[124] In the same year, he completed an adaptation for the modern stage of another comedy by Plautus, namely *The Treasure* (*Der Schatz*; Latin title *Trinummus*), ranking it as Plautus' second-greatest work.[125] Lessing's evaluation of these plays is certainly surprising. In the first place, his own most recent comedies—*The Freethinker* and *The Jews* of 1749—are innovative, experimental works which transcend the formal and thematic limitations of traditional comedy, including that of antiquity. He may, of course, have decided, soon after completing these 'problem' comedies, that comedy was not, after all, the most suitable vehicle for ideological controversy. This is confirmed by the fact that he subsequently employed mainly non-dramatic media such as the historical or biographical essay (as in his *Rettungen* or 'vindications' of heretics and other maligned figures) to deal with controversial issues, at least until

[118] Mayer 356 and 362. [119] U. Schulz 181. [120] See B I, 1269; Och 51.
[121] See Och 54; C. Walker (1986) 35; Oehlke I, 444. [122] Och 42.
[123] LM IV, 57–82. [124] LM IV, 83–1130; IV, 79 and 191.
[125] LM II, 125–70; IV, 81.

his later years. At any rate, he put his own comedies aside in 1750 and tried to define the essential nature of comedy itself, looking to antiquity, as he later did in his *Laocoön*, for archetypal models of the art-form in question. He had already oncluded from his own experience as a dramatist that both satirical (or farcical) and serious (or sentimental) elements were essential to comedy if it was to fulfil its basic purpose, and in keeping with the moral didacticism of the early *Aufklärung*, he still believed that this basic purpose was to promote virtue and discourage vice. The comic ideal was therefore to be found in a 'mixed' form in which vices were satirized and virtues celebrated—an amalgam, in other words, of Gottschedian satire and Gellertian sentiment, the two main ingredients which, together with popular farce, he had himself employed in varying proportions in his early plays. But surprisingly, he now claimed that this ideal had already been realized by Plautus—at least in a few of his plays such as *The Captives* and *The Treasure*.[126]

There is, of course, nothing new or surprising about Lessing's desire to ground his dramatic theory on the authority of antiquity: literary conservatives such as Gottsched, like the French classicists before him, had done exactly the same. But in selecting Plautus as his ideal, Lessing was breaking new ground. Ever since the Renaissance, the elegant and stylish Terence had been considered superior as a writer of comedies to the more popular and often vulgar Plautus.[127] Lessing, characteristically going against the grain, was among the first to reverse this ranking—even if, in singling out Plautus' most refined plays such as *The Captives, The Treasure*, and *Stichus*, all of which were derived from Greek New Comedy, he was making less of a break with tradition than might at first appear. His own comedies certainly suggest that the element of popular farce in Plautus must have appealed to him. But it is less easy to explain how he could regard Plautus' plays as morally improving, for comic effect rather than moral edification is undoubtedly the chief object of Plautus' satire, and he rarely celebrates virtue for its own sake. Dramas of family reunion like *The Captives* and *The Treasure* plainly appealed to Lessing because they contain a pronounced measure of sentiment as well as humour, sentiment which has some moral content inasmuch as it is based on family piety. In this sense, such plays do indeed exemplify a 'mixed' or balanced form of comedy, more realistic than the one-sided satire advocated by Gottsched or the unrelieved sentiment of Gellert's *Tender Sisters*. It is surely this realism of Plautus' comedies, together with their popular flavour, rather than any explicitly didactic content, which underlies their appeal to Lessing. They also enabled him to invoke the sanction of antiquity for that combination of humour and sensibility which traditional poetics, despite its own invocation of the ancients, refused to recognize. Lessing would employ this same tactic again in later years, as when he reinterpreted Aristotle's *Poetics* to bring it into line with modern domestic tragedy instead of the courtly tragedy of French classicism; the ancients, he believed, were far too useful as allies to be left in the hands of the conservatives.

[126] LM IV, 191–2.
[127] See Riedel (1976) 43 and 52; Korzeniewski, however, questions this view.

Plautus' *Trinummus* was particularly suitable for adaptation to the German stage, for it contains numerous features of plot and character akin to those of Saxon comedy: the frustrated lovers, the conflict of generations, the young spendthrift, the crafty servant, and the return of the long-lost father were instantly recognizable motifs. Lessing's adaptation, *The Treasure*, accentuates all those qualities most congenial to the contemporary theatre, condensing the original into a tightly organized one-act play by omitting or reducing Plautus' long monologues and descriptions and emphasizing the satirical and sentimental elements.[128] The result is not exactly a modern play, but a well-crafted and highly amusing comedy of obviously Roman origin and recognizably modern psychology. It further demonstrates Lessing's growing mastery of stagecraft, and after its publication in 1755, it was produced on some twenty occasions over the following two decades.[129]

Lessing's translation of *The Captives* is much more literal, but nonetheless readable. It is noteworthy as one of the first of his published translations from many languages, although it still contains awkward and stilted passages of a kind which he later learned to avoid.[130] The long essay on Plautus which precedes it represents his first published excursion into classical philology.[131] It is largely derivative and based on somewhat antiquated scholarship, and its defence of Plautus' art is at times strained, as a still unidentified critic perceptively demonstrated; Lessing published the latter's lengthy critique in the next issue of his periodical and replied to it with only moderate success.[132] His engagement with Plautus in 1750 was accordingly both a postscript to his own early comedies and part of his apprenticeship as a translator and classical scholar. But his enthusiasm for the Roman dramatist did not last, and in the *Hamburg Dramaturgy* of 1767–69, *The Treasure* is categorized as an example of 'low comedy'.[133]

From 1748 onwards, Lessing drafted numerous comic scenarios, along with translations and adaptations of works by others such as Plautus, Goldoni, and several English dramatists; most of these projects remained fragmentary.[134] During the 1750s, his preoccupation with comedy was gradually displaced by a new interest in tragedy, culminating in *Miss Sara Sampson* of 1755. This play, and the most substantial of his comic and tragic fragments, will be discussed in due course in their chronological contexts.

The early comedies made little impact for several years after they were written, for none of them, except the two weakest plays, *Damon* and *The Old Maid* (published in 1747 and 1749) was accessible to the public at large until they appeared in Lessing's collected *Writings* (*Schriften*) in 1754 and 1755. His early reputation as a writer in fact rested less on his comedies than on his poems, many of which saw the light in Mylius' periodicals of the Leipzig years, in the *Berlinische privilegierte Zeitung* (the newspaper Lessing helped to edit in Berlin), and in his published collection *Trifles* (*Kleinigkeiten*) of 1751.[135] The remainder of this chapter will

[128] On this see Riedel (1976) 52–7 and B I, 1232–8.
[129] U. Schulz 194.
[130] See Robertson (1913) 524.
[131] LM IV, 57–82.
[132] LM IV, 131–74 and 180–93.
[133] LM IX, 221; cf. B I, 1352.
[134] LM III, 235–500.
[135] See GEL: *Kleinigkeiten*, Faksimile-Ausgabe, ed. Jochen Meyer.

examine the reasons for his early success as a poet, and for the subsequent neglect of his poems until recent times. The early poetry includes songs, verse narratives, epigrams, verse fables, and philosophical or didactic poems, but most of the poems published up to and including the collection of 1751 belong to the first two of these categories, which will now be considered. (The remaining groups of poems can more appropriately be discussed in later chapters.)

The early songs (*Lieder*) are of various kinds and based on diverse models, but the dominant tone is that of the 'Anacreontic' poetry which enjoyed great popularity in Germany during the 1740s. Though it takes its name from the Greek lyricist Anacreon of the sixth century BC, this poetry was chiefly inspired by the so-called *Anacreontea*, a collection of over sixty poems (often described as 'odes') first published in 1554 by the French humanist Stephanus (Henri Estienne). Most of these poems date from the early Christian centuries, but they were falsely regarded, until the nineteenth century, as the work of Anacreon himself. Admired and imitated from the start by Ronsard and others, they enjoyed a renewed vogue in French courtly circles during the reign of Louis XIV; they again became popular a few decades later in Germany, this time among *Aufklärung* poets writing for the new middle-class public.[136] Friedrich von Hagedorn (who was also much influenced by Horace) led the way with a collection published in 1729, but the fashion reached its height in the later 1740s with collections by J. W. L. Gleim (1744–5), J. N. Götz (1746), and J. P. Uz (1749). Lessing was familiar with the Greek originals from his student years (his teacher Christ planned to translate them into German),[137] as well as with the recent German imitations; he soon began to compose poems in the Anacreontic idiom himself, and Mylius regularly published them in his journals, identifying their author merely as his 'Anacreontic friend' in order to preserve Lessing's anonymity. Some twenty-five poems appeared in this way in 1747 and another eight in the following year, many of them subsequently incorporated in the *Trifles* of 1751.[138] It would seem, however, that this collection was assembled as early as 1748, for Lessing later complained that the publisher had received it three years before it finally appeared.[139] His poems should therefore be seen not as a postscript to the German Anacreontic movement—as the date of the *Trifles* might suggest—but as part of it.

German Anacreontic poetry is the closest literary equivalent to rococo painting, especially the pastoral idylls of Watteau, Boucher, Lancret, and Pater. Disarmingly simple and seemingly naive, these poems celebrate a light-hearted hedonism for which love and wine, enjoyed in Arcadian settings, constitute the highest goods: *carpe diem* and *ergo bibamus* are their categorical imperatives. It is at first sight puzzling why this lyrical mode, with its courtly history, should for a time have appealed so strongly to the German middle classes. Its appeal was never, of course, universal—Lessing' father, needless to say, frowned on it, and his sister

[136] On German Anacreontism in general, see Zeman *passim* and Anger *passim*.
[137] Cf. E. Schmidt I, 46.
[138] On the genesis of the poems see GEL: Sämtliche Gedichte, ed. Grimm 372–4.
[139] LM IV, 375; see also J. Meyer in GEL: *Kleinigkeiten* 213 and 230.

Dorothea, fearing for her brother's salvation when she found him composing tributes to Venus and Bacchus during his enforced stay in Kamenz in the early months of 1748, consigned some of his manuscripts to the flames.[140] The Leipzig public was, however, less censorious; even Gottsched translated some of the Greek originals, and Hagedorn, along with the austere didacticist Haller, was the most esteemed German-speaking poet in the years before Klopstock made his debut in the middle of the century. The emancipation of the senses was already under way in Germany (albeit less demonstratively than in France), and not least in fashionable Leipzig; and whereas the public was by no means ready for the unabashed sexuality of poetry such as Goethe's *Roman Elegies* of forty years later, the *Anacreontea* and their derivatives exuded a humorous charm and stylized sentiment which made them more acceptable. (They doubtless also provided welcome relief from the sermonizing of Brockes, Haller, and the moral weeklies.) The *Anacreontea* had a similar appeal in England, where one translator commended them as 'sportive without being wanton, and ardent without being licentious'.[141] For their modern imitators, the line between light-hearted frivolity and *faux-naif* voyeurism was, of course, not always easy to draw (after all, the lyrical persona of many of the *Anacreontea* is a bibulous old man lusting after the young of both sexes), and such poetry always moved on the outer edges of respectability. This, of course, was no deterrent to Lessing, whose early comedies, as already noted, at times crossed the boundaries of propriety. Nevertheless, his own poems have a wholesome vitality whose appeal outlived the Anacreontic vogue, and their distinctive character has much to do with that of Lessing himself.

Several of his poems are directly modelled on items in the *Anacreontea*. His 'After the Fifteenth Ode of Anacreon' ('Nach der 15. Ode Anakreons'), for example, is a verse translation of the eighth poem in the original manuscript (the *Palatine Anthology*), and is described by one authority as the best German version of that poem to date;[142] its easy colloquial style and four-line rhyming stanzas do indeed come closer to the spirit of the original than, for instance, J. N. Götz's more literal, unrhymed version.[143] But Lessing's preference for rhyming stanzas reveals his debt to a second poetic tradition which is no less powerful an influence on his early lyric than its Anacreontic themes and models: this was the student song, a tradition which was still very much alive in Leipzig, and to which other student poets of that city such as J. C. Günther (1695–1723) had contributed before him.[144] The social function of Lessing's songs is underlined by their frequent apostrophes to friends or drinking companions—a feature less common in Anacreontic poetry proper—and more than one of his songs, including the most famous of them all, namely 'Death' ('Der Tod'), in which the grim skeleton suddenly confronts the carefree imbiber, quickly became part of the student repertoire.[145] These songs, with their direct speech, colloquialism, ribald

[140] See L. to J. G. Lessing, 28 April 1749 and KGL 48.
[141] Anacreon (1804) I, 21.
[142] LM I, 70; Zeman 243; cf. also LM I, 77 and 96–7.
[143] Cf. L., Sämtliche Gedichte, ed. Grimm 290.
[144] Cf. Zeman 223 and 237.
[145] LM I, 90–1; cf. Zeman 249 and E. Schmidt I, 85.

humour, and rousing rhymes and refrains—as in his 'Drinking Song' ('Trinklied')[146]—reinforce the literary idiom of Anacreontic verse with a popular element which fulfils a similar function in Lessing's early lyric to that of the *commedia dell'arte* in his early comedies.

Apart from their song-like character, the most striking formal feature of Lessing's *Lieder*—and indeed of most of his early poems—is their epigrammatic quality. Although his work on the epigram proper did not begin until the early 1750s, most of his Leipzig poetry already displays a tight logical structure with a climactic ending, usually of a humorous kind. 'The Beauty from Behind' ('Die Schöne von hinten', 1747),[147] with its concluding revelation that the 'beauty' is an overdressed old woman, and 'The Names' ('Die Namen') are in this respect typical. Coleridge's translation of the latter poem may serve as an illustration:

> I ask'd my Fair one happy day
> What I should call her in my Lay;
> By what sweet name from Rome or Greece,
> Lalage, Neæra, Chloris,
> Laura, Lesbia, or Doris,
> Dorimæne or Lucrece.
>
> Ah! (replied my gentle Fair)
> Beloved! what are names but air?
> Choose thou whatever suits the line,
> Call me Laura, call me Chloris,
> Call me Lalage or Doris —
> Only, only call me *Thine*!

It is true that Anacreon himself wrote epigrams, and the poems of his imitators, including the *Anacreontea*, often have an epigrammatic quality; but it is not as consistent and conspicuous as it is throughout Lessing's poetry.

Another of Lessing's favourite devices is the enumeration of negative instances followed by a concluding positive antithesis, as in 'Für wen ich singe' ('For whom I sing'), which lists all the groups of people, such as children, pedants, pious women, etc., who do not constitute his audience, before turning to his drinking companions and sweetheart who do.[148] Related devices include the *reductio ad absurdum*, paradox, and blatantly illogical conclusion, as in 'The Strength of Wine' ('Die Stärke des Weins)', 'In Praise of Idleness' ('Lob der Faulheit'), and 'Old and Young Wine' ('Der alte und der junge Wein').[149] Ironic wit, though not uncommon in the *Anacreontea*, is more pervasive in Lessing's poems, so much so that they at times seem more like parodies of the Anacreontic tradition than examples of it;[150] indeed, many of them began life as postscripts to serious articles in Mylius' periodical *The Scientist* (*Der Naturforscher*), parodying the article in question by turning its argument into a sophistical justification for drinking or lovemaking, as in 'The Earthquake' ('Das Erdbeben').[151]

[146] LM I, 87. [147] LM I, 69. [148] LM I, 81–2; cf. I, 110–11.
[149] LM I, 67, 74, 68. [150] Cf. LM I, 75. [151] LM I, 109–10.

Qualities such as these place Lessing's early lyric at the opposite extreme to the lyric of personal feeling. Much of their appeal lies in their self-mocking wit, their rational construction, and their ironic variations on traditional forms and motifs—all of which qualities, and the fact that their tone is for the most part humorous, underline their affinity with his early comedies. They do, of course, have an autobiographical component inasmuch as they reflect the Leipzig student milieu and its characteristic preoccupations; but there is nothing remotely confessional about them. It is significant that the only two poems in which an authentic note of personal sentiment comes through were not published in Lessing's lifetime. 'Auf sich selbst' ('To Himself'), which begins 'I do not always feel like reading' and culminates in outspoken defiance of the unnamed 'old people' who begrudge him his youthful pleasures, is too raw an expression of his resentment at parental attitudes to be a good poem.[152] The more successful 'Ich' ('I'), scribbled in an acquaintance's autograph album in 1752, is no less self-assertive, but more reflective; with its dismissal of honours, wealth, and the opinion of posterity, and its blunt affirmation of personal autonomy, it expresses sentiments which we know from other evidence to be characteristic of its author. Its sombre combination of the old *vanitas* theme with a commitment to Enlightenment individualism make it the most memorable, as well as the most personal, of the early poems:[153]

> Honour has never sought to favour me,
> And if it had, it would not have succeeded.
> For who has time, when urgent haste is needed,
> To choose a sumptuous garb in which to flee?
>
> Great wealth has never been what I desire,
> What use is it to hoard, in life's brief measure,
> Not for oneself, but more for thieves, one's treasure,
> When simple needs the smallest means require?
>
> How long until I too shall have to go,
> And those to come will walk above my head?
> What need have they to know on whom they tread?
> For I alone need know.

Lessing's avoidance of the confessional mode, of direct expression of personal feelings, was by no means untypical of the German lyric of the 1740s, for the lyric of personal experience and self-expression had not yet displaced the lyric of wit and wordplay which is more representative of the early Enlightenment. Nevertheless, the culture of sensibility which gave birth to the new kind of lyricism was already in the ascendant, and had already left its mark on Lessing's comedies. But while he was increasingly prepared to express and elicit strong feelings in his dramas (indeed, he would shortly describe this as the main purpose of tragedy), the medium of drama imposed a degree of distance between the life of its characters and that of the dramatist which made it more congenial to him than the personal lyric.

[152] LM I, 126–7.
[153] LM I, 131. I am grateful to John R. Williams for improvements to the translation of this poem.

Although he was quick to recognize Klopstock's originality and poetic genius, his reaction to some of the latter's passionate love poetry (in a review of 1751 of which he is almost certainly the author) was one of sardonic amusement;[154] and in the 1770s, he deplored the emotional effusions of Goethe's Werther in no uncertain terms.[155] In short, despite the epicurean posture of his own early lyrics, there is a streak of stoicism in Lessing's character which is derived less from philosophical reflection than from that reticence with regard to his feelings which his teachers at St Afra had already noticed; he also tended to regard such reticence as a virtue (especially among males). This, together with the poetic conventions of the 1740s, explains why his lyrical poetry has so little personal content.

The collection *Trifles* was published anonymously in Stuttgart in 1751. Lessing's decision to withhold his name when he submitted the work for publication in 1748 was no doubt influenced in part by a wish not to antagonize his parents. But the title (which may echo Hagedorn's use of the same term to describe his own minor poetry)[156] is typical of the self-disparaging tone which he regularly adopts with regard to his own writings, and in this case probably reflects his genuine estimate of them; at any rate, he omitted many of the items which had appeared in the *Trifles* from the two editions of his collected poems which he edited in 1753 and 1771.

Unfairly dismissed as devoid of spontaneous feeling by the criterion of that so-called *Erlebnislyrik* (lyric of experience) which came to be associated with Goethe and his successors, Lessing's early poems were for many years disparaged and neglected. Their originality has again been recognized in recent times, as has their historical importance,[157] which is evident from the enthusiasm with which they were received by his contemporaries, and from the frequent reprints of the *Trifles* during his lifetime (five editions appeared between 1751 and 1779, only the first two under Lessing's supervision).[158] The young author's identity quickly became known, and favourable reviews and comments by Haller, Michaelis, and many others followed the publication of the 1751 and 1753 collections.[159] In 1779, the celebrated Chodowiecki produced twelve engravings to accompany individual poems, including 'Death', which was by that time a popular song.[160] That several of the poems enjoyed continued popularity for a further century was due not least to their musical settings by such varied composers as Agricola, Beethoven, C. P. E. and J. C. F. Bach, Bode, Haydn, Quantz, and Zelter;[161] as Herder put it in 1781, 'They are in the mouths of the nation in numerous musical settings, and no further comment is necessary.'[162]

Apart from a small number of verse fables and reflective poems, the only other category of poetry strongly represented in Lessing's early years is a series of humorous verse narratives of varying length, listed under the general heading 'Fables' in

[154] On this see LM IV, 376.
[155] See L. to Eschenburg, 26 October 1774.
[156] See B II, 965.
[157] On this see Zeman 229–50; also Barner et al. (1987) 157.
[158] See LM I, 60.
[159] B II, 967–72; Braun I, 12–16.
[160] E. Schmidt I, 84.
[161] Cf. Busch (1982) *passim*.
[162] Herder SWS XV, 493.

the collection of 1753 but described as 'Tales' (*Erzählungen*) in that of 1771.[163] These verse tales belong to a tradition epitomized by La Fontaine's *Contes et nouvelles* of 1665–85 and perpetuated in Germany by Hagedorn and Gellert shortly before Lessing himself contributed to it. La Fontaine draws his themes mainly from the humorous, often scurrilous, tales of Renaissance writers, from Boccaccio and the *Cent Nouvelles nouvelles* to Rabelais and Ariosto. In keeping with Renaissance practice, the originality to which he aspires is an originality not of theme but of treatment, which in his case resides in the relaxed humour and elegant discursiveness with which he reworks time-honoured stories in fluent but irregular verse. Criteria of originality were soon to change radically in Germany with the cult of 'original genius' in the 1760s and 1770s, and Lessing, whose attitude to poetic originality was still essentially that of the Renaissance and baroque periods, would soon face charges of plagiarism himself (directed in the first instance at his epigrams).[164] But like those of La Fontaine, his verse tales happily rework older themes, drawn in Lessing's case especially from the fifteenth-century *Liber Facietarum* of Poggio Bracciolini.

Lessing's distinctive contribution to this narrative form is akin to his treatment of Anacreontic models in his lyric poetry: most (but by no means all) of his verse tales—unlike La Fontaine's leisurely narratives and their often diffuse Renaissance models—are short, crisp, and incisive, once again akin to the epigram or fable in their climactic structure and powerful endings. A rough translation of the best known of the shorter pieces, 'Faustin', should convey something of this quality:[165]

> Faustin, who fifteen years did roam
> Abroad, away from wife and children, hearth and home,
> At last, grown rich from usury
> Took ship for home across the sea.
> 'O Lord', the honest Faustin sighed,
> As through the mists his birthplace he descried,
> 'Lord, on my sins be not unkind,
> Chastise me not for all I've done!
> Restore me in thy grace to daughter, wife and son,
> That in good health I them may find.'
> So Faustin sighed; God heard the sinner's prayer.
> In peace and affluence he found the house he knew.
> He found his wife and both his children there,
> And—bounteous God!—an extra two.

Poggio's original is much longer, and its impact is greatly diluted,[166] because it reveals almost at once that the wife of the absent husband has set up house with another man; and as she explains away each unfamiliar acquisition to the returning husband, including a recent addition to the family, as divine blessings, the husband's final protest that God has gone too far in siring children for him has

[163] LM I, 157–92. [164] Braun I, 151–8; B II, 1181. [165] LM I, 161–2.
[166] For a German translation, see GEL, Sämtliche Gedichte, ed. Grimm, 324–5.

much less impact—at least on the modern reader—than the stark revelation at the end of Lessing's story, which leaves the rest to the reader's imagination. (For good measure, Lessing increases Poggio's 'nearly five years' of absence to fifteen, and Poggio's one additional child to two.)

Lessing's experiments with verse narrative are not, however, confined to the short, epigrammatic variety just described. In 'The Hermit' ('Der Eremit'), he adopts the opposite strategy and expands a half-page *facetia* of Poggio into a verse tale 310 lines in length, which he published on its own in 1749.[167] Like Poggio's original, it ends with a humorous revelation—namely that the pious hermit has seduced most of the womenfolk from the nearby town, including the wife of the judge before whom he is indicted; but its interest lies chiefly in its easy mastery of rhyming madrigal verse with lines of unequal length, enlivened by dialogue, digressions, apostrophes to the reader, and successful adaptation of La Fontaine's agreeable discursive manner to the German language. One does not readily think of Lessing as a narrative writer or a gifted raconteur—although the parable of the rings in *Nathan the Wise* confirms that he had the requisite aptitude. We do, however, know from his friend Ramler that he had a fondness for Rabelais;[168] and unlike his lyrical poetry, his output of verse tales, full of earthy humour and wry commentary on marital infidelity and religious hypocrisy, continued sporadically until 1767 (although he refrained from publishing the more scurrilous of these later productions).[169] But from their first beginnings in 1747, these tales have a liveliness and vigour which foreshadows Wieland, who brought the humorous verse narrative to perfection in Germany.[170] Unfortunately, Lessing's own narrative abilities remained largely unrealized, as he confined his literary energies increasingly to the more prestigious medium of drama. Apart from a few exercises in the ode, which were thrust upon him as editor of a Berlin newspaper, the only sequel to his early work in the lyric and cognate forms was his continued interest in the epigram; and apart from a handful of verse tales composed in the Breslau and Hamburg periods, and a few short narratives in parable form in the 1770s, the only extension of his early experiments in narrative poetry was his later work on the fable.

[167] LM I, 166–76; German translation in GEL: Sämtliche Gedichte, ed. Grimm, 327–8.
[168] D 141. [169] LM I, 189–92.
[170] See esp. 'Der Wunsch zu sterben' (1747) in LM I, 182–6.

3

Berlin 1748–1752: Society; Journalism; Didactic Poetry

As editor of *The Scientist* (*Der Naturforscher*, 1747–48), Christlob Mylius was invited to Berlin to witness an annular eclipse of the sun on 25 July 1748. He duly accepted, and arrived in Berlin on 23 July.[1] Whether or not Lessing planned from the start to accompany him or join him there is uncertain. But when his debts compelled him to leave Leipzig early in July, he at once chose Berlin as his destination, and set off, as he later told his mother, in the company of his cousin Theophilus Gottlieb Lessing, who unexpectedly called on him on his way to resume his studies at Wittenberg. The fact that Lessing informed no one—not even his close friend Weisse—of his departure does, however, suggest that his decision was based on sudden impulse rather than careful reflection;[2] similar incidents later in his life would indicate that such behaviour was characteristic. At all events, his plan to spend only a few days in Wittenberg before continuing to Berlin was frustrated by an illness of several weeks' duration. Since returning to Leipzig was out of the question, he decided to spend the winter semester in Wittenberg, and matriculated on 13 August as a student of medicine. This plan was in turn abandoned less than three months later because, as he subsequently told his parents, he was running out of money and wished to spare them further expense.[3] We also know, however, that Mylius, on his way back to Leipzig after eight weeks in Berlin, must have passed through Wittenberg soon after Lessing matriculated,[4] and he no doubt stopped to inform the latter of his contacts in Berlin society and his determination to embark on a new career there as soon as possible. It is therefore probable that Lessing joined him on his return journey to Berlin in early November, for they both moved into accommodation which Mylius had rented in that city around 8 November, the date on which Mylius took over as editor of an established newspaper, the *Berlinische privilegierte Zeitung* (henceforward BPZ). The house in Spandauer Strasse (later numbered 68) into which they moved belonged to the Nicolai family, and its successive occupants for much of the century—the poets Gleim and Ramler, the journalist Mylius, the publisher Nicolai, and the philosopher Moses Mendelssohn[5]—would all figure prominently in Lessing's subsequent life. It was situated on the north bank of the Spree in the heart of the old city, only a short walk from

[1] Mylius, *Der Naturforscher*, 5 August 1748, 457.
[2] Cf. KGL 50.
[3] L. to Justina Salome Lessing, 20 January 1749.
[4] See Mylius, *Der Naturforscher*, 18 November 1748, 575.
[5] Hermsdorf 66; D 139.

Fig. 7. Berlin from the north, engraving by Martin Engelbrecht, c. 1750.

the royal palace on the island to the south. Thus began the first of Lessing's four extended periods in Berlin, which would together amount to over ten years.

His move to Berlin was plainly dictated by external circumstance rather than by inherent necessity. When his parents, belatedly informed of his latest change of direction, voiced their disapproval of his new surroundings, he replied that he intended in any case to move before long to Hamburg, Vienna, or Hanover, in all of which cities he had personal contacts.[6] (He omitted to add that the contacts in question were mainly theatrical.) This reply suggests, however, that he had as yet formed no close attachment to Berlin, and that any major city (provided, of course, it had a theatre) would suit him equally well. But Berlin did have a theatre, and it had further advantages which he would shortly come to value. Its lack of a university—Prussia's universities were in Frankfurt an der Oder, Königsberg, and Halle—was no disadvantage, for Lessing had now turned his back on universities, at least for the present; he in any case had access to books and library facilities[7] and Berlin had a large educated community of professional people and government employees—not to mention the Royal Academy of Sciences and Belles-Lettres, to which Frederick II had attracted a considerable number of scholars from several European countries. Unlike that of Leipzig, the Berlin press was not only relatively undeveloped, but also subject to fewer restrictions on freedom of expression (except on political matters) than that of Leipzig. For aspiring journalists like Mylius—and

[6] L. to Justina Salome Lessing, 20 January 1749.
[7] Cf. L. to Johann Jakob Wippel, 5 January 1754.

indeed Lessing himself, who was before long reviewing books for Mylius' newspaper—it offered some of the best opportunities in Germany.[8] Besides, Frederick had signalled his support for progressive opinion and enlightened values from the moment of his accession in 1740, recalling the philosopher Wolff to Prussia and encouraging various luminaries of the French Enlightenment to join his circle in Berlin. And however much they grumbled at the preferential treatment the French enjoyed, German intellectuals such as Lessing could not fail to be stimulated by the cross-cultural rivalry which animated Berlin society.

Whereas the western half of the Hohenzollern territories, the province of Brandenburg, had always been part of the Holy Roman Empire, the eastern territories of Prussia proper had not. Frederick was well aware of his state's distinct identity within the German lands, and he pursued a correspondingly independent foreign policy, challenging the Empire head-on by seizing the Austrian province of Silesia as soon as he came to the throne in 1740. The ensuing wars which punctuated the first half of his reign intensified his efforts to strengthen Prussia's military and economic might, but they did not deflect him from his lifelong ambition to raise his country's culture to a level comparable with that of France. The fruits of these endeavours were nowhere more visible than in Berlin.

Unlike Leipzig, Berlin was a relatively new city, which had existed as a unified entity only since 1709, when the old city on the right bank of the Spree and the adjoining districts on the river island and the left bank were formally incorporated.[9] The city expanded rapidly throughout the eighteenth century, and its population increased by over fifty per cent during Frederick's reign (from some 90,000 in 1740 to almost 150,000 in 1786).[10] When Lessing arrived in 1748, it already exceeded 100,000 as compared to Leipzig's 30,000; of the German cities, only Vienna was larger. Trade and industry also prospered, encouraged by Frederick's and his predecessors' policy of encouraging skilled foreign workers to settle in Prussia (some nine per cent of the city's population was of Huguenot extraction).[11]

In keeping with its transitional status, Berlin was full of contrasts. Its old fortifications had been partially demolished in the 1730s, giving place to a less substantial 'customs wall' which allowed the authorities to control and raise revenue from incoming traffic.[12] Night watchmen still called the hours in ill-lit, malodorous streets with overhanging gables, but new formal avenues simultaneously took shape with four-storey houses and uniform facades. The facades alone were of interest to the king, and when the fronts of older properties were compulsorily regularized, the occupants might find their new windows at floor or ceiling level, if not bisected by the existing floors.[13] The state lottery which Frederick introduced helped to finance splendid royal and public buildings, including the cathedral built in 1747–50, flanked by a wide public garden, and the palace of the king's brother Prince Heinrich (later to become the Humboldt University), on which work began

[8] Cf. Hermsdorf 67. [9] See Schieder 14–15.
[10] Berlin im Kartenbild 25; Ribbe I, 382. [11] Schieder 100–1.
[12] Ribbe I, 386. [13] See Blanning (1997) 530; Hermsdorf 51.

in 1748.[14] Frederick's commitment to the arts was underlined by the vast Royal Opera House (1740–42), which comfortably accommodated over 2,000 people, and with less comfort up to 5,000.[15] If numbers were short, soldiers were pressed to fill the empty space; their presence was by no means incongruous in an institution whose singers and musicians were themselves drilled and disciplined like soldiers.[16]

Literary culture was also developing in the capital. In 1750, there were thirteen bookshops, four of which belonged to publishing houses; five of the others specialized in French publications.[17] A few libraries existed, but none of them could compete with the Royal Library, then housed in a wing of the palace, which already possessed 50,000 volumes in 1715. Scholars with appropriate credentials could obtain access to it, as Lessing in due course did.[18] No small part of the city's intellectual life took place, however, in coffee-houses and drinking establishments, and in the numerous clubs and societies which arose in those years, including the Monday Club, founded in 1749, of which Lessing subsequently became a member.

But for a newcomer, what stood out above all in Berlin was the Prussian army, which numbered 50,000 in 1740 and swelled to 220,000 by the end of Frederick's reign; a large proportion of these troops were quartered in Berlin and nearby Potsdam. Voltaire observed in 1752: 'There are astonishing numbers of bayonets and very few books. The king has greatly embellished Sparta, but confined Athens entirely to his study.'[19] Or as Mirabeau (or rather Berenhorst) later commented, 'Prussia is not a state with an army, but an army with a state.'[20] This was a thoroughly masculine world, devoid of the feminine graces of Dresden or Leipzig. But Lessing quickly adapted to it, and he soon felt at ease in the company of officers who, like himself, lived on the edge of conventional society.

Such German theatre as there was in Berlin led a precarious existence in noisy, smoke-filled premises, even after Johann Friedrich Neumann, a pupil of Caroline Neuber, obtained a royal warrant to perform in the city in 1742.[21] His attempts to raise standards by outlawing harlequinades and sticking to a repertoire of the kind recommended by Gottsched enjoyed only limited success, despite the fact that his company included Konrad Ekhof, whom Lessing would later consider the greatest of German actors; the old improvised comedies were reintroduced as soon as Franz Schuch opened his booth on the Friedrichsplatz in 1754. In the absence of a reputable company in Berlin, Lessing was obliged to take his first tragedy, *Miss Sara Sampson*, to Frankfurt an der Oder in 1755 for production by Konrad Ackermann's troupe.

Needless to say, only French plays were performed in the royal palace theatre.[22] Performances, to which respectably dressed members of the public were admitted, took place on Wednesdays throughout the year. An important source

[14] Ribbe I, 388; Ludwig 13 and Plate 11. [15] Hermsdorf 46; Ludwig, Plate 16.
[16] Cf. Blanning (1997) 531–3. [17] See Raabe (1983) 60–1.
[18] See Goldenbaum (1989) 276; Oehlke I, 178; Ludwig, Plate 12; Kirschstein 25.
[19] Brockhaus (1830) VIII, 827 (article 'Preussen'); Voltaire to d'Alembert 5 September 1752 in Goldenbaum (1989) 276.
[20] Schieder 61; but Clark 215 attributes the remark to Georg Heinrich Berenhorst.
[21] Oehlke I, 176–7. [22] Hermsdorf 83.

of information on the actors and repertoire is an article on the Berlin theatre in the periodical *Contributions to the History and Improvement of the Theatre* (*Beiträge zur Historie und Aufnahme des Theaters*) published by Lessing and Mylius in 1750.[23] It lists all the plays performed in 1749, including works by Racine, Corneille, Molière, Destouches, Regnard, and Voltaire, with additional remarks on ballet and opera productions (the latter invariably sung in Italian) at the Royal Opera House, and on Italian comedy at Potsdam. (The authorship of this article is uncertain,[24] but a gratuitous reference in it to the liaison of a former actress with the marquis d'Argens, Director of the Belles-Lettres section of the Berlin Academy, might suggest Mylius rather than Lessing.) There can be little doubt that Lessing was a regular attender at the French theatre, for although he was already encouraging German dramatists to explore other dramatic traditions besides that of France, there is as yet no hint in his writings of that hostility to French drama which he would display in later years: on the contrary, he began to write a comedy of his own in French entitled *Palaion*, three scenes of which were completed in 1750 before he abandoned it.[25]

The other main bastion of culture in Berlin was the Academy itself, originally founded in 1700 by King Frederick I of Prussia, with Leibniz as its first President. It languished through lack of royal support under the next monarch, Friedrich Wilhelm I, but its revival was one of the most cherished projects of his son, Frederick II, who began to implement it as soon as he succeeded to the throne. In inviting Christian Wolff to return to Prussia, he hoped to persuade him to take a leading role in the Academy, but Wolff, wary of seeing his rationalistic system diluted by empirical science or attacked by the French intellectuals whose services Frederick simultaneously sought, opted instead to return to his old university of Halle.[26] Frederick would ideally have liked to appoint Voltaire as President, but he knew that the latter's private life ruled out any protracted absence from France. Partly on the strength of Voltaire's own advice, he then approached the physicist Pierre Louis Moreau de Maupertuis, whose celebrated expedition to Lapland had confirmed Newton's conjecture that the earth's shape is that of an oblate spheroid. Voltaire's jealousy at this appointment, which intensified when the death of his partner, the marquise du Châtelet, left him free to move to Germany, would later contribute to a crisis in the Academy's affairs which did lasting damage to the Academy itself—and, as it subsequently emerged, to Lessing's prospects of a career in Prussia. On his appointment, Maupertuis was invested with autocratic powers over the Academy and its members, irrespective of their social rank, powers which Frederick defined in a characteristic military addendum: 'rien ne se fera que par lui; ainsi qu'un général gentilhomme commande des ducs et des princes dans une armée'.[27] New buildings, into which the Academy moved in 1752, were erected next to Prince Heinrich's palace on Unter den Linden,[28] and a large number of ordinary, external, and honorary members were appointed, including Euler,

[23] LM XXII, 144–54. [24] See LM XXII, xii. [25] LM III, 310–16; cf. B I, 1242.
[26] Harnack 249–55; for a shorter account of the Academy's history see Grau 87–112.
[27] Harnack 299–301. [28] Ibid. 486.

Cassini, Bradley, Buffon, and Linnaeus. The ordinary members met regularly, and papers—often including submissions from external members—were read out and duly published. Membership of this distinguished body was a coveted honour, which even Catherine the Great (the only female member) was pleased to accept.[29]

From the start, the Academy was criticized, especially by Germans, as excessively French in its style and membership. Its official language was indeed French, the statutes were largely modelled on those of the Académie des Sciences in Paris, and not a few of its members, including the President, spoke no German at all. Some of its French-speaking members, such as the marquis d'Argens and the Permanent Secretary Formey, also owed their position rather to fortunate circumstance than to personal merit. None the less, the proportion of native Frenchmen among the ordinary members was never high: the total number of French-speakers was greatly inflated by Berlin Huguenots and Swiss, whose bilingualism gave them an additional advantage. Besides, the relative paucity of German members, at least in the first decades, was due only in part to pro-French prejudice: several eminent Germans, including Wolff, Lessing's Leipzig teacher Kästner, and the orientalist Michaelis of Göttingen, declined invitations to become ordinary members, as did the German-Swiss poet and physiologist Albrecht von Haller.[30] The Swiss contingent, which included such distinguished figures as the mathematician Euler, the physicists Daniel and Johann Bernoulli, and the philosopher Lambert, was at times the most influential national group among the ordinary members.[31]

Although Frederick never attended the Academy's sessions in person, he regularly submitted papers, including *éloges* of deceased members who had earned his respect, and kept a close eye on proceedings whenever his military campaigns and other responsibilities permitted. When Maupertuis died during the Seven Years War, the presidency remained vacant, despite Frederick's efforts to appoint d'Alembert in his place. Disapproving of the way in which the Academy had conducted its business during his absence—business in which Lessing's name had featured prominently—he assumed the *de facto* role of president himself, consulting d'Alembert on all important decisions. It was during this period that he began to oppose the appointment of German members almost on principle, and their numbers dwindled to derisory levels.[32] In his last years, few new members of any nationality were appointed, and the Academy fell into decline.

The Academy's linguistic uniformity was deceptive in a further sense, for it masked that body's greatest strength, namely its diversity of opinion. Ideological differences rarely coincided with national differences, and in the damaging debates of the early 1750s in which Maupertuis' authority was critically undermined, there were Swiss, Germans, and French (or Huguenots) on both sides of the conflict between the rationalism of Leibniz and Wolff and the empiricism of Locke and Newton.[33] Apart from sporadic interventions by the king over appointments and personalities, it ran its own affairs; it enjoyed freedom of speech, and intellectual

[29] Ibid. 369. [30] Ibid. 324 and 369. [31] Ibid. 327–8.
[32] Ibid. 362 and 392. [33] Ibid. 333.

currents from all over Europe enlivened its deliberations.[34] In so far as one can generalize, its philosophical tendency was eclectic, and its values were liberal, progressive, and at times iconoclastic.[35] The attitudes and concerns of the Academy permeated intellectual life in the capital, and had significant repercussions on Lessing and his circle.

Just as Dresden bore the stamp of Augustus the Strong, the new Berlin and its culture were marked by the personality of Frederick II. Frederick's dual character as Machiavellian militarist and defender of enlightened values was as perplexing to thoughtful contemporaries as it is to us today. Since his seizure of Silesia in 1740, he had been viewed with profound suspicion from abroad, and by his neighbours to the south as the mad dog of Europe. But during the peaceful decade between 1746 and 1756, his benevolent qualities were more in evidence, especially at home: Lessing could scarcely have chosen a more propitious moment to move to Berlin. Frederick's cultural aims were not those of a feudal reactionary, nor did they represent a courtly world in retreat before the rise of a 'bourgeois public sphere', as some historians would have us believe. On the contrary, his endeavours were chiefly directed to making culture a public property,[36] by allowing greater freedom of expression than anywhere else in Germany, and by encouraging intellectual endeavour: a high proportion of his academicians, and of his educated admirers, were commoners, and Kant would speak for many when, a few decades later, he named Frederick (not without a touch of flattery) as the exemplary monarch of the century.[37] Nor was Frederick's admiration of foreign culture uncritical. Those whom he admired in France were not Louis XV and his court, but the liberal opposition, several of whose members he welcomed as exiles from domestic oppression. In music, he preferred German composers, and his favourite accompanists and performers were either German—like Agricola, Quantz, and C. P. E. Bach—or in the case of opera, Italian. It was to him that the Saxon composer J. S. Bach, invited to perform in Potsdam in 1747 in a strange conjunction of spiritual universes, dedicated his 'Musical Offering'.[38] Furthermore, that distaste for German scholarship which he acquired in his early years was not without foundation, at least in the earlier part of the century. He regarded it as pedantic and old-fashioned, and was unimpressed when Gottsched boasted to him in 1761 that he had published sixty volumes in folio; Frederick later observed that he preferred the duodecimo format himself, for he admired only those scholars who wore their learning lightly, and who could express themselves with wit and elegance.[39] That he failed to recognize the latter qualities when they did make their appearance in German scholarship—not least in the works of Lessing—was because his tastes had by that time become inflexible and his cultural vision circumscribed.

When Lessing arrived in Berlin towards the end of 1748, his immediate concern was to restore his finances. His existing scholarships appear to have been renewed when he matriculated at Wittenberg, for he told his mother that they would suffice

[34] Ibid. 305–11. [35] Ibid. 428–30. [36] See Blanning (1997) 542–50.
[37] Kant AA VIII, 40–1. [38] See Schieder 424–30.
[39] See Frederick II to the Duchess of Gotha, 13 January 1761, in Fontius/Geissler 236–7.

to clear his debts, and there are indications that he received some financial support from other relatives around this time. At any rate, those debts which had compelled him to leave Leipzig appear to have been settled, for nothing more is heard of them and he felt free to return to Leipzig a few years later.

His initial employment in Berlin was with Johann Andreas Rüdiger, proprietor of the newspaper which Mylius now edited. In return for meals and modest remuneration, he agreed to catalogue part of Rüdiger's extensive library, the remainder of which was to be auctioned at the end of the year.[40] Casual clerical work for prominent persons of Mylius' acquaintance followed, but as soon as his parents became aware of his position, he once more came under pressure from his father to abandon Mylius and the writing of comedies, and to resume his studies or seek academic employment.[41] The mere mention of Vienna as a possible destination provoked suspicions that he planned to convert to Catholicism,[42] and when his father again sought information on his son's activities from outsiders, including the elderly Rüdiger, the latter passed on the letter to his son-in-law Christian Friedrich Voss, to whom he had delegated his business affairs, and Voss in turn, mystified, passed it on to Mylius, whose name figured prominently—and doubtless in unflattering terms—in the letter. Mylius, of course, promptly handed it over to Lessing.[43] The familiar accusations and reproaches recurred over the next four years in Pastor Lessing's letters to his son,[44] eliciting robust (though never disrespectful) rebuttals from Gotthold, such as his well-known defence of his own religious position:[45]

> Time will tell whether the better Christian is one who has memorised and regularly refers to the principles of Christian doctrine, and who conforms to all the observances because they are customary, or one who has intelligently doubted and attained conviction—or at least attempted to do so—by means of enquiry. The Christian religion is not something one should take over on trust from one's parents.

Relations with his father gradually became more cordial, however, as Lessing began to include information on his critical and scholarly activities, and to enclose selected copies of his own publications.[46] He also took every opportunity to mention influential (especially aristocratic) patrons and contacts—but with one notable omission: his contacts with the notorious Voltaire are passed over in silence.

It is clear from his letters that, partly in response to his father's admonitions, Lessing was now giving serious thought to his longer-term career. In the spring of 1749, he responded with enthusiasm to his father's offer to explore, through his learned correspondents, the possibility of obtaining an academic post for him in Göttingen, perhaps as assistant to the classical philologist Johann Matthias Gesner.[47] To this end, the young Lessing began work on a treatise *On the Pantomimes*

[40] KGL 66; Consentius (1902) 86–7.
[41] See L. to J. G. Lessing, 2 November 1750; few letters from L's. father have survived.
[42] See L. to J. G. Lessing, 10 April 1749. [43] See L. to J. G. Lessing, 30 May 1749.
[44] See, for example, L. to J. G. Lessing, 29 May 1753.
[45] L. to J. G. Lessing, 30 May 1749. [46] See KGL 92–3.
[47] L. to J. G. Lessing, 10 April and 28 April 1749.

of the Ancients,[48] but it remained unfinished as his interest in the Göttingen plan waned and finally evaporated during the following year.[49] As his brother Karl later commented, Lessing was in any case temperamentally unsuited to academic life.[50] He would have found its predictable routine oppressive, and he was too dependent on momentary stimulus to devote himself to systematic scholarly projects over long periods of time; the academic hierarchy with its figures of authority and constraints on free expression (all university teachers were state employees) would likewise have been intolerable to him. For similar reasons, the role of house tutor, to which many penurious ex-students from Hamann and Kant to Hegel and Hölderlin were reduced in eighteenth-century Germany, was out of the question. His love of books and work in Rüdiger's library led him on occasion to consider a career as librarian,[51] and he did indeed become one some twenty years later. His true vocation, however, was that of a writer, yet even this was too unspecific and fraught with difficulty to give him a clear aim and direction. He had scholarly inclinations, but was averse to academic life; his book reviewing for Mylius had aroused his interest in critical journalism, but he knew from Mylius' past enterprises how precarious professional journalism could be; and although his ambitions as a dramatist and poet were as strong as ever, there was little prospect of his earning a living by creative writing without patronage, and patronage usually required submission to another kind of authority. He would shortly try to combine all of these roles, but their conflicting claims on his time and energy would generate new kinds of tension.

For the present, he fell back on another expedient to which he had already resorted in Leipzig, namely work as a translator. He had, of course, long since acquired an excellent reading knowledge of French, and had even translated French plays with Weisse for the Leipzig theatre. Realizing that, if he wished to prosper in Berlin society, he must also become proficient in spoken French—the language of the king and the Academy—he now took lessons in colloquial French with Richier de Louvain, a young man of around his own age who taught French for a living and who became his personal friend.[52] At the same time, he began to translate longer texts from the French, the first of which was the *Histoire romaine* (1738–48) by Charles Rollin, late Rector of the University of Paris and a correspondent of Frederick II in the 1730s.[53] Lessing translated only Volumes 4, 5, and 6 of the work's sixteen volumes, and he must have begun this task soon after his arrival in Berlin, for the first volume of his translation was published at Easter 1749. For various reasons, others of his translations were never published,[54] but those which did appear are on the whole fluent and competent, if not yet of the standard he would attain in later years. Among his translations from the French, that of Antoine-François Riccoboni's recently published *L'Art du théâtre* was published in his

[48] LM XIV, 144–53. [49] See L. to J. G. Lessing, 2 November 1750 and 8 February 1751.
[50] Cf. KGL 63. [51] Cf. L. to Georg Conrad Walther, 1 November 1752. [52] KGL 70.
[53] On this see B I, 1284; cf. also the extracts from L's translations in B I, 653–69 and from the French original in B I, 1285–7.
[54] See B II, 726 and XI/1, 732.

and Mylius' short-lived periodical of 1750, the *Contributions to the History and Improvement of the Theatre*;[55] some of the other items in this journal were translated by Mylius.

Lessing's and Mylius' interest in French language and culture extended, of course, to members of Frederick's circle and of the Academy, some of whom began to feature in their writings and personal lives. Among the first to capture their attention was the notorious philosopher Julien Offray de La Mettrie, whose contentious doctrines had made life impossible for him in his native France and even in tolerant Holland, where he had studied medicine under the illustrious Boerhaave.[56] His first major work, the *Histoire naturelle de l'âme* (1746), was publicly burned in France, and his subsequent *L'Homme machine* (1747) caused such outrage among the Dutch clergy that he had to flee that country in turn. Frederick, true to form, offered him protection and membership of the Berlin Academy, which he readily accepted. The king found his brash informality and drollery entertaining, and La Mettrie was allowed greater licence than anyone else in the royal entourage.

Even among freethinkers of the Enlightenment, La Mettrie's views were extreme. Unlike most of the *philosophes*, he rejected all the articles of natural religion, denying the existence of God, the immortality of the soul, and the freedom of the will to choose between good and evil. He extended to the soul itself Descartes' theory that both the animals and the animal functions of the human body are governed by mechanical principles—hence the provocative title of his most famous work.[57] Safe in Prussia, he revelled in his European notoriety and was widely known as 'Monsieur Machine'; he alleviated the monotony and loneliness of Potsdam by publishing or reissuing his most scandalous works, including the *Anti-Sénèque, ou Discours sur le bonheur* and *La Volupté* (also known as *L'Art de jouir*).[58] The first of these works describes the moral conscience as an unnatural and unnecessary obstacle to happiness, and the second glorifies hedonism in general and sexual gratification in particular. This was too much even for Frederick, who consigned the *Anti-Sénèque* to the flames and banned the sale of La Mettrie's *Œuvres philosophiques* (1751), letting their author off with a private warning.

The German public, including Lessing and Mylius, was unedified by La Mettrie's antics. One of Lessing's philosophical poems of the early Berlin period, written in Haller's manner, takes issue directly with La Mettrie's atheism and amoralism;[59] and in a withering review of *L'Art de jouir* in 1751, he reveals that the erotic fantasies in that work are loosely modelled on Haller's poem 'Doris', which La Mettrie has plagiarized from a French prose translation and invested with a priapic grossness alien to Haller's gentle pastoral.[60] He also took the opportunity to air his genuine revulsion at the French libertine in his letters to his father, thereby furnishing evidence of his own spiritual hygiene.[61]

[55] Complete text in B I, 884–934. [56] See Lach *passim* and Thomson 5–20.
[57] See Thomson 33–77. [58] La Mettrie II, 81–166 and 195–267.
[59] LM I, 237–40. [60] LM IV, 423–7; cf. IV, 232.
[61] L. to J. G. Lessing, 2 November 1750.

La Mettrie's treatment of Haller had already caused a scandal in Germany. Affronted by adverse criticism of his *Histoire naturelle de l'âme* in the *Göttingische Gelehrte Anzeigen*, of which Haller was the editor, he revenged himself by dedicating *L'Homme machine* to Haller, in ironic homage to that distinguished physiologist and poet.[62] In 1751, Mylius sprang to Haller's defence and offered to publish replies to La Mettrie's insults.[63] His motive was not, however, disinterested, for he was by this time soliciting the support of Haller and other scientists for an expedition, no doubt inspired by those of Maupertuis and his associates, to explore the natural history of the Americas.

But Mylius had a further reason for resenting La Mettrie's activities. Within weeks of his arrival in Berlin, he had founded a new periodical, *The Soothsayer* (*Der Wahrsager*), which described itself as a 'humorous weekly' and dealt with topical Berlin issues in a light-hearted and satirical manner.[64] An early number, in January 1749, had portrayed 'Monsieur Machine' not as a human being but as a creation of the famous mechanic Vaucanson, and one of the February issues developed this metaphor further by arguing that the mechanical teaching methods employed in German schools and universities confirmed that human beings, like animals, are essentially machines.[65] When Berlin teachers took offence and protested, Mylius' publisher Voss received a warning from government officials, who had for some time been pressing the king to introduce a system of censorship. The king's patience, already stretched to the limit since La Mettrie, falsely claiming to act on royal authority, had persuaded Voss to publish his *Anti-Sénèque*, finally snapped when a mock defence of cuckoldry in *The Soothsayer* provoked further complaints.[66] A royal edict on censorship followed on 17 May, and further publication of *The Soothsayer* was prohibited. Thus, Christlob Mylius earned the dubious distinction of prompting the introduction of censorship in Prussia, and his name had now twice come to the king's attention in incriminating circumstances. Neither Lessing nor the king forgot this episode, and it was not without repercussions on Lessing's subsequent career. When La Mettrie died suddenly on 11 November 1751—reputedly from a surfeit of truffle pâté[67]—a short obituary notice appeared in another of Mylius' periodicals, again with mechanical metaphors and puns, but not without a charitable word on the deceased's learned accomplishments.[68] Frederick, on the other hand, seized the opportunity to shock the theologians with an *éloge* of his errant protégé, which was received in stony silence when it was read out to the Academy.[69]

By far the most important of Lessing's dealings with the French intellectuals in Berlin was his relationship with Voltaire, which began shortly after the latter arrived in the city on 11 July 1750. Frederick's ambition, cherished since his years as Crown Prince, to persuade Voltaire to take up residence in his capital had finally succeeded, for the conditions he now offered him could hardly have been bettered. Voltaire's annual stipend was 20,000 livres,[70] or around 5,000 talers in German

[62] La Mettrie I, 277–84; see also B II, 831. [63] Consentius (1903) 522.
[64] Consentius (1900) *passim*. [65] Ibid. 8–18, 36, 40–1. [66] Ibid. 45–7.
[67] See Kunisch 308. [68] LM IV, 279. [69] Harnack 330. [70] Pearson 217.

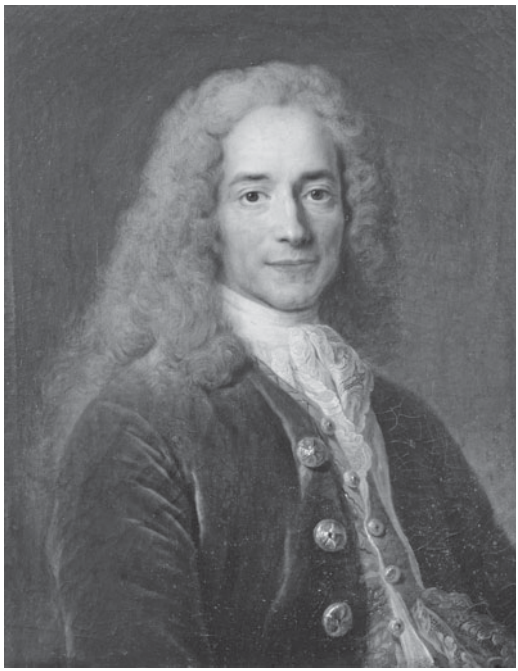

Fig. 8. Voltaire, painting by Nicolas de Largillière, 1730.

currency (Lessing would earn 909 talers at the time of his marriage in 1776,[71] while Herder and Goethe, as senior officials in the Duchy of Weimar, would each receive around 1,800 talers in 1789).[72] He was given a suite of rooms in the royal palace in Berlin (and subsequently in the *Stadtschloss* or town palace in Potsdam), free board and transport, an order of merit, and the title of Chamberlain to the King,[73] and his only duty—which in fact proved increasingly irksome and frustrating—was to advise on and correct Frederick's literary productions. Though he was already immensely rich, with an income of some 25,000 talers in 1749, he was also acquisitive: he had employed his sharp intellect and lawyer's training to amass a vast capital which enabled him, over the following two decades, to advance loans to the rulers of Württemberg and the Palatinate at high rates of interest.[74] Now aged fifty-five and renowned as poet and dramatist, historian, critic, philosopher and polymath, he was also the dominant personality of the French Enlightenment. His arrival in Berlin was consequently a major cultural event.

The evidence for Lessing's relations with Voltaire is largely anecdotal, and its accuracy cannot be guaranteed; much of it derives from Karl Lessing's comments, themselves partly based on information supplied by Richier de Louvain in 1784.[75] The outlines are as follows. At some time in the latter part of 1750, Voltaire

[71] Hagen 622. [72] Haym II, 467; Boyle I, 579. [73] Hermsdorf 58.
[74] See Brockmeier et al. 6; Holmsten 90–1. [75] KGL 70–81.

appointed Richier as his private secretary. A few weeks later, he required German translations of legal submissions in connection with his court action against the Jewish financier Abraham Hirschel, and Richier recommended his friend Lessing, who thereupon dined at Voltaire's table and acted as interpreter when the case was heard in January 1751.[76] Bored in Berlin and interested as ever in easy profits, Voltaire had negotiated a purchase of diamonds with Hirschel and engaged with him in illegal speculation in securities issued in Saxony to Prussian citizens. Both parties perjured themselves in the ensuing action, in which their illegal speculation also came to light; and although they reached a settlement, both were morally discredited. As in the case of La Mettrie, Frederick retained Voltaire's services and continued to admire him as a writer, though he now had no illusions concerning his moral character.

Lessing's reaction was no doubt similar. Voltaire had figured prominently in his and Mylius' theatrical *Contributions* of 1750, which contained, in translation, the section on English drama from his *Lettres anglaises*, as well as reports from Paris on productions of Voltaire's plays.[77] That Lessing's admiration was not uncritical is evident, however, from his perceptive footnote to Voltaire's contention that ancient comedy, as distinct from tragedy, is no longer accessible to modern readers: he replies that many of the issues, character types, and literary devices in Aristophanes and Plautus are essentially timeless, and adds that, with sufficient historical understanding, anyone can temporarily become an ancient Greek or Roman.[78] (Twenty years later, Herder would base his philosophy of history on the same principle.) Lessing was nevertheless overjoyed when Voltaire invited or permitted him to translate fifteen of his historical essays, which appeared in the autumn of 1751 (postdated 1752) as *The Shorter Historical Writings of M. de Voltaire* (*Des Herrn von Voltaire Kleinere Historische Schriften*);[79] his excitement and admiration are reflected in his translator's preface, in which he proudly announces that he has been able to incorporate new material from Voltaire's marginal notes to the printed originals.[80] It is therefore surprising that he never acknowledged this translation as his work—not even when he wrote to Voltaire's Dresden publisher offering to translate more of his writings;[81] his anxiety lest his father might get wind of it remains the likeliest explanation.

The essays contained much to interest the young Lessing. Voltaire's tributes to Islam in 'On the Koran and Mohammed' and to Saladin in his 'History of the Crusades', his observations on the unreliability of printed sources in 'Printed Lies', and his scepticism towards every account of religious prodigies would all find echoes in Lessing's own works. But the chief function of this collection—and perhaps the reason why Voltaire encouraged it—was to provide advance publicity for his

[76] See Mangold *passim*; E. Schmidt I, 191. Nicolai later questioned the reliability of Karl Lessing's account, denying that L. ever acted in this capacity (D 41); see also Hildebrandt (1982) 133–8.

[77] Text in PO X, Part 12, 41–58 and 72–6.

[78] Ibid. 48, n. 1; see also B I, 734–5.

[79] See the section on 'Lessing's translations' in the bibliography: GEL's translations from the French of Frederick II and Voltaire, ed. Schmidt, 25–252; also B II, 924–47.

[80] GEL's translations . . . , 28; also B II, 312–13.

[81] L. to Georg Conrad Walther, 1 November 1752.

forthcoming major work, *Le Siècle de Louis XIV*: the second and third essays, which together occupy over one-third of the volume, are indeed drafts for that work which were incorporated in the final version, and several others are closely related to it. Lessing's preface informs readers of the work's imminent publication, with fulsome acknowledgement of Frederick's support for its author.

After his inglorious lawsuit, Voltaire retired with his secretary to Potsdam early in 1751. He was almost ready to publish *Le Siècle de Louis XIV*, on which he had been working since 1735, and it was eagerly awaited by the public, including the king and his circle. He had already included a eulogy of Frederick, as military hero and bringer of peace, as philosopher and benefactor of his subjects, in one of the essays translated by Lessing,[82] and the *Siècle* itself contained further messages for that monarch. Though never explicitly mentioned, the similarities between Louis and Frederick are repeatedly underlined: Louis' unprovoked assault on Holland in the early part of his reign, his repeated victories and growing military power, his reforms and improvements to his country, his munificence as a patron of artists and men of letters (not least of foreign ones)—all these parallels implied that another age of glory might lie ahead for a country whose monarch shared Louis' strengths but lacked his weaknesses. For while Louis sought military glory, he did not know when to stop; he was inclined to despotism; he lacked 'philosophy'; and above all, he was intolerant of diverse opinions, especially in religion. In short, *Le Siècle de Louis XIV* is, among other things, a kind of mirror for princes, embodying Voltaire's views on how an enlightened monarch should behave. It was no wonder, then, that Lessing could hardly wait to read a work of such relevance to Prussian politics and culture.

When Voltaire and Richier returned from Potsdam in December, the *Siècle* was already in production, and Richier was glad to accept Lessing's help in collating the sheets of the advance copies for the king and his circle. As Karl Lessing tells us,[83] Lessing managed to piece together from defective sheets an almost complete copy of the first part of the work, reading the missing sections on the spot, and he persuaded Richier to let him borrow the defective sheets for three days, on condition that he showed them to no one. But no sooner had he finished reading them than an old friend from Saxony named Drechsel, now tutor to a noble family in Berlin, called on him, and Lessing, in a moment of weakness, was in turn persuaded to lend them to Drechsel for one day, likewise in strict confidence. Unable to resist the temptation to impress the wife of his employer, Drechsel allowed her to see the work, unfortunately at the very moment when a personal friend of Voltaire, the Countess von Bentinck, called at the house. This lady, who had herself tried without success to obtain an advance copy from Voltaire, immediately drove to his residence to demand an explanation. The hapless Richier was at once called to account. But as ill luck would have it, Lessing had chosen that very day for another of his impulsive, unannounced departures, this time for Saxony to resume his studies in Wittenberg; and for one reason or another, he omitted to return the defective

[82] GEL's translations . . . (as in n. 79) 234. [83] KGL 72–81.

sheets before he left. The letter which Voltaire now dictated to Richier does not survive. But it is clear from the letter which followed it that he suspected a plot to publish either a pirated edition or an unauthorized translation of his work, and with a mixture of threats and flattery, he demanded the return of the missing sheets.[84] Fortunately, the letter was delivered to Lessing—it would otherwise have been forwarded to his father. He returned the sheets at once, with a letter of apology to Richier, and as Richier later recollected, he also drafted a pugnacious response in Latin to Voltaire. If so, he did not send it. The return of the missing sheets did not, however, prevent Richier's immediate dismissal as secretary; he was fortunate to obtain a new and less precarious post as librarian to Prince Heinrich of Prussia.

At this point, Lessing's personal dealings with Voltaire come to an end. This concluding episode does, however, raise some puzzling questions. His behaviour towards Richier displays a degree of irresponsibility without parallel in his later years, even if his friends came to accept as normal his inability to keep to deadlines. (As Moses Mendelssohn commented to Nicolai some years later: 'You know that Lessing's "quite definitely" is scarcely equal to someone else's "perhaps".')[85] It would appear that, on this particular occasion, his recurrent urge to abandon his present surroundings for a radically different environment again overtook him, overruling his existing responsibilities to a culpable extent. It says much for his ability to inspire friendship, and for Richier's remarkable forbearance, that the latter bore him no grudge. Karl Lessing explains his brother's sudden departure as prompted by his father's advice to abandon Berlin for academic pursuits;[86] but it is unlikely that, having defied this advice for several years, Lessing would have acted on it so abruptly in the absence of some stronger motive. Nicolai's suggestion that he took flight out of fear of Voltaire, and because he had composed some epigrams on the French writer's avarice and fraudulent dealings with Hirschel, can likewise be discounted;[87] for fear of Voltaire would hardly have led him to abscond with Voltaire's property, and even if the epigrams were written before the end of 1752, Voltaire makes no reference to them in his letters, and they were not published in an attributable form until almost a year later, months after Voltaire was expelled from Prussia.[88]

It seems likely that an accumulation of pressures underlay Lessing's decision. His first three years in Berlin were a time of hectic activity—of dramatic, poetic, and critical writing, of protracted translations and miscellaneous casual work to earn a living, of intensive studies of foreign languages, of editorial chores, and of wide-ranging journalistic and critical writing. He had taken over from Mylius as review editor of the *Berlinische privilegirte Zeitung* (BPZ) in February 1751 and added to it a monthly review article of his own. The progressive decline in that article's critical content in favour of already available poems and translations suggests increasing pressure of work, and perhaps a loss of interest in favour of other activities. Before he left Berlin, Lessing must have secured the agreement of Mylius

[84] Voltaire to L., 1 January 1752: see D 44–7. [85] D 141. [86] KGL 82.
[87] D 45; cf. LM I, 5 and 39–40 (epigrams). [88] See B II, 1243–4.

to relieve him as review editor during his absence. And since Mylius' plans for his expedition to the Americas were now taking firmer shape, Lessing must also have known that he could not delay much longer if he wished Mylius to deputize for him over an extended period. It is not unlikely, however, that his recent immersion in historical studies in connection with Voltaire's essays and *Le Siècle de Louis XIV* had aroused in him an overwhelming desire to return to full-time scholarship—and perhaps even to rival Voltaire in his range of accomplishments. And although his feelings towards Voltaire were by now ambivalent, Voltaire remained for him a living example of a scholar and dramatist who had made his career by his pen and attained fame and influence, without renouncing his role as a controversialist and oppositional figure in his own country. As Lessing's behaviour over the next two years would show, he now cherished similar ambitions himself, and he devoted most of his time in Wittenberg to researching and preparing a series of works for inclusion in the edition of his collected *Writings* (*Schriften*) which he would publish between 1753 and 1755. His main aim in returning to Wittenberg was to consolidate, through uninterrupted study and writing, that position as an independent writer which he had begun to establish through his work as a journalist in Berlin. This journalistic work will now be discussed before his year in Wittenberg is examined.

Apart from his translations and literary productions, Lessing's writings in the early Berlin years consist for the most part of reviews and criticism. These deal with a wide range of texts, largely but not exclusively literary in character. Since the periodical press, and review journals in particular, were of relatively recent origin, something must be said about their early history in order to clarify Lessing's role in their development.

The explosion of the periodical press in the eighteenth century was a pan-European phenomenon, no less pronounced in Germany than in France and Britain.[89] Whereas around 260 German periodicals—many of them short-lived—were founded between 1741 and 1750, over 4,000 were founded between 1750 and 1805.[90] The number of active writers shows a similar growth, from between 2,000 and 3,000 in the mid-1760s to over 10,000 by 1800.[91] The history of the review journal itself begins in the seventeenth century, with the foundation of the French *Journal des savants* in 1665, the *Acta eruditorum* in Leipzig in 1682, and Bayle's *Nouvelles de la république des lettres* in Amsterdam in 1684. These learned journals were international in scope and included notices of a limited number of books, mainly of a scholarly and specialized nature, but the notices usually took the form of abstracts rather than critical reviews in the modern sense. Literary discussion of a more general kind emerges in the first half of the eighteenth century with the periodical essay and the magazine article, which covered a wide range of literary topics, from traditional genres and major writers of the past to recent works and

[89] On all this see James Basker, 'Criticism and the Rise of Periodical Literature' in Nisbet/Rawson (1997) 316–32.
[90] Hermsdorf 74; Gagliardo 231.
[91] Cf. Grappin (1986) 235; McCarthy (1995) 13; Gagliardo 386.

more popular forms such as the novel. The most influential models in this category were English, above all *The Tatler* (1709–11) and *Spectator* (1711–14), as well as Johnson's *Rambler* (1750–52), the *Gentleman's Magazine* (founded 1731) and the *London Magazine* (founded 1732), all of which included, among other things, essays and articles on literature.[92] Popular literary criticism emerged in Germany with the journals of Gottsched and his followers who, like their adversaries, were more indebted than they cared to admit to the German translation of Addison's *Spectator* produced by Gottsched's gifted wife Luise in 1739–43. (Christlob Mylius, it will be remembered, served his journalistic apprenticeship in this school.)

The review journals proper emerged around the middle of the century, with the *Monthly Review* (1749) and *Critical Review* (1756) in England and comparable publications elsewhere. These journals, the direct forerunners of the review journals of today, achieved their distinctive character by combining the informed scholarship of the learned journals with the popular presentation and less specialized interests of the periodical essay and magazine article. Among the first such journals in Germany was the *Göttingische gelehrte Anzeigen* (founded in 1739), still relatively scholarly in its approach, and a number of Berlin periodicals of more popular character, the most successful of which was Nicolai's *Allgemeine deutsche Bibliothek* (founded in 1765), whose aim was to review every new literary and scholarly publication in Germany. Lessing's journalism of the early 1750s belongs to the formative phase of Berlin periodical criticism.

When Lessing and Mylius arrived in 1748, there was little journalism of quality in Berlin, and no periodicals devoted mainly or exclusively to critical reviewing. This situation had the advantage that the existing press was not dominated by a literary clique as it was in Leipzig, and the disadvantage that much pioneering work had to be done in order to develop a market.[93] The simplest solution was to attach critical supplements to the leading newspapers, of which there were currently two. Mylius' employer Rüdiger had established his BPZ, later known as the *Vossische Zeitung*, in 1722, and Ambrosius Haude of the publishing house Haude & Spener founded the *Berlinische Nachrichten von Staats- und gelehrten Sachen* in 1740.[94] Both newspapers appeared three times per week, and by the middle of the century, both had acquired a critical supplement. The 'learned article' ('gelehrter Artikel') or review section of the BPZ was edited by Mylius from his arrival in 1748 until October 1750 (when he fell out with Rüdiger), revived and edited by Lessing from February to December 1751, edited once more by Mylius for most of 1752 during Lessing's absence in Wittenberg (Rüdiger had meanwhile died), and again edited by Lessing from November 1752 to October 1755.[95] The work was fairly demanding, for a review section was included in almost every issue. The equivalent supplement of the *Berlinische Nachrichten*, entitled 'Critical News' ('Critische Nachrichten'), adopted a more learned tone and appeared only once per week; it was edited by Sulzer and Ramler in 1750 and by Mylius from late 1750 to 1751.[96] Lessing

[92] Basker (as in n. 89) 320–7.
[93] See Peschken *passim*.
[94] See B XI/2, 720; Hermsdorf 75.
[95] See B I, 1292–3.
[96] B I, 1423–44; B II, 736–8.

contributed reviews of individual books to both supplements, but his most notable achievement was the monthly article entitled 'The Latest from the Realm of Wit' ('Das Neueste aus dem Reiche des Witzes'), which he added throughout his first period as review editor of the BPZ in 1751. 'Das Neueste' was a kind of review essay ranging over an assortment of publications, but increasingly padded out with minor literary works by himself and others. Unlike Mylius, Lessing took no interest in the news and current affairs sections of the Berlin newspapers, for the censorship instituted by Frederick made critical comment on political matters impossible.[97]

Lessing's output as a reviewer was certainly considerable, but its precise extent is a vexed question. Around 400 reviews in the above-mentioned supplements have been attributed to him by various editors of his works, and most of them, including reviews whose attribution has long been considered doubtful, continue to be reprinted in recent editions, if only for the sake of completeness. But as Karl S. Guthke has demonstrated, this corpus is no more than a 'house of cards'.[98] Not only are the contributions of Lessing's associates Mylius and Naumann often similar to his in style and tone.[99] In many cases, the reviews themselves consist largely of paraphrases or (often verbatim) extracts from the works reviewed, usually from their prefaces. Consequently, most generalizations in the past concerning Lessing's attitudes and techniques as a reviewer have been built on sand: very few of the reviews in question are demonstrably his work, and many of those which may be by him—or which were published under his editorship—contain little or no original material. Reviews extracted from prefaces are, of course, as old as reviewing itself, and many were doubtless the result of haste or laziness on the part of the reviewer. But in Lessing's time, the tradition of providing abstracts rather than critical comment, long established in the learned journals, was still alive, and it no doubt helps to account for the prevalence of such reviews in the Berlin press. It is nevertheless clear that all pronouncements on Lessing's work as a reviewer must be made with extreme caution, and the following account will refer chiefly to his monthly review essays ('Das Neueste') of 1751, and to a lesser extent to reviews published under his editorship which address topics in which he was particularly interested.

The first issue of 'Das Neueste' in April 1751 is a fine example of Lessing's qualities as a critic.[100] It seems at first sight to cover a random assortment of recent publications in French and German: Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Discours sur les sciences et les arts*, two examples of French erotic fiction entitled *Thérèse philosophe* and *Les vrais plaisirs ou les amours de Vénus et d'Adonis*, a collection of Jean-Baptiste Rousseau's posthumous poems and other works, and Klopstock's as yet incomplete epic *The Messiah* together with the writings of some of Klopstock's critics and admirers in Germany and Switzerland. In fact, the essay is a carefully judged statement on current literary culture in France and Germany, aimed in particular at the Berlin public. By opening with Rousseau's first discourse—the latest literary sensation from France, published only a few months earlier and now hailed by Lessing

[97] Cf. L. to J. G. Lessing, 8 February 1751.
[98] Guthke ((2000d).
[99] See Consentius (1902) 48; Guthke (1975b) 32.
[100] LM IV, 387–99.

as a 'masterpiece'—Lessing shows his appreciation and up-to-date knowledge of French literature: indeed, this review marks the beginning of Rousseau's reception in Germany.[101] But by welcoming Rousseau's tirade against modern civilization (although he questions Rousseau's explanation of its shortcomings), he is also making a point about contemporary French culture, reinforced by his censures of the two works to which he turns immediately afterwards. He begins by citing a rumour (in fact correct) that *Thérèse philosophe* was written by the marquis d'Argens, director of the Belles-Lettres section of the Berlin Academy. He then disingenuously dismisses this rumour on the grounds that the work's glorification of illicit sexuality looks more like the work of 'Demetrius' (a pseudonym of La Mettrie). The effect of this is to insinuate twice over that French moral degeneracy, on which he now proceeds to enlarge, is very much at home in the Prussian capital. For good measure, he then points out that the second erotic text under review, *Les vrais plaisirs* (by Fréron and Colbert), is plagiarized, in morally debased form, from the Italian *Adonis* of Marino—just as he would demonstrate, two months later, that La Mettrie's *L'art de jouir* was plagiarized from Haller. And after attaching the stigma of prurience to other French authors from Corneille to Piron, he proceeds to disarm any suspicion of prejudice on his own part by concluding his review of French literature as he began it, with praise of a writer named Rousseau—not Jean-Jacques this time, but the poet Jean-Baptiste. After noting in passing that this writer, too, is reported to have indulged in (unspecified) excesses in his youth, Lessing magnanimously adds that he appears to have made amends for these in the morally unexceptionable (and, one suspects, undistinguished) works of his later years.

This skilfully contrived display of right-minded impartiality shows that the rhetorical strategies for which Lessing's later works, especially his polemical writings, are famous are already fully at his command. As his leisurely review moves on—with a passing genuflection to Voltaire—to the reception of Klopstock's *Messias*, a wider strategy can again be discerned. Not only does this outstanding example of German poetry in the middle decades of the century shine all the more brightly in contrast to the pornography, plagiarism, and mediocrity of the French texts discussed immediately before it. Klopstock's Christian epic is also, for Lessing's German readers, by definition morally unimpeachable. In addition, this very work was currently an object of controversy between the two schools of criticism then active in the German-speaking world, for Gottsched and his disciples had condemned its innovatory form and Miltonic excursions into the supernatural, while the Swiss school of Bodmer and Breitinger had praised it for precisely these qualities. Lessing now seizes the opportunity to dissociate himself from both camps and stake out an independent critical position of his own. He advises Gottsched to abandon poetics for areas he is better qualified to pronounce on (he doubtless has Gottsched's historical scholarship and services to the German theatre in mind), while he criticizes the Swiss for their feeble imitations of Klopstock's hexameters and their irrational opposition to the use of rhyme in poetry. With a concluding

[101] Cf. Jaumann 5; Kronauer 30–2.

tribute to Haller, Hagedorn, Gellert, Uz, and Gleim,[102] he further indicates that Germany has other poets of note besides Klopstock; but by concentrating on the latter, he sets the scene for more detailed discussions of *The Messiah* in subsequent issues of 'Das Neueste'. These discussions will show that, for all his recognition of Klopstock's services to German poetry, Lessing is not blind to his defects either.

This opening essay sets the pattern for subsequent issues of 'Das Neueste'—or at least for those to which Lessing devoted his full attention before other commitments took over towards the end of the year. He even manages to include, towards the end of the essay, some poems of his own and a translation of one of J.-B. Rousseau's epigrams, thereby heightening that impression of relaxed and entertaining diversity which the following issues seek to perpetuate. It would be impracticable to examine the latter in detail here, especially as many of them simply develop points already raised in the first issue; in any case, some items towards the end of the year may well be the work of Mylius. A few topics do, however, call for mention.

The June issue contains a long account of Diderot's newly published *Lettre sur les sourds et muets* and also refers to his *Lettre sur les aveugles* (1749).[103] Once again, Lessing has discerned the quality of an emerging author who would soon become a leader of the French Enlightenment. What interests him in this case is above all Diderot's observations on mime, and his remarkable experiment in assessing the language of gesture by holding his ears, to the consternation of other theatre-goers, during performances of dramas with whose texts he was already familiar. From now on, Lessing took a keen interest in Diderot as a kindred spirit and man of the theatre, translating his dramas and critical writings some nine years later. The other feature which strikes him is Diderot's digressive, even rambling style, whose apparent disorder is more than outweighed by the original ideas he constantly comes up with. As already mentioned, Lessing was himself cultivating a similarly relaxed manner, a style made popular by the English periodical essay; but in his case—as in that of Voltaire—it usually serves as a cloak for a highly deliberate rhetorical strategy.

It must be emphasized that Lessing's frequent criticisms of French writers in his early reviews are not inspired by a nationalistic animus of the kind often attibuted to him by his compatriots in the age of nationalism. He has the greatest admiration for French philosophy and historiography, at least as practised by those three figures whom he had already identified as the foremost intellects of their country. For frivolous publicity-seekers such as La Mettrie, he of course has only contempt. His opinion of recent French literature—with the notable exception, at least for the moment, of Voltaire's dramas—is on the whole unfavourable. In this respect, his views are not far removed from those of Voltaire himself or even Frederick, both of whom believed that French literary culture had suffered a general decline since the time of Louis XIV. The real change in his opinion of French literature took place some years later, as he came to believe that even the greatest names of French

[102] LM IV, 399; on Gleim cf. B II, 793. [103] LM IV, 415–22.

classicism no longer had anything of value to offer Germany, and that the most exciting developments in recent German literature—such as Klopstock's poetry—took their inspiration from completely different sources. His repeated discussions in 'Das Neueste' of *The Messiah,* one of which (in the September issue) is a masterly exercise in close reading, measure Klopstock not by the standards of French classicism but by those of classical antiquity; and his main (albeit muted) criticism of him is not so much of the poet as of the man, for he cannot resist a dig at that element of self-importance which he detects in one who, in the first lines of his great poem, looks not to the Muses or to the deity for inspiration, but to his own immortal soul.[104]

There is an additional reason why Lessing was particularly interested in Klopstock around this time. For alone among contemporary German poets, Klopstock seemed to have realized Lessing's own ambition of living by his writing without forfeiting his independence—thanks to a pension from the King of Denmark. Lessing dwells at length on the theme of royal patronage in 'Das Neueste', with heavy irony at the expense of the Prussian monarch: 'A poet rewarded is quite a rarity in our times. But this rarity becomes much greater if the poet is a German, and if his songs breathe nothing but religion and virtue.'[105] Though he was no longer sanguine about his prospects, Lessing had not yet ceased to hope for similar support in the future.

In the large number of reviews published under his editorship of the review section of the BPZ, Lessing again strove for breadth of coverage and a reader-friendly presentation. There are reviews on all varieties of literature, including the novel; he even incorporates a short piece of fiction on occasion to add variety or to offset a shortage of copy.[106] Works on scientific and medical subjects are regularly discussed, and the first issue of Mylius' new scientific journal *Diversions in Physical Science* (*Physikalische Belustigungen*) is given a friendly welcome. Some of the reviews on religious topics reflect Lessing's growing preoccupation with theology around this time, and his scholarly interest in Bayle's *Dictionnaire* and other biographical compendia is evident on more than one occasion.[107] Among the most impressive features of the review section is its international coverage, for the books reviewed include works of German, French, English, Spanish, Italian, Polish, and Danish origin, as well as works in or on the classical languages.

The aspect of these early reviews which has attracted most attention in the past is Lessing's relation to the current schools of critical opinion, and especially to Gottsched, who is attacked with monotonous regularity in the BPZ throughout the entire period of Lessing's association with it. It used to be customary to attribute all or most of these reviews, from 1748 onwards, to Lessing, by extrapolating backwards from his well known campaign against Gottsched in the *Letters on Literature* of 1759.[108] As already noted, Lessing shared many of Gottsched's interests and aspirations in his early years, even if he kept well clear of him in Leipzig; and in his

[104] LM IV, 449, n. 5 and V, 74–87; cf. also LM IV, 376. [105] LM IV, 400–4; cf. IV, 15–16.
[106] See, for example, LM V, 69–72. [107] LM IV, 304–406 and 327–9; cf. IV, 221–3.
[108] See, for example, Birke *passim*.

preface of 1749 to his and Mylius' theatrical periodical (the *Contributions*), he pays tribute to Gottsched's plans for a major work on theatre history, praising 'the meritorious services he [Gottsched] has undeniably rendered to the German theatre'.[109] The question consequently presents itself as to why and when this respectful attitude turned into one of hostility.

Gottsched's fatal weakness as a literary authority was his inflexibility, especially in the sphere of poetics. His views on poetics, which were essentially those of Boileau and French classicism, were fully formed by around 1729 and never developed any further. But at a time of rapid change in European literature, with new genres emerging and old ones disappearing, any attempt to enforce prescriptive rules was doomed to failure. No sooner had Gottsched attained a position of national influence than his decline set in. In 1738, he fell out with the Deutsche Gesellschaft, the literary society he had helped to establish throughout Germany, and his theatrical collaboration with Caroline Neuber broke down in 1740. The Swiss critics Bodmer and Breitinger, with whom he had hitherto maintained a loose alliance, deserted him in the early 1740s; they demanded more freedom for the poetic imagination than his rationalistic poetics allowed, citing Milton as a model. In 1743, he was abandoned in turn by that group of young followers, including Gellert and Klopstock, who became known as the 'Bremer Beiträger'. Christlob Mylius threw off his journalistic thraldom to Gottsched soon afterwards, and even the young Lessing, in a verse fable of 1747, felt strongly enough to defend Milton against Gottsched's anathemas.[110] By the early 1750s, Gottsched's condemnation of Klopstock's hugely successful *Messiah* and such unfortunate incidents as his public laureation of his obsequious disciple, the third-rate poet Schönaich, delivered him to widespread ridicule, which was in no way diminished when Frederick II dubbed him 'the Saxon swan' in 1757. It is remarkable that this long and unremitting decline from eminence failed to shake the immense self-importance which radiates from all Gottsched's portraits; as Johann Georg Scheffner, a well-disposed relative who visited him in his declining years, recalled: 'Boundless self-esteem had rendered him impervious to all the onslaughts of criticism.'[111]

Yet as already noted, there is evidence that Lessing still retained a good deal of respect for Gottsched in 1749. The title of his monthly supplement to the BPZ, 'Das Neueste aus dem Reiche des Witzes', whose forthcoming publication he announced on 18 March 1751,[112] even seems to have been modelled, with no ironic intention, on those of two of Gottsched's periodicals, *Das Neueste aus der anmutigen Gelehrsamkeit* and the *Belustigungen des Verstandes und des Witzes*. In the following month, the first part of Lessing's translation of one of Voltaire's essays, not yet published by Lessing himself, appeared in the former of these periodicals—presumably with Gottsched's knowledge and with Lessing's permission. It has, however, been shown that the second half of the essay, published by Gottsched in the following issue, was translated by another hand.[113] The first instalment also

[109] LM IV, 54–5. [110] LM I, 159–60; cf. GEL: Sämtliche Gedichte, ed. Grimm, 323–4.
[111] Oehlke I, 195; cf. I, 455–8. [112] B II, 33–4.
[113] See LM XXII, 156–7 and B II, 949.

contains numerous amendments and minor changes which Lessing cannot have endorsed, since they are absent from the version which he himself published later in the year, as well as two footnotes which he could not possibly have consented to, for they accuse Voltaire of ingratitude towards Frederick II. All this would suggest that Lessing, indignant at Gottsched's editorial interference, refused him permission to use the second half of his translation in the following issue of the periodical, and that his open hostility towards Gottsched probably dates from this incident.

Karl S. Guthke has analysed these events in detail and shown, by painstaking detective work, that all or most of the jibes against Gottsched in the BPZ before Lessing took over the review section in February 1751 must have emanated from Mylius, who had long had cause to resent him; the later ones, on the other hand—including, of course, those in 'Das Neueste'—must derive from, or at least have been approved by, Lessing as editor (the first negative review of Gottsched appeared on 27 March).[114] But even in 'Das Neueste', Lessing still has a positive word for Gottsched's achievements outside the poetic sphere.[115] All this would change, however, over the next few years, when Gottsched began to encourage his disciples to publish invectives against Lessing. The stage was then set for Lessing's all-out assault on him towards the end of the decade.

Already in the first issue of 'Das Neueste', Lessing was attempting, as earlier mentioned, to establish an independent critical position for himself between the rival schools of Gottsched and the Swiss in the controversy over Klopstock's *Messiah*.[116] He continued to pursue this course over the next few years, for he detected too much dogma on both sides—Breitinger, no less than Gottsched, had published a deductive system of poetics, even giving it the same title as Gottsched's. Lessing preferred to respond to each work of poetry inductively, judging it primarily by its emotive effect on the reader or audience and referring in cases of doubt to the authority of classical antiquity—though not in a narrowly prescriptive manner. These same criteria were prominent, it will be remembered, in his essay of 1750 on the dramas of Plautus, and his emphasis on personal feeling as a guide shows his indebtedness to the affective poetics of sensibility (and perhaps also to the aesthetics of J.-B. Du Bos, for whom the chief function of poetry was to stimulate the passions). In later works such as *Laocoön* and the *Hamburg Dramaturgy*, he would seek to define general principles, as distinct from restrictive rules in the manner of the rationalists, to accommodate both the exemplary qualities of ancient poetry and the role of subjective response and individual creativity—principles wide enough to encompass not just the classical canon, but also the works of Shakespeare, Klopstock, and new forms such as the domestic tragedy. But throughout the 1750s, his criticism remains for the most part practical and inductive, respecting personal and national individuality and striving to maintain a balance between subjective response and general principles in the manner outlined above. The result was that neither the Gottschedians nor the Swiss could claim him as one of their own, and each in fact suspected him of being in league with the other.[117]

[114] Guthke (1975b) 49–57. [115] LM IV, 397.
[116] On the following see Guthke (1975b) 36–40. [117] Ibid. 28–9, 44–7, 64–70.

Apart from his work as a reviewer, Lessing's other main achievement as a journalist in the early Berlin years was to launch, with Mylius as co-editor, the first periodical in Germany devoted exclusively to theatre history, the *Contributions to the History and Improvement of the Theatre* (*Beiträge zur Historie und Aufnahme des Theaters*). The fact that only four issues were published, all of them in 1750, does not diminish the journal's historical importance as the first of its kind and the forerunner of two further periodical publications by Lessing on the same subject.

The *Contributions* are devoted not just to drama, but to the theatre in general, including the art of acting. For one of the work's major objectives is to defend the acting profession and to raise its social standing in Germany. Mylius' opening essay in the first issue, reprinted from one of his Leipzig periodicals, establishes the journal's artistic credentials by denouncing the popular theatre of improvisation, declaring that acting, as practised in the 'regular' theatre, is a liberal art on a par with painting, musical composition, and poetry.[118] He concludes that the further progress of enlightenment demands that actors be accorded the same degree of social recognition in Germany as in France, where under Louis XIV, they at times dined at the royal table. (A later article notes that actors in the royal company currently receive a stipend of 12,000 livres—around 3,000 talers—together with additional benefits.)[119]

Lessing had a further, personal motive for launching the *Contributions*, as is clear from the editorial preface (dated October 1749), of which he is wholly or for the most part the author.[120] He defends the theatre against the criticisms of the clergy in particular, declaring that ministers of the Church might well profit from the actor's skills. As he himself puts it, 'those who often resemble madmen rather than apostles would learn to speak in a more moderate and agreeable way'.[121] Warming to his theme, he announces that the journal's historical researches will also demonstrate that older objections to the theatre, such as those of the Church Fathers, no longer apply, a fact which may persuade 'unthinking zealots to judge less harshly and exercise more restraint in their damnations'. (This, it will be recalled, was written in the same year as *The Freethinker*, when his father's opposition to the theatre was still intense.)

As for the journal's intended scope, Lessing's preface promises a work of truly encyclopaedic proportions. Its aim is patriotic: Germany, we are told, now has literary works in most genres which can bear comparison with those of other countries, but they are the product of very few writers. Only by educating the taste (a key concept in those years) of the public can this situation be improved, especially through the medium of periodicals, which have hitherto devoted less attention to drama than to other forms of literature. More translations of international drama are required to serve as models, particularly from countries other than France, hitherto the source of most translated works. The *Contributions* will accordingly publish, on the one hand, essays on the theoretical principles of drama, and

[118] Lessing/Mylius (eds), *Beiträge* (1976) 1–13 (see Bibliog., Editions of Individual Works); also B I, 1330–1.

[119] Lessing/Mylius (eds), *Beiträge* (1976) 440.

[120] See LM VI, 3.

[121] LM IV, 54–5.

on the other, translations of Greek and Latin plays in the first instance, but also of French, Italian, English, Spanish, and Dutch dramas. Carried away by his enthusiasm, Lessing then lists six English dramatists, including Shakespeare, and no fewer than eight Spanish playwrights whose works merit translation.

This project, together with its partial realization, has three main literary sources of inspiration. The first is Lessing's devotion to the classics, and his desire to find new ways of exploiting the classical legacy in modern drama. The second is Gottsched, whose plans to improve the German theatre and eventually to provide a history of the theatre in general are supported by the new journal. The preface even states that one of the journal's aims is to furnish materials for Gottsched's history, and its only major divergence from Gottsched's programme is its emphasis on dramatic traditions other than that of France. The contents of the journal are also compatible with Gottsched's theoretical principles. Mylius' article on the role of exaggeration in comedy[122] is a defence of satirical comedy in Gottsched's manner, and even Lessing's discussion of Plautus does not so much contradict as supplement Gottsched's poetics by stating that comedy should not only portray vice in a negative light, but also present virtue as attractive. As far as comedy is concerned, Lessing's innovations had so far been less conspicuous in his theoretical pronouncements than in his practice as a dramatist; similarly, when he does begin to attack Gottsched in 1751, his objections are less to Gottsched's theories of drama than to his personal shortcomings and his views on other varieties of poetry such as the verse epic.

The third source of inspiration in the *Contributions*, despite its declared intention of concentrating on dramatic traditions other than that of France, is the French tradition itself. All three of Corneille's *Discours sur le poème dramatique* (1660) are presented in translation, as is Voltaire's account of English drama in his *Lettres anglaises* (nos. 18 and 19), and there are several reports on the French theatre in Paris and Berlin, in most of which Voltaire figures prominently. And although it is stated in the preface that German drama has a greater natural affinity with that of England than that of France, the list in the preface of English dramatists considered worthy of emulation is almost identical with, and follows almost the same order as, the succession of playwrights commended in Voltaire's *Lettres*—with the significant omission of Addison and his *Cato*, which both Voltaire and Gottsched had admired for its affinities with French tragedy.

The aims of the journal, as stated in the preface, were of course far too ambitious to realize—especially since only four issues were published. Many of the articles included are translations of French originals, and there are only two plays, namely Lessing's translation of Plautus' *The Captives* and Mylius' translation of Machiavelli's comedy *La Clizia*. There is nothing at all on the Greek, Spanish, or Dutch theatre, and the English theatre is touched on only in the extract from Voltaire's *Lettres*. The most substantial piece of criticism is Lessing's discussion of Plautus, particularly his concluding remarks on the function of comedy.[123] His fluent translation

[122] Lessing/Mylius (eds) *Beiträge* (1976) 266–72. [123] LM IV, 180–93.

of Antoine-François Riccoboni's newly published *L'art du théâtre*, which he had already reviewed in the BPZ,[124] also deserves mention as evidence of his continuing interest in all aspects of acting and stagecraft, on which Riccoboni supplies a wealth of practical advice. The French actor recommends a natural style of acting, free from affectation and hyperbole, advice which accords well with Lessing's growing move towards realism in comedy.

Apart from the preface and items concerning Plautus, Lessing's only original contribution to the *Contributions* is his short and damning review of a recent translation of a Latin treatise by Samuel Werenfels, a Swiss clergyman who, early in the century, had defended dramatic performances in schools.[125] The topic itself was bound to arouse strong feelings in both Lessing and Mylius, who had not forgotten the enforced resignation of Rector Heinitz in Kamenz some seven years earlier. In addition, the incompetent translator, one Immanuel Friedrich Gregorius, himself hailed from Kamenz; he seemed to be ignorant of the fact that Mylius had provided a much better translation of the same work soon after the dispute in Kamenz over school drama;[126] and to crown it all, Gregorius had secured favourable comment on his inadequate work by writing sycophantic letters to Gottsched. This kind of provocation was more than Lessing could resist. The Werenfels review is the first characteristic example of his polemical style, in this case directed against the 'schoolboy howlers' of an incompetent translator.[127] With his formidable command of language and growing experience as a translator, he would shortly develop this variety of polemic into an art-form. Meanwhile, he took care to send a copy of the relevant issue of the *Contributions* to his father, to whom Gregorius's father in turn complained about Lessing's assault on his son, and when Pastor Lessing raised the matter in his next letter to Berlin, Lessing stood firmly by his opinion.[128] (There is, on the other hand, no evidence that he sent his father the first issue, with its prefatory advice to ranting clergymen to take lessons in acting.)

The *Contributions* came to an end with the publication of the fourth issue. Lessing maintained that the project was abandoned because of disagreements with his co-editor (Mylius) who failed to carry out his responsibilities properly, but it is also possible that the publisher refused to bring out further issues.[129] Lessing's claim that discerning readers had called for its continuation is nevertheless accurate: the reviews, of which more than ten have been identified, were overwhelmingly favourable.[130]

Some general conclusions concerning Lessing's qualities as a critic may be drawn from this survey of his early journalism, which already displays many of the characteristics of his later critical writing. Most of it consists of reviews, and the review—an occasional form, topical, more or less spontaneous, argumentative, analytical, unsystematic—is in a sense the archetypal form of all his criticism.[131]

[124] B I, 884–934 (translation); LM IV, 198–9 (review).
[125] LM IV, 175–9. [126] See B I, 1400. [127] LM IV, 176.
[128] L. to J. G. Lessing, 2 November 1750 and 8 February 1751.
[129] LM VI, 3–4; cf. Robertson (1913) 514 and E. Schmidt I, 176.
[130] B I, 1336–45. [131] Cf. Steinmetz (1968) 46.

Informality is of its essence, even if it is a studied informality like that of Steele and Addison or of the French *causerie*. Like the letter form, in which Lessing would shortly recast some of his early reviews for inclusion in his collected *Writings* (*Schriften*, 1753–55), his reviews are couched in a relaxed and natural style, avoiding technical jargon and specialized knowledge. Often humorous, ironic, or satirical, they seek to entertain as much as to instruct, as the notice of the forthcoming publication of 'Das Neueste' makes clear. But with Lessing, entertainment is rarely an end in itself: as with Voltaire, the wit, humour, and elegant facility of his criticism are all part of a rhetorical strategy to persuade the reader to share his point of view.

Unlike the previous generation of critics, Lessing proceeds for the most part inductively, moving from particular instances to general conclusions and judgements. And his judgements are not based on abstract rules to be applied in a prescriptive manner: he shuns all magisterial pretensions, even if his own critical principles would later come to be regarded by many as authoritative. His approach is analytical, and he regularly begins by dividing the material he is working with into distinct and often antithetical elements—as with the contrasting opinions of Rousseau and La Mettrie, or Gottsched and the Swiss—in order to play them off against one another or to mediate between them to construct a more balanced or complete point of view. His concern with the particular also underlies his preference for a personal as distinct from an impersonal perspective: he speaks with an individual voice, which becomes increasingly recognizable as his mannerisms develop, and his criticism is often directed as much at the author of the work criticized as at the work itself. This means, of course, that a great deal of his criticism is polemical. His love of polemics, already nurtured in Kästner's colloquium on disputation, is itself a product of his habitual non-conformism, his delight in opposing unquestioned assumptions and dominant orthodoxies. More will be said on his polemical artistry in the next chapter, for it was after his year in Wittenberg that he first deployed it with devastating effect.

With its popular style and non-technical, entertaining presentation, Lessing's journalistic criticism is aimed not at specialists but at the educated public at large. Like Samuel Johnson, whose *Rambler* essays were simultaneously appearing in England (1750–52), he writes for the plain man (the audience is still almost exclusively male) or 'common reader'. He is writing on a commercial basis, on behalf of a publisher who expects to sell at least some of the books under review: most reviews in the BPZ accordingly conclude with a note of the price, and the information that the book in question can be obtained from Voss's bookshops. The reader is treated with respect and deference, at times even with flattery; he is addressed as 'refined' or 'well disposed', as a reader 'of taste' or 'of sensibility', whom the writer has no wish to bore, to whom he apologizes for digressions or for briefly introducing more specialized material, and to whose judgement he submits the evidence and his own conclusions.[132]

[132] See Barner (1977) 330; also LM IV, 49, 53, 56, 68, 452, 462, etc.

In pitching his writing at this level, Lessing faced a demanding task, because the kind of audience he was writing for was small in number and only now emerging—partly thanks to the efforts of the new journalism to educate it. But he was also steering a difficult course between two older kinds of journalism, that of the learned journals and that of the moral weeklies. His scholarly and antiquarian interests had in no way diminished since he left university; on the contrary, they were still developing. But apart from his work on Plautus for the *Contributions,* he displayed them only sparingly, like the French writers he admired, and went out of his way to avoid any suspicion of pedantry. In later years, he perfected the art of presenting scholarly material to a general public to a degree rarely equalled by his compatriots, avoiding the academic approach of the learned journals; where necessary, he devised or adapted other literary forms to make his scholarly findings accessible. On the other hand, he disliked the patronizing manner of the moral weeklies to which the older generation was accustomed, declaring on one occasion that he had 'made it almost a rule to leave our weekly moralists unread'.[133] Such periodicals, whose day would soon be over, catered for a less sophisticated audience, providing practical advice on social comportment and domestic responsibilities, teaching self-effacing piety and virtue to the middle classes and castigating the vices of the rich and idle. All this doubtless served a useful purpose and played no small part in disseminating Enlightenment values; but it required the writer to assume an avuncular, paternalistic, or even pastoral role as guide and mentor of the public, a role to which Lessing, by temperament and conviction, was utterly unsuited. Not that he had no advice to give to a popular audience, or indeed to the world at large. But when he did choose to give it, he almost invariably did so indirectly, through a literary or poetic medium, as he had already done with his dramas *The Freethinker* and *The Jews*.[134]

If he is sparing in his positive advice to others on how to conduct themselves, Lessing is much less restrained in other kinds of judgement. Literary and aesthetic judgements are, of course, indispensable in reviews and criticism; but if such criticism becomes personal, as it frequently does in Lessing's case, it entails moral judgements as well. He has no inhibitions about passing moral judgements on his opponents—provided, that is, they have in his view failed to observe acceptable standards of behaviour. Thus, a moral as well as a critical code of values is inherent in his work from the start: it is that of liberal, progressive, and implicitly democratic opinion as embodied in the writings of the founding fathers and leading thinkers of the Enlightenment, from Locke and Bayle to Montesquieu and Beccaria. Reason and evidence, not authority and dogma, are the only reliable tests of truth and value, and an author's opinion is no more valid (at least in theory) than that of his readers. Lessing's *ad hominem* attacks on individuals are nearly always on those who, in his view, have violated these principles, by abuse of authority, falsification or misrepresentation of evidence, or by treating other human beings as means rather than as ends. The new critical journalism accordingly

[133] LM VIII, 122. [134] Cf. Martens (1977) 245 *passim*.

promotes the democratization of culture, which itself marks a step towards the democratization of government, just as the republic of letters marks a step towards the republic of law. Lessing had already shown that he upheld these liberal values in politics no less than in criticism, having defended the civil rights of the Jews in a drama expressly dedicated to that theme.

Finally, Lessing's combination of democratic values and critical authority confronted him with a problem which became acute in later years. On the one hand, his distrust of received opinion and ready-made certainties prevents him from assuming a dogmatic posture, and he goes out of his way to challenge his readers to think for themselves: to cite only one example, he began the first issue of 'Das Neueste' with fulsome praise of the arts and sciences as the bedrock of civilization, before presenting Rousseau's condemnation of them and praising Rousseau's achievement in turn. On the other hand, when he believes in something sufficiently strongly, he uses every means at his disposal, from ridicule, innuendo, and *captatio benevolentiae* to selective use of evidence and, in polemical contexts, assaults on his adversary's moral integrity. There was, of course, nothing unusual about such procedures in his day; it was rather Lessing's customary avoidance of them, and the exceptional skill which he displayed when he did feel obliged to resort to them, that was unusual. But once he had gained a reputation, in later years, as a champion of truth against the forces of reaction, his conflicting impulses of impartiality and personal commitment gave rise to problems both for him and his readers, problems which, in the religious sphere in particular, eventually caused him serious difficulties.

By the mid-1750s, Lessing had made a name for himself as a critic, largely on the strength of his reviews in the BPZ, including 'Das Neueste' of 1751. Since these writings were published for the most part anonymously, much of the evidence on their reception comes from private correspondence among those of his readers—both friends and enemies—who had penetrated his anonymity, such as Gleim, Ramler, Sulzer, Haller, Gottsched, and Wieland.[135] Most of them admired him, a few hated and feared him, but all were clear that he was a force to be reckoned with; his reputation was further enhanced as his literary works began to appear, with his first collection of poems, the *Trifles* (*Kleinigkeiten*), published in 1751. His literary production continued throughout his first years in Berlin, in poetry as well as in drama, and most of his longer didactic poems, which have not so far been considered, date from this time. They may appropriately be discussed in this survey of the early Berlin period.

Lessing experimented in didactic poetry of a reflective or philosophical kind on various occasions between 1746 and 1755, but most of the works in question were written between 1748 and 1752. He published the six most substantial pieces in 1753, in the first volume of his collected *Writings*, under the title 'Fragments'.[136] All but one of them are indeed fragments, as is a further piece from 1746 'On the Plurality of Worlds' ('Über die Mehrheit der Welten') which he included in the

[135] See B II, 744–7. [136] LM I, 235–67.

second volume of the same collection. Unlike such forms as the epigram and fable, for which he had a natural aptitude and predilection, these reflective fragments are primarily the result of his desire to try his hand at all the main varieties of poetry in current use, and the reasons he gives for their unfinished state are not entirely convincing. He informs us, for example, that the concluding part of the (to all appearances uncontentious) fragment 'From a Poem to Herr M[ylius]' ('Aus einem Gedicht an den Herrn M[ylius]'), on the rival merits of the ancients and moderns, was deleted by one of the Leipzig censors (now deceased) at the time of the poem's first publication;[137] but if so, why did Lessing not retain a copy? A second fragment ('On the Plurality of Worlds') was abandoned when his confidence failed him on reading Fontenelle's prose dialogues—a very different medium—on the same subject;[138] and in other cases, he simply states that, for unspecified reasons, he has decided to withhold parts of the poems in question.[139] Perhaps; yet no such material was discovered among his posthumous papers. It is more likely that he failed to complete them primarily because he found the didactic posture and monologue form an uncongenial medium for extended reflection. The verse forms he feels happiest with are the shorter, impersonal, and humorous ones, such as the epigram and the *petite poésie* of the *Trifles*; and for intellectual enquiry, he prefers the dialogue, whether with an adversary, with the reader, with himself, or between invented characters. Surprisingly, the most substantial of the didactic fragments, 'On Religion' ('Die Religion'), adopts an autobiographical mode; but as will shortly be seen, it is not as autobiographical as it first appears, it makes use of internal dialogue, and the choice of the fragment form was in this case deliberate.

Didactic poetry, as old as Hesiod and Empedocles, enjoyed its last major flowering in the early and middle decades of the eighteenth century, with Pope and Thomson, Brockes and Haller, Young and Polignac. Lessing's first efforts in the genre, dating mainly from the Leipzig period—such as his fragment on the plurality of worlds, or his tribute to modern science and its superiority to the science of antiquity ('From a Poem to Herr M[ylius]')—recall the poetry and metaphysical optimism of his teacher Kästner, who had celebrated the well-ordered Newtonian universe in his 'Philosophical Poem on Comets' ('Philosophisches Gedicht von den Kometen') of 1744.[140] But the tone and manner of the Berlin fragments are different: they recall the Calvinistic broodings of Haller, his agonizings over personal faith and his laments over—or diatribes against—the depravity of modern man and his loss of contact with idyllic nature.[141] Like most poems in Haller's *Essay in Swiss Poetry* (*Versuch schweizerischer Gedichte*, 1732), nearly all of Lessing's fragments employ the alexandrine metre of French classicism.

The fragments have two main themes, both of them of central importance to Lessing in the early Berlin period, namely poetry and religion. 'From a Poem on the Present Taste in Poetry' ('Aus einem Gedicht über den jetzigen Geschmack in der Poesie') contains an internal dialogue expressing his unease over his continued use of alexandrine verse, as recommended by Gottsched, after the recent triumph

[137] LM I, 247–8, n. 4. [138] LM V, 66–7. [139] Cf. LM V, 36.
[140] See Baasner 243–8. [141] See Guthke (1975c) *passim*.

of Klopstock's *Messiah* with its revolutionary use of the hexameter,[142] while two other pieces ('To Baron von Sp[ilcker]' in madrigal verse, and 'To Herr Marpurg', the only completed poem in the collection) give precedence to spontaneous inspiration over excessive concern with the rules of rationalistic poetics.[143] All three illustrate Lessing's efforts to define his own position as poet and critic in relation to the dominant tendencies of the time, and all three reflect Haller's anxious preoccupation with nature and artifice. The two remaining fragments from the Berlin period are philosophically the weightiest, dealing as they do with metaphysical and religious doubts and their possible resolution. The first, 'From a Poem on Human Happiness' ('Aus einem Gedicht über die menschliche Glückseligkeit')[144] was presumably written in 1750 or 1751, for it outlines and rebuts the atheism, determinism, and amoralism of La Mettrie, whose works Lessing read and criticized in those years. Its theme of religious doubt is once more reminiscent of Haller, but its decisive rejection of atheism also serves, like the condemnation of La Mettrie in Lessing's letters to his father, to establish his own religious respectability (he places it first in the collection of fragments) before he moves to more serious religious doubts in the last and longest piece, which purports to be the opening section of a major poem in six cantos entitled 'On Religion'.[145] This fragment, which Lessing had already used to fill the entire November issue of 'Das Neueste' in 1751, deals with at least some of the problems he may have had in mind when he defended honest doubt in contrast to routine Christian observances in his letter to his father of 30 May 1749.

As the prose preamble informs us, this opening fragment of the projected poem, conceived 'on a lonely day of vexation', deals with religious doubts occasioned by the inner and outer misery of mankind. Much of it consists of internal dialogue between the poet and himself, in which he reviews the twenty years of his life so far (thus confirming that the poem, or its conception, dates from 1749) as a protracted struggle to overcome physical frailty and moral weakness. To his melancholy self-scrutiny, the motives of all his actions appear as vices, including pride and stubbornness, ambition (*Ruhmsucht*), avarice and envy (*Geiz und Neid*), and his dispiriting conclusion is that all supposed virtues may be vices in disguise. The fact that many details resemble known aspects of Lessing's life—his early dedication to books and study, his poetic ambitions and envy of a great religious poet writing in German, the resentment he feels on seeing a bejewelled old poet with his coach and liveried retinue (a reference perhaps added after Voltaire's arrival in 1750), and the theme of religious doubt itself—has encouraged some critics to interpret this poem as the autobiographical expression of a religious crisis.[146] It is true that a genuine religious problem is raised in this fragment, a problem to which Lessing (as well as several characters in his dramas) reverts at various times in his life, namely the problem of theodicy and the risk of misanthropy which readily

[142] LM I, 242–3; according to E. Schmidt I, 218, the fragment was written in 1752 in Wittenberg.
[143] LM I, 241–2 and 248–55. [144] LM I, 237–40. [145] LM I, 255–67.
[146] See Jolles 115; also Wessell (1977) 121 and 130.

accompanies it. If the human race really is as evil as it may seem 'on a lonely day of vexation', the fragment asks, how can it be the work of a wise god and part of an admirable universe? And how can one possibly regard oneself and one's fellows with anything other than loathing?

Whether or not Lessing experienced a religious crisis in the early 1750s, and what form such a crisis may have taken, are questions which can more usefully be addressed in connection with his year in Wittenberg, when religious issues became for a time his main object of study. But even if 'On Religion' was written at the time of such a crisis, caution must be exercised in treating it as a straightforward autobiographical document. In the first place, the main doubt expressed in it (the problem of theodicy) was always a fleeting one for Lessing, the product of a temporary depression or a 'lonely day of vexation', for there is no indication that his lifelong belief in God and a benevolent providence, underpinned since his days at St Afra by the metaphysical optimism of Leibniz and Wolff, was ever seriously threatened as a basic conviction. His gravest religious doubts, which are not aired in this poem, concerned the divinity of Christ and the necessity or otherwise of the Christian revelation for a virtuous life and personal salvation. Besides, the fragment follows too well-established a literary pattern to pass without qualification for an autobiographical statement. The poetic 'fragment', as a deliberate device for airing religious doubts or heretical opinions (usually accompanied, as in the present case, by an assurance that such doubts would be refuted in a planned, but as yet unwritten, continuation), was used by Haller in his 'Unfinished Poem on Eternity' ('Unvollkommenes Gedicht über die Ewigkeit')[147] and by other poets such as Johann Heinrich Oest as well as Lessing, and the inner struggle with religious doubts is a recurrent theme in German didactic poetry. In addition, Lessing had admitted in the preface to his *Writings*—probably to forestall the kind of accusation of plagiarism he himself was fond of making against French authors—that some sections of his fragments were modelled on works by French poets,[148] and it has indeed been shown that 'On Religion' is modelled in part on the second canto of Louis Racine's poem *La Religion*, which is full of self-reproaches and representations of the misery of mankind without God.[149] And last but not least, the kind of agonizing over the possibly sinful motives of one's own actions which occurs in 'On Religion' is thoroughly untypical of Lessing. For although pride and ambition were certainly among his vices—if that is what they were—in his early years, avarice (*Geiz*) is the last thing he can be accused of, for his generosity, and even prodigality, were bywords among his friends, and it is hard to imagine that he ever hoped, or wished, to rival Klopstock as a religious poet. In short, while 'On Religion' does contain some autobiographical elements, it is much too stylized and conventional a work to be read as an autobiographical confession; the autobiographical content of this work is only marginally more substantial than that of the Anacreontic poems which preceded it.

[147] Haller 150–7; cf. Guthke (1975c) 124.
[148] LM V, 36.
[149] See Pons (1964) 61; also B II, 902.

Lessing's didactic fragments are among the least impressive of his early poetic experiments. They are at times little more than rhyming prose, and one suspects that his main reasons for including them in his collected works were to increase their volume and to demonstrate the breadth of his poetic interests rather than his mastery of every form. Only two years later, in his collaborative analysis (with Moses Mendelssohn) of Pope's didactic poetry, he concluded that it is not in any case the business of the poet to expound philosophical systems. This conclusion, no doubt reinforced by the condemnation of didactic poetry in Aristotle's *Poetics*, now led him to exclude philosophical verse in the manner of Lucretius from the realm of poetry.[150]

Another category of poems included in the *Writings* of 1753 is entitled 'Odes' ('Oden').[151] But since most of them are of later date and concerned with or dedicated to Frederick II, they can more appropriately be discussed in the context of Lessing's ambivalent attitude to the Prussian monarch in the later 1750s. It should, however, be noted here that most of them were written not by choice, but as a duty required of the review editor of the BPZ each New Year's Day and on 24 January, the king's birthday. The composition of the first such ode, which was published on 1 January 1752, was probably the last task which Lessing performed before his sudden departure for Wittenberg at the end of 1751; Mylius was presumably left to supply the birthday ode some three weeks later.

[150] LM VI, 415. [151] LM I, 135–47.

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Wittenberg and Associated Writings 1752–1754: History of Scholarship; Philosophy; Theology and Religion; Classical Philology; Epigrams

The small town of Wittenberg, fifty miles south-west of Berlin, lies just above the flood-plain of the River Elbe, around eighty miles downstream from Meissen. Its two central thoroughfares form a link between the old castle of the Electors with its associated church (the Schlosskirche) at the western extremity, the Town Hall and Parish Church in the town centre, and the main university buildings at the eastern end. In Lessing's time, the Prussian frontier lay only a few miles to the north, and Wittenberg still retained those heavy fortifications which made it the object of destructive sieges until Napoleonic times.[1] Although it ceased to be an official residence of the Electors of Saxony in 1542, Wittenberg's role between 1517 and 1530 as cradle of the Lutheran Reformation and the growing reputation of its university (founded in 1502) were enough to spread its fame throughout Europe.

The university—or, as it was officially known, the Leucorea (a Greek version of 'Wittenberg' or white mountain)—consisted of the four traditional faculties of theology, law, medicine, and the arts. Almost from the start, it was strong in humanistic studies as well as in theology, for Luther, who joined its staff in 1512 and, with the help of Melanchthon, decisively shaped its curriculum, required all students to complete a basic training in the arts faculty before proceeding to their chosen specialism. The main lecture rooms and other facilities were housed in the Fridericianum, a purpose-built complex on the Kollegienstrasse towards the south-east end of the town. These were later supplemented by the Augusteum, a group of buildings a short way to the east whose focus was the house in which Luther had spent much of his later life; it was acquired by the university in 1565 and extended towards the end of the sixteenth century.[2] This complex likewise contained lecture rooms and student accommodation, while the university library and anatomical theatre were housed in a new building fronting the street and separated by a courtyard from the older buildings to the rear. The Schosskirche, to which the students processed on ceremonial occasions along the length of the town,[3] served as the university church, and its wooden door, used as a university notice board at the

[1] See Bellmann et al. Plate 25. [2] Ibid. 61–7. [3] Ibid. Plate 41.

time when Luther affixed his famous ninety-five theses to it in 1517, was still in place in Lessing's time. (It was consumed by fire eight years later, along with the church itself, during the Seven Years War.)

In the aftermath of the Reformation, Wittenberg became the foremost university in Germany, with a complement of more than three thousand students in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. This number fell drastically as plague and devastation struck the town during the Thirty Years War, but recovered strongly in the later seventeenth century. It declined steadily thereafter, and while 1,765 students were in residence in 1700, there were only 787 in 1750;[4] the stronghold of Lutheranism was gradually eclipsed by its neighbours and rivals, the universities of Halle and Leipzig, as Pietism and the Enlightenment gained the ascendancy over the old Reformation orthodoxy.

In returning to Wittenberg, Lessing was following his own scholarly and literary inclinations; but he was at the same time justifying himself in the eyes of his father, who had taken his master's degree in theology there some forty years before. Having already spent four months in the town with his cousin Theophilus in

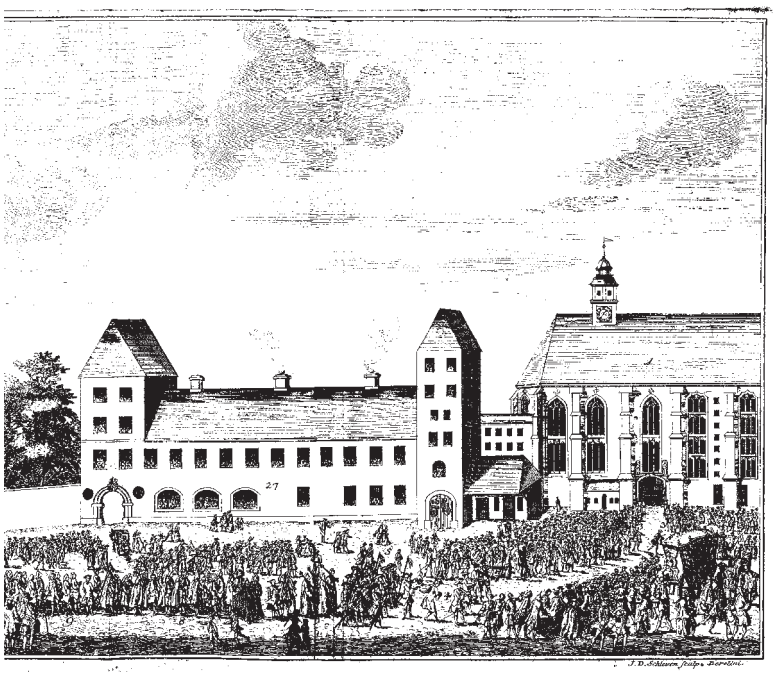

Fig. 9. Wittenberg, church procession, engraving by Johann David Schleuen (on whom see p. 328), c. 1756.

[4] See the statistical table at the end of Junghans.

1748, he must have settled in quickly when he returned at the end of 1751, especially since one of his brothers (also named Theophilus) had been in residence there for several months. How he paid his way is a mystery. He may have borrowed or scraped together enough from his Berlin earnings to tide him over; or he may have qualified for one of the numerous endowed scholarships which the university had at its disposal.[5] At any rate, he shared a room in the centre of town with his brother, reputedly at no. 61 Mittelstrasse, on the corner of the square with tall Renaissance gables behind the Parish Church where Luther had often preached.[6] As Karl Lessing tells us, the two brothers bore their poverty with fortitude,[7] no doubt sustained by the cheap meals provided for students in the university refectory or *Konviktorium*. According to an official report in the second half of the eighteenth century,[8] the poorest students—to whose number the two brothers certainly belonged—could subsist on 52 talers per year, with no allowance for barber's bills, coffee, sugar, milk, or entertainments, provided they were not required to pay lecture fees. (The contrast with Voltaire's Berlin stipend of 5,000 talers gives some idea of the different worlds which he and Lessing inhabited.) The three higher grades of student allowance—at 110, 195, and 413 talers respectively—provided successively higher standards of living, with those on the top grade enjoying a suite of rooms, an academic assistant, and tuition in languages and a range of gentlemanly pursuits.

We know little of Lessing's circle of acquaintances in Wittenberg, except that some of his friends, including the librarian Friedrich Immanuel Schwarz, were former pupils of St Afra; Lessing was called upon to deliver the funeral oration for another St Afra student when illness forced Schwarz to withdraw at the last minute.[9] We also know that he was visited in March by Gottlob Samuel Nicolai, professor of philosophy at Halle and later at Frankfurt an der Oder;[10] Gottlob Samuel was a brother of Friedrich Nicolai, with whom Lessing would form a close friendship some two years later. A man of literary interests, Nicolai had doubtless heard of Lessing through his family's bookselling business in Berlin and Wittenberg,[11] and the two established amicable relations and corresponded for a time; Nicolai would shortly attempt—with disastrous results—to mediate in Lessing's controversy with the poet Lange.

Such references to Wittenberg society as there are in the poems which Lessing wrote during 1752 are negative and acerbic. His two odes to Nicolai invoke the spirit of Juvenal to chastise the folly, depravity, and corruption he sees around him, and deplore the noise of the local soldiery.[12] These odes are, of course, literary constructions—they contain echoes of Haller's melancholy as well as Juvenal's vituperations—but the contemporary allusions are doubtless real enough, for the students and garrison of Wittenberg constituted a disproportionately large and mutually hostile presence in a town of under 5,000 inhabitants, and unruly behaviour and

[5] See Friedensburg 545. [6] Bellmann et al. 78. [7] KGL 83; cf. D 52.
[8] The following statistics are from Friedensburg 539. [9] KGL 83–4.
[10] See LM V, 261; D 50; Danzel/Guhrauer I, 247. [11] See Oehlke I, 242. [12] LM I, 139–41.

noisy demonstrations were a problem for much of the eighteenth century.[13] Like Lessing's didactic poetry, the Wittenberg poems also contain gloomy reflections on the fickleness of fortune and the inscrutability of providence, but they add to these a new preoccupation with mortality, as in 'The Death of a Friend' ('Der Tod eines Freundes')[14] and in the most personal of all Lessing's poems, 'I' ('Ich'), which he wrote down on the spur of the moment in a friend's autograph album.[15] These sombre meditations may well have been prompted by the death of that friend at whose funeral Lessing delivered the oration.

The main focus of Lessing's interest in Wittenberg was, however, the university library. Students had only limited access to the books, though not to the shelves.[16] But fortunately for Lessing, his old friend Schwarz, who was currently a custodian of the library, allowed him to consult books as he pleased, and Lessing later boasted that every book in the collection had passed through his hands.[17] Admittedly, the library had suffered long periods of neglect and, for an institutional collection, was only modest in size, containing little more than 12,000 volumes in the later eighteenth century;[18] but there were quite enough early printed books and other rarities to sustain Lessing's wide-ranging research throughout the Wittenberg period.

Lessing had already matriculated in 1748 in the faculty of medicine. His choice of medicine as an alternative to theology was no doubt connected with that interest in science which had first been aroused by his studies of astronomy with Klimm at St Afra and later sustained by his friendship with Kästner and Mylius; as Karl Lessing tells us, he had even attended classes in chemistry and botany at Leipzig university.[19] Nevertheless, the subject of his master's degree had little to do with either medicine or science as understood in the eighteenth century; it appears that he obtained his degree from the faculty of philosophy, since the Mag. phil. degree was not a qualification offered by the faculty of medicine.[20]

The topic of his thesis was a treatise on the mental faculties and their physiological basis by the sixteenth-century Spanish physician Juan Huarte, which Lessing now edited and published in German translation.[21] Despite the fact that Huarte was a physician, Lessing's decision to study him is primarily a product of his recent studies of the Spanish language and his interest in the history of scholarship. He had begun to learn Spanish systematically in 1750, and had practised speaking it with Mylius.[22] It seems from a letter to his father that he chose this particular language because few people in Germany were familiar with it,[23] and he duly resolved to translate Calderon's *La vida es sueño* and Cervantes' *Novellas ejemplares* in that same year, only to abandon these projects when other commitments intervened

[13] See Junghans 174; Friedensburg 543–4.
[14] LM I, 140–2; cf. LM V, 96–7.
[15] See p. 75.
[16] Friedensburg 537; for information on library rules in Wittenberg, see Multhammer pp. 10–14.
[17] KGL 83; D 53; Danzel/Guhrauer I, 226.
[18] Hirsching I, 255.
[19] KGL 34; Oehlke I, 69; cf. Guthke (2000c) *passim*.
[20] See Multhammer pp. 45–6.
[21] Huarte (1752): see 'Lessing's translations' in Bibliography.
[22] KGL 67–8.
[23] L. to J. G. Lessing, 2 November 1750.

and a translation of some of Cervantes' stories was published by another writer.[24] He did, however, complete his translation of Huarte's treatise, although it seems that his degree was awarded not for this translation but for a Latin disputation on that author, only notes for which survive.[25] He had taken the degree, which he received on 29 April 1751, essentially to please his father, but he characteristically requested the latter not to address him by his new title of 'Magister' in future correspondence.[26]

Lessing's writings of the Wittenberg period and its aftermath, most of which he later included in the collected edition of his *Writings*, fall into four more or less distinct categories. The first group deals with the history of scholars and scholarship and contains criticism of works on these subjects; the edition of Huarte belongs to this category, as does the critique of Jöcher's *Dictionary of Scholars* (*Gelehrten-Lexicon*) on which Lessing began work soon afterwards. This area of his scholarship, which extends to prosopography in general, is much influenced by the *Dictionnaire historique et critique* of Pierre Bayle, who also helped to shape Lessing's philosophical attitudes. The second group deals with theology and the history of religion; it includes two theological fragments of uncertain date but of roughly this period, and a number of 'vindications' (*Rettungen*) in defence of individuals or works which, in Lessing's opinion, had been unjustly denounced as heretical. The third group is devoted to classical philology, and includes his criticism of Lange's translation of Horace and the polemical tract in which this culminated, as well as a defence of Horace against the moral strictures of some of his commentators. The fourth and final group consists of poetry, including the Wittenberg odes referred to above and a large number of epigrams, a form to which Lessing became particularly attached at this time. Each of these groups will now be discussed in turn, beginning with the writings on the history of scholarship; some prefatory observations on Lessing's attitude towards scholarship may help to place the writings in question in the context of his life and works as a whole.

Lessing's attitude towards scholarship, especially antiquarian scholarship with no obvious popular appeal or relevance, is profoundly ambivalent. He made every effort to avoid the appearance of pedantry and to wear his learning lightly, and he admired other writers, such as Voltaire and Diderot, who did likewise. His first comedy, as already mentioned, was a satire on pedantry and on learning divorced from life, and the prospect of an academic career never seriously attracted him. But another side of him, which he suppressed for a time but never wholly overcame, was powerfully drawn to the pursuit of learning for its own sake, and he in due course became immensely learned and could hold his own in debate with specialists in a wide range of disciplines. Before he reached the age of forty, he acquired a library of some 6,000 volumes—a vast collection for a private individual in those days—and owned complete runs, around 750 volumes in all, of the main learned journals of his age.[27] But the problem he faced did not result from any desire on his

[24] See B I, 1279–80; B XI/1, 723.
[25] See B II, 410–17 and editor's notes in ibid. pp. 1014–15.
[26] KGL 83.
[27] See L. to Gleim, 1 February 1767; Pons (1979) 43–4.

part to master the essentials of many subjects by systematic study. For while he could and did study systematically when the need arose, he much preferred to proceed unsystematically, following up new interests and lines of enquiry in whatever order they arose and were succeeded by others. It was, in short, the apparently indiscriminate nature of much of his scholarship, the diffuse and fragmentary nature of many of its productions and his consequent failure to complete works requiring sustained systematic effort, that regularly caused disquiet both for him and for those who admired him. Moses Mendelssohn, for example, deplored 'the accursed antiquarian studies' to which Lessing was repeatedly drawn, fearing that they would 'eventually turn him into an arch-pedant'.[28] Against such reproaches, Lessing would defend himself by declaring that 'importance is a relative concept, and what is very unimportant in one respect may become very important in another', or 'to pronounce many things trivial and unimportant is more often to betray one's own short-sightedness than to appreciate their true value'.[29] He had a sneaking admiration for obscure and vast erudition, and his old friend Naumann, who kept crossing his path in the course of his own peripatetic existence (as he did once more in Wittenberg) said of him in later years: 'He made great allowances for meritorious professional pedants, and much admired them. Within this category—but in a positive sense—he described Leibniz as the greatest and most venerable pedant of his age.'[30] Lessing, with that ironic self-deprecation in which he often expresses his real enough modesty, at times applies this term to himself, calling his treatise *Laocoön* (which is actually one of his most systematic productions) 'a mish-mash of pedantry and caprices' and the so-called *Letters* (*Briefe*) in which he embodied some of his scholarly exercises of the early 1750s 'the friendly letters of a pedant'.[31] On other occasions, he goes further still and speaks contemptuously of scholarship and book-learning as a whole, contrasting them unfavourably with the wisdom which comes from practical experience.[32]

The root of this ambivalence is that he is torn between two contrasting models of learned discourse, that of the urbane man of letters writing for a wide literate public—a type more often encountered in France and Britain at that time than in Germany—and that of the humanistic scholar or baroque polymath writing (usually in Latin or French) for the learned audience of the international republic of letters.[33] In the most successful of his learned writings, such as *Laocoön*, he was able to strike a balance between the two, but the older model always retained its attraction for him. He had, of course, been exposed to it from an early age, as in the humanistic grammar school of St Afra; he encountered living examples of polyhistorical scholarship at its best (and no doubt also at its worst) in Leipzig, above all in Johann Friedrich Christ; and he was deeply influenced by one of its last and most formidable representatives, namely Pierre Bayle. Neither Christ nor Bayle (at least in his main work, the *Dictionnaire*) was a systematic writer; their medium was

[28] D 289. [29] LM XI, 3–4 and XII, 38. [30] D 56.
[31] To Gleim, 13 May 1766; LM V, 212; cf. also L. to K. A. Schmid, 12 or 13 January 1773.
[32] See, for example LM XVI, 535; III, 161; XIV, 155.
[33] See Barner (1981) *passim*; Barner (1984b) 73–5; Raabe (1977) 85; Raabe (1982) 119.

the short learned essay, packed with antiquarian knowledge and ranging over the most diverse assortment of subjects. Karl Lessing aptly sums up this aspect of Lessing's scholarship:[34]

> It is not difficult to say what kind of scholar Lessing was. He pursued the course—at first voluntarily and latterly against his will—of the polyhistor […] He did not give precedence, by reflection and choice, to any one discipline in his studies, but regarded them all as equally important. He consequently let himself be guided entirely by chance and by the impression of the moment.

As the years went by, he tended to elevate this proclivity to be guided by chance into a fundamental principle—not so much of his scholarship, where he was often obliged to resist it in order to complete the task in hand, as of his life in general; and in so doing, he became increasingly disposed to identify chance with the workings of providence. This topic will be further explored later, but in the present context, it is sufficient to note that the tension between his journalistic aspirations of the early Berlin period and his renewed dedication to antiquarian pursuits in Wittenberg is matched by a tension which runs throughout his life between his role as *bel esprit* and man of the world on the one hand, and his recurrent desire to immerse himself in recondite and often reclusive scholarship on the other. For the moment, the latter impulse predominated, and he indulged it to the full in Wittenberg.

The first of his Wittenberg writings on the history of scholarship is his edition of Huarte's *Examen de ingenios para las ciencias* (*The Examination of Mental Aptitudes for the Sciences*), first published in 1575, which he translates from the Spanish as *Prüfung der Köpfe zu den Wissenschaften*.[35] His knowledge of Huarte possibly goes back to his childhood in Kamenz, for his father had referred to the Latin edition of Huarte's work, entitled *Scrutinium ingeniorum* (1622), in his own master's thesis of 1712.[36] It is likely, however, that his serious interest was first stimulated by Bayle's article on Huarte, for Lessing's unusual translation of Huarte's title as *Prüfung der Köpfe* (literally 'testing of heads') echoes Gottsched's identical translation in his German edition of Bayle's *Dictionnaire*;[37] Lessing's notes for his Latin thesis also cite and amplify Bayle's remarks, and display that same preoccupation with bio-bibliographical detail which typifies Bayle's compendium.[38]

His main work on Huarte was carried out in the first months of 1751, but the speed with which he completed his thesis and edition (which is 450 pages long and appeared in print at the end of April)[39] suggests that he may have done some preliminary work beforehand, perhaps during his stay in Wittenberg three years earlier; for although he was not yet proficient in Spanish at that time, a Latin edition of Huarte's work was available, and he cites the inadequacy of that edition as his main reason for translating the work into German.[40] This does not, however, explain why he was attracted to the work in the first place, and since we have only his rough Latin notes and the brief preface to his translation to go by,

[34] D 593. [35] LM XIV, 169–71; cf. B II, 410–17. [36] Franzbach (1965) 56.
[37] Ibid. 81. [38] LM XIV, 170; cf. V, 6. [39] B II, 1018. [40] LM V, 7.

many questions remain unanswered. The fact that Huarte's work had been placed on the index of prohibited books in both Spain and Portugal and condemned by some as indecent was guaranteed, of course, to arouse his interest,[41] and Huarte's opening chapter on the need to investigate thoroughly where a child's natural aptitudes lie before committing him to a specific career no doubt struck a sympathetic chord in one whose own parents seemed determined to push him in the wrong direction. But Huarte's work had other qualities which recommended it to him. It was of considerable historical importance, having gone through seventy-five editions in seven European languages.[42] Its investigation of the biological origins of intelligence long remained the only study of its kind, and its attempts to identify the material basis of mental activity foreshadowed one of the central concerns of the Enlightenment. (Herder, for example, saw Huarte as a precursor of Helvétius,[43] and Huarte's reflections on the influence of climate and diet on nations and individuals point forward to the environmental determinism of Du Bos and Montesquieu.)[44] Lessing was able to take his work more seriously than that of La Mettrie, for Huarte was no mechanical materialist: he accords a prominent role to the creative imagination and to individual genius, and he is more concerned to reconcile humoral medicine with rational psychology than simply to reduce the one to the other.[45] His insistence that all observable phenomena are the product of natural causes is also in tune with Enlightenment attitudes, and his advice—explicitly praised by Lessing—not to attribute every unusual event to miraculous agency foreshadows the identical advice which Nathan gives to Recha in *Nathan the Wise*.[46] In all these respects, as in his readiness to criticize the ancient authorities on whom he is largely dependent and in the sound common sense which at times transcends his antiquated conceptual framework, Huarte has strong affinities with his younger contemporary Francis Bacon.

Nevertheless, Huarte's treatise is full of flaws, not only in its obsolete scientific framework but also in its over-rigid separation of different aptitudes, which leads him to conclude, for example, that boys with good singing voices are incapable of serious scholarship. Lessing rightly rejects such absurdities, including Huarte's physiognomical speculations and his low estimation of female intelligence.[47] In the last resort, Huarte's strength lay rather in the questions he asked than in the answers he gave: he was, in short, a pioneer in a largely uncharted field.

None of these considerations explains fully why Lessing threw himself with such energy into this project on his arrival in Wittenberg at the end of 1751. His most revealing comment on Huarte occurs near the end of the preface to his translation:[48]

> he is bold, he never follows conventional opinions, he passes judgement and conducts his whole enterprise in a distinctive manner, he freely reveals all his thoughts and he is

[41] Franzbach (1965: as in n. 21 above), Introduction p. v.
[42] Franzbach (1965) 20.
[43] Herder SWS I, 88.
[44] Huarte (1752) 154 and 250.
[45] Cf. PO XXIII, 950.
[46] Huarte (1752) 20 and 24–5; LM XIV, 171 and III, 12–13.
[47] Huarte (1752) 150; B II, 415.
[48] LM V, 7.

> his own master. But it is well known that such spirits are also prone to innumerable paradoxes, and the fair-minded reader will not be surprised to encounter a considerable number of them here too.

Huarte is an individualist and eccentric after Lessing's own heart. But he is something else besides: he is one of those 'meritorious professional pedants' for whom, as Naumann put it, Lessing 'made great allowances'. His pedantry is evident, for example, in the disproportion between his ponderous apparatus of learning and the often trivial or absurd conclusions which it generates, as in his prescription of goat's milk boiled with honey for intending fathers if they wish to sire intelligent and dutiful sons, or in his corollary to Hippocrates' test of a woman's fertility by igniting a smoke-generating substance beneath her skirts: Hippocrates pronounces her fertile if she can taste the smoke in her mouth, because her passages are in that case unobstructed; Huarte adds that, if she cannot taste it, this may not indicate infertility but merely that she has an unsuitable husband.[49] There is Rabelaisian humour here, and we know that Lessing was fond of Rabelais;[50] it is all the more entertaining in this case because Huarte's humour, like that of all pedants, is involuntary. It therefore mattered little if Lessing (whose translation is rated highly by the chief authority on the subject)[51] repeatedly confused right and left in translating Huarte's advice as to which side a woman should lie on after intercourse in order to produce a boy or a girl:[52] by Lessing's time, such interest as Huarte's advice on eugenics still possessed lay rather, as one reviewer remarked, in its comic potential than in its scientific substance.[53] As for the book's reception, although a Wittenberg professor issued a second edition of Lessing's translation in 1785,[54] most reviewers stressed the work's antiquated character. And although he continued to defend its historical importance, Lessing himself later declared that, were he to repeat the exercise, he would choose a better book than this to translate.[55]

In his studies of the history of scholarship, Lessing frequently consulted the relevant biographical compendia, of which the *Gelehrten-Lexicon* of Christian Gottlieb Jöcher, reissued in an enlarged edition in 1750–51, was the main example in German. Jöcher was professor of philosophy and university librarian at Leipzig university, and Lessing may have heard some of his lectures on historical subjects. In compiling his lexicon, Jöcher drew extensively on earlier reference works in several languages, apparently with the help of student assistants,[56] and Lessing quickly became aware of its deficiencies. He is almost certainly the author of a review, published in the BPZ in June 1751, of the third volume of Jöcher's work, in which he notes such errors as the confusion of different individuals with the same surname, and he concludes that it is 'a very meagre achievement to put together lives from existing biographies and reference works without carefully checking them'.[57] He must likewise be the reviewer, in the 'Critical News' four

[49] Huarte (1752) 442–3 and 386. [50] See D 141. [51] Franzbach (1965) 126.
[52] Huarte (1752) 397 and 408–9; cf. Introduction xxxix. [53] B II, 1029; cf. KGL 85–6.
[54] Franzbach (1965) 148; B II, 1024–9. [55] L. to C. G. von Murr, 25 November 1768.
[56] See D 53. [57] LM IV, 327–9.

months later, of a German translation of Mateo Alemán's novel *Guzmán de Alfarache*, for the review consists largely of corrections to Jöcher's article on Alemán, the mistakes in which derive chiefly from Jöcher's—or his assistants'—ignorance of the Spanish language.[58] Lessing's patience with Jöcher, whom he now accuses of 'irresponsible errors' and 'at least one blunder per line', was by this time wearing thin.

One of the projects he undertook in Wittenberg was accordingly a full-scale critique of Jöcher's work, article by article, a project which, if he had completed it, would have been comparable in scale to the criticized work itself. As it was, he made a serious start and completed sufficient articles to fill twenty-four printed quarto pages on Jöcher's opening entries under the letter 'A' alone. His attempt to find a publisher was frustrated by the censor, Johann Daniel Ritter, Dean of the faculty of arts in Wittenberg and a former colleague of Jöcher in Leipzig,[59] and he began to have the work printed at his own expense instead. (This would not be the last occasion on which he found means of outflanking the censors.) He sent the first twenty-four pages to Jöcher's publisher, presumably announcing his intention to publish a major critique in the same format (his letter does not survive), and rumours began to circulate in Leipzig that he was attempting to blackmail Jöcher himself. Jöcher, by now informed by Ritter and his publisher of what was happening, at this point wrote to Lessing directly, saying that he would gladly have recompensed him for his outlay and incorporated his corrections in supplementary volumes to the *Gelehrten-Lexicon* if Lessing had approached him in the first place.[60] His letter is courteous enough, with just a hint of possibly adverse consequences if Lessing persists in his plan (Jöcher mentions in passing that he has consulted, among others, the Rector of Wittenberg university), and regretting the fact that, in his printed criticisms, Lessing had at times expressed himself in so 'violent, biting, and offensive' a manner. In two subsequent letters (Lessing's replies are lost), Jöcher adds that he has now marked the offending passages (presumably at Lessing's request), and thanks him profusely for agreeing not to pursue his project further, again offering to pay for any costs he may have incurred.[61]

Lessing had indeed decided to abandon his project, presumably because Jöcher had behaved in a fair-minded manner and made no unreasonable demands; for when S. G. Lange, the next victim of his criticism, behaved less reasonably, his reaction was very different. He did nevertheless publish most of the already printed criticisms as one of the *Letters* (*Briefe*) to an imaginary correspondent in the second volume of his *Writings* in the following year, duly toning down some of the harsher expressions to which Jöcher had taken exception.[62] The original printed sheets, which came to light again in 1916, contain corrections to several more of Jöcher's articles.[63] But this by no means exhausts Lessing's work on the project. When Johann Christoph Adelung was preparing a revised edition of Jöcher's lexicon in 1784–87, Karl Lessing placed at his disposal all the relevant

[58] LM IV, 266–9. [59] See KGL 88–9; Friedensburg 600. [60] Jöcher to L., 1 October 1752.
[61] Jöcher to L., 11 and 29 October 1752. [62] LM V, 127–42; see also PO XXII, 358.
[63] B II 433–57; see also PO VI, Part 8, 191–5.

material from his brother's posthumous papers. Adelung accordingly incorporated the material which Lessing had published in 1753, but included, so far as we know, only a small proportion of the manuscript materials, which were subsequently lost.[64] Nevertheless, a large body of further corrections in the form of Lessing's marginalia to his own copy of the lexicon also came to light early in the twentieth century, and these are included in the main editions of his works.[65] The overall impression left by this abandoned project is of the young Lessing's immense scholarly enthusiasm, his remarkable energy, and his already formidable erudition. And while it is impossible to overlook the disproportion between effort and result—and, indeed, the unrealistic nature of the whole venture—one cannot but admire the way in which he is able to involve the reader even in such recalcitrant material as this, especially through the vivid dialogue with his imaginary correspondent with which he introduces the extracts from his critique in the *Writings* of 1753.

The real inspiration for this project was, of course, the *Dictionnaire* of Pierre Bayle, which itself began life as a dictionary of the errors Bayle had discovered in earlier biographical compendia such as that of Louis Moréri. Lessing now adopted an equivalent role in his critique of Jöcher, and the *Dictionnaire*, which he cites repeatedly as a means of correcting Jöcher's deficiencies, is the model for most of his early attacks on careless scholarship, faulty translations, and inadequate historical research. His debt to Bayle is evident not just in his scrupulous attention to historical detail, but also in the manner in which he presents his conclusions. In his corrections to Jöcher, he follows Bayle's procedure in printing the main text across the top of the page, with the footnotes, which are usually longer than the text itself, printed in double columns below;[66] and in his *Life of Sophocles* (1760), which was designed to fill a gap in the *Dictionnaire*, he outdoes even Bayle in discursiveness, with a terse biographical text accompanied by two alphabets of notes, with further alphabets of notes on the notes themselves.[67]

But Bayle's influence on Lessing, and on the Enlightenment in general, extends far beyond such externals as this. Voltaire, Gibbon, Hume, and Diderot were all decisively influenced by him, and he was admired by such disparate figures as Count Zinzendorf and Frederick the Great.[68] All of them could associate themselves with his advocacy, born of bitter experience during Louis XIV's suppression of Protestantism, of freedom of conscience and religious tolerance. And paradoxically, religious believers (at least if they were Protestants) no less than unbelievers could regard him as their ally;[69] for while he himself claimed—sincerely, as is now widely accepted—that, by demonstrating the complete irrationality of Christian doctrine, he could elevate faith on the ruins of reason, it seemed to most thinkers of the Enlightenment that his true aim was to elevate reason upon the ruins of faith.

[64] LM XIV, 172–3, n. 1. [65] LM XXII, 198–263.
[66] See B II, 1038. [67] LM VIII, 291–375.
[68] See Sauder (1975) *passim*; Nisbet (1978) *passim*; Sauder (1997) 44; Harnack 423–4.
[69] Labrousse II, 314–15 and 608–9; Sauder (1997) 54; Beyreuther 85.

Lessing must have been aware of Bayle's immensely influential *Dictionnaire* from his early years, perhaps already in Kamenz: his father's dissertation of 1717, for example, had included criticisms of the French thinker.[70] He was certainly consulting the work by 1749 or 1750 at the latest, for his essay on the life and works of Plautus in the *Contributions* of 1750, like that on Sophocles ten years later, expressly refers to Bayle and is written in his manner. Bayle's unsystematic presentation and readiness to leap from one subject to another—from the subtleties of Calvinist theology to the reliability of ancient texts, from Cartesian cosmogony to Roman law, from the genealogies of the patriarchs to disputed details in the lives of medieval schoolmen—was in itself characteristic of the polyhistorical scholarship of the seventeenth century. Yet it embraced an additional aspect which raised Bayle's work above all its predecessors, namely that critical method to which its title (*Dictionnaire historique et critique*) draws attention. Its critical method, which to some extent looks forward to that of Kant, consists of two elements, both of which are employed systematically without being part of a system—a rigorous questioning of all supposed historical (i.e. empirical) facts on the one hand, and a radical deconstruction of supposedly rational dogmas in both metaphysics and religion on the other. Unlike that of his rationalist contemporaries, Bayle's use of reason is therefore predominantly negative and destructive, and a polemical impulse runs throughout his work. And having frequently endured accusations of heresy himself, he became a staunch defender of alleged heretics, and even atheists, who followed the dictates of their own conscience.

All of these aspects of Bayle's critical enterprise inform Lessing's work during the 1750s, and in some respects for the rest of his life. Bayle's scepticism towards rational interpretations of Christian doctrine soon becomes a recurrent feature of his religious thought, and it is no coincidence that polemics assumes a central role in his criticism at around the time of his first immersion in the *Dictionnaire*. And finally, Bayle's championship of heretics and what he called 'the rights of the erring conscience' resonates throughout those 'vindications' (*Rettungen*) of maligned figures of the past which constitute a high proportion of Lessing's Wittenberg writings.

This review may conclude with a wider look at the philosophical principles underlying Lessing's work, including his early writings on religion, during these years. Two main philosophical tendencies can be discerned in the early decades of the German Enlightenment. One is the rationalistic tradition of Leibniz and Wolff, which proceeds deductively from the first principles of a speculative metaphysical system; these principles, especially in the hands of less orthodox thinkers, frequently combine with Spinozistic or neo-Platonic elements, both of which have close affinities with the thought of Leibniz in particular. The other tradition is less easy to define, precisely because it is unsystematic and distrustful of systems in general, but its historical designation is 'eclecticism' (as in Franz Budde's *Institutiones philosophiae eclecticae* of 1703).[71] Its origins go back to later Greek philosophy, but its

[70] Pons (1964) 100. [71] See Dreitzel *passim*; Wundt 65–74.

German beginnings lie in the seventeenth century, in those polyhistorical compilations whose critical principles, as already noticed, were refined by Pierre Bayle in France, but also by Christian Thomasius in Germany;[72] the same eclectic tradition is present in the massive works of reference and scholarly histories produced in the first half of the eighteenth century by Gundling, Zedler, Brucker, and others. It has a pronounced empirical element, but unlike the empiricism of Locke and his continental successors such as Condillac, it is grounded not so much in a psychology of the senses as in the raw material of history and practical experience as a source of wisdom. Lacking a critical theory of subjectivity such as Kant would later develop, German eclecticism relies heavily on common sense, not least in the sphere of morality or practical reason.[73] Moral principles, unlike those of metaphysics, are considered to be self-evident, just as they are by Pierre Bayle, whose scepticism does not extend to the sphere of ethics: it is for this reason that morality becomes the bedrock of religion for so many Enlightenment thinkers, including Lessing. And finally, one of the most positive consequences of eclecticism's distrust of dogma is its belief in religious tolerance, whose most eloquent advocates include Thomasius and Bayle—and, of course, Lessing, who had forcefully defended it in the last of his early comedies, *The Jews* of 1749.

The two philosophical traditions described above are by no means mutually exclusive.[74] For not only do they have many values in common, such as the belief in tolerance and that optimistic outlook which is characteristic of the *Aufklärung* in general. The two traditions also frequently coincide, in varying proportions and combinations, in the work of particular individuals: Gottsched, for example, relies chiefly on Wolff in his philosophical works, but on the eclectic tradition in his historical scholarship. The same is true of Lessing, whose thought is also eclectic in the wider sense inasmuch as it draws not only on the two traditions just referred to, but on other currents as well, such as Bayle's scepticism, Spinoza's metaphysics, and the ideas of several other French as well as English thinkers. Each of his philosophical statements has to be considered in its individual context, and inconsistencies, as he himself realized, could not be avoided. Only in his later years did he develop a way of thinking which took account of, and even encouraged, contradictions, while at the same time accommodating them, if not in a system, at least in a coherent framework. The foregoing observations may make it easier to contextualize some of the ideas and principles which arise in his early writings on theology and the history of religion, most of which date from his year in Wittenberg, although they also include two theological fragments written respectively shortly before and soon after that time.

As already noted, Lessing's didactic poems of the early Berlin period do not support the thesis that he underwent a personal religious crisis at this time. It is nevertheless plain that he had entertained serious doubts concerning the Lutheran

[72] See Schmidt-Biggemann (1989) *passim*; Schmidt-Biggemann (1988) 31–50 and 203–17; Kemper *passim*.

[73] See Schmidt-Biggemann (1983) 221.

[74] See Dreitzel 331 and 342.

faith from an early stage, and certainly by the time when he abandoned his theological studies in Leipzig and that career as a clergyman which his parents had planned for him. We also know that he immersed himself in the writings of radical critics of religion in the early Berlin and Wittenberg periods. It is, however, unlikely that his personal doubts or those of others drew him at any time towards atheism: we need only recall his vehement reactions in 1750 and 1751 to La Mettrie's atheism to realize how alien it was to him. The precise history of his personal religious beliefs is nevertheless difficult to trace, because most of his comments on them are unspecific or expressed in poems and unfinished fragments rather than in unambiguously autobiographical statements. But the problem which seems to have troubled him most, without ever threatening the basic articles of natural religion to which he continued to subscribe, is the problem of evil. He touches on it not only in most of the religious poems of those years, but even in that letter of 30 May 1749 to his father in which he confesses to religious doubts, adding that he finds it hard to accept that professed Christians who fail to love their enemy (he is thinking here in particular of his father's hostility towards Mylius) really are Christians at all. The theme of moral depravity recurs throughout his writings at this time, from his satire on Christian hypocrisy in *The Jews* to his endorsement of Rousseau's strictures on civilized society in 'Das Neueste' and the Juvenalian complaints and cynical epigrams of the Wittenberg period. His moral indignation is most fully expressed in the first of his surviving theological writings, the fragment *Thoughts on the Moravian Brethren* (*Gedanken über die Herrnhuter*), traditionally (but mistakenly) believed to have been written in 1750.

Pietism, as an evangelical movement opposed to doctrinal strife and concerned above all with personal devotion and charitable works, ran into opposition from the Lutheran establishment in Saxony soon after its emergence in the later seventeenth century. Its founding fathers, Philipp Jakob Spener and August Hermann Francke, sought refuge in Brandenburg, whose Prussian rulers—themselves part of a Calvinist minority—welcomed them as a counterweight to the Lutheran hierarchy and encouraged their educational and philanthropic enterprises as an asset to the state.[75] In 1722, Pietism re-emerged in institutional form in Saxony when Count Zinzendorf founded the religious community of Herrnhut in Lessing's native province of Upper Lusatia, which had long been hospitable to refugees from religious persecution (in this case, a group of Moravian Protestants to whom Zinzendorf afforded protection). Although it did nothing to oppose official Lutheran doctrine, the group's separatist tendencies led to Zinzendorf's expulsion from Saxony in 1736; it nevertheless continued to flourish and had established branches in several countries by the time it was accorded recognition twelve years later. The Moravian brethren were now the leading force in Pietist religiosity.

The dedication of the Moravians to practical moral works, as distinct from the orthodox Lutheran emphasis on faith and doctrinal conformity, attracted Lessing's sympathy, for he had by this time come to regard moral virtue as the essence

[75] See Fulbrook 153–73.

of Christianity. (The fact that his father had grown less tolerant of Pietism since its recognition in Saxony will have done nothing to diminish this sentiment.)[76] The basic thesis of his *Thoughts on the Moravian Brethren* is stated near the beginning of the fragment: 'Man was made to act rather than to reason. But precisely because he was not made to do so, he indulges more in the latter than in the former.'[77] Lessing then provides what he calls a 'history of philosophy in a nutshell', followed by an equally compressed history of Christianity. In both cases, he discerns an excessive preoccupation with abstract theory divorced from life, which continues to be dominated by animal passions to the detriment of practical morality. The foremost teachers of virtue, Socrates in philosophy and Jesus Christ in religion, were both put to death for their pains. Even the great theorists of modern science must share some of the blame for the continued failure of morality, for 'they fill our heads, and our hearts remain empty'.[78] Since its initial triumph in ancient Rome, Christianity was dogged first by intolerance and then by doctrinal conflict, which the Reformation served to intensify. Lessing then imagines what would happen if an untutored (and consequently uncorrupted) individual were to recall today's thinkers and scientists to simple virtue, and teach us 'to feel the living voice of nature in our hearts':[79] he would be dismissed as an ignoramus. At last coming to his main conclusion, Lessing now suggests that a man of this kind—namely Count Zinzendorf—has already appeared among the theologians, who have no justification for attacking him; he has done nothing to question their teachings, since he is not concerned with theory at all, but with practice.

At this point, the fragment breaks off. In some respects, it is of a piece with Lessing's other early writings on religion: it is—or seemed likely to become—a 'vindication' of an unjustly maligned individual, and its defence of the peace-loving sect he founded is akin to Voltaire's (albeit more light-hearted) defence of the Quakers in his *Lettres anglaises*. Its insistence on morality as the essence of religion is also typical of Lessing's other works of this period. Yet some of its sentiments are so uncharacteristic of him that they leave major questions unanswered: why does he adopt so anti-intellectual a position, presenting the entire history of philosophy, including the work of Leibniz (whom he normally admires) in so negative a light, and why does Newtonian science (which he had always treated with respect) come off no better? It has been suggested that his critique of intellectual constructions in religion may be influenced by Bayle's sceptical assault on rationalizations of religious faith.[80] This may be so, but it does not account for his negative treatment of modern science, which Bayle, though critical of such fundamental concepts as time, space, and motion, does not present as a morally detrimental force. Others have noticed a strong resemblance to Rousseau's critique of scientific progress and appeals to natural virtue in his first discourse,[81] but this raises chronological problems, because editors of Lessing's works continue to follow Karl Lessing's dating of

[76] Cf. E. Schmidt I, 669–70. [77] LM XIV, 155. [78] LM XIV, 157.
[79] LM XIV, 160–1. [80] See Beyreuther 92–6. [81] Kronauer 27–9; Lüpke (1989) 42.

the fragment to 1750,[82] whereas Rousseau's discourse did not appear until early in the following year.

It happens that three separate reviews defending the Moravian brethren and exalting practical virtue above theological controversy were published in the BPZ during the period when Lessing was review editor in 1751.[83] Since they are almost certainly his work, one commentator has suggested that his *Thoughts on the Moravian Brethren*, which resemble them closely in tone and subject-matter, must also date from that year rather than from 1750.[84] This evidence, though significant, is no more than circumstantial. The decisive evidence that the fragment cannot have been written before 1751 is internal. Its affinity to Rousseau's discourse goes far beyond its critique of scientific progress and its appeal to natural virtue: it extends to its basic conception and structure, its themes, and even at times to its wording.

Rousseau had supplied a brief and tendentious survey of the sciences (by which he means essentially philosophy and natural science) and the arts, associating their rise with the alleged moral decay of European society since ancient times. The second part of his discourse seeks to establish a causal connection between the two processes. Lessing's fragment is likewise arranged in two parts. The first contains a brief account of the history of philosophy and natural science, deploring their increasing abstraction and failure to promote moral virtue. Like Rousseau's parallel

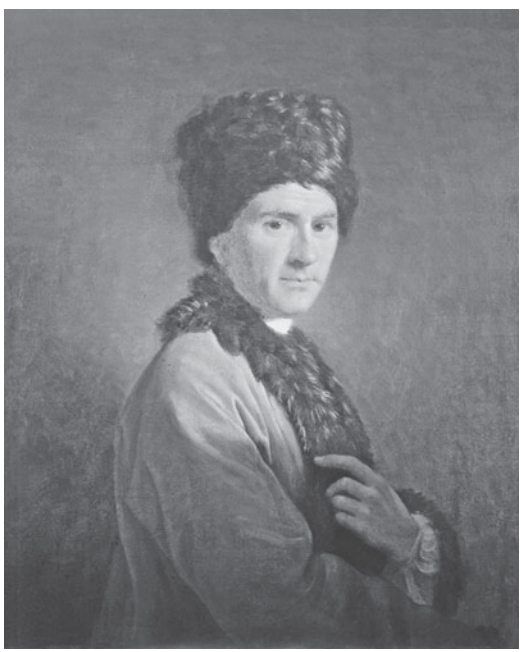

Fig. 10. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, painting by Allan Ramsay, 1766.

[82] See LM XIV, 154, n. 1; PO XVII, Part 20, 51; B II, 1416.
[83] LM IV, 298–9, 302–4; 350–1.
[84] Lüpke (1989) 41.

survey, it includes an invented homily on the vanity of human knowledge by Socrates, described by Rousseau as 'the wisest of men in the judgement of the gods' and by Lessing as 'the wisest of men by the verdict of the oracle'. Lessing, significantly, excludes the arts from his survey, and hence from responsibility for the moral decay of humanity. Their place is taken, in his account, by theology, to which he assigns more specific blame for mankind's moral predicament in the second part of the fragment; Rousseau's negative portrayal of the Renaissance is matched in Lessing's fragment by a negative account of the Reformation. There are further similarities in the indictment of modern science by the two writers. Both supply technical formulas from modern algebra to illustrate its abstraction, and both allude to Leibniz, whom the philosopher of Geneva naturally associates with the image of two synchronized clocks and the author of *The Young Scholar* with the theory of monads.[85]

Lessing has accordingly taken over Rousseau's model of moral decline, transferring to theology that share of the blame which Rousseau had assigned to the arts; and he introduces Zinzendorf at the end as a kind of Rousseau of theology. But in so doing, he has brought his fragment full circle. The point at which it breaks off is equivalent to that at which Rousseau's discourse ends; both writers have diagnosed and condemned the sickness, but neither has prescribed a cure. The Moravian brethren have now served Lessing's purpose as a foil to show up the inadequacy of Lutheran theology, and he has nothing of importance left to say about them. The fragment remained unfinished not because, as has been suggested,[86] Lessing discovered Rousseau's discourse before he finished his own essay and realized that he would have to recast it fundamentally. It remained unfinished because its model could take it no further, and because Lessing, for all his mood of moral indignation, could never fully share Rousseau's cultural pessimism: he valued not only the arts, but reason itself, too highly for that, and he could no longer sustain what was essentially the role of a preacher—he had earlier applied this term to Rousseau[87]—other than through the indirect medium of poetry or drama.

This remarkable fragment, together with the review in 'Das Neueste' of April 1751 (which was probably written shortly before it), shows how profoundly Lessing was stimulated and unsettled by Rousseau's first discourse. It prompted him to conduct an experiment of his own in explaining in historical terms not only the failings of contemporary culture, but also the fundamental inadequacies of the Lutheran confession in which he had been brought up. Like the young Herder some two decades later, he comes close at this point to sharing Rousseau's doubts concerning the Enlightenment as a whole; but his faith in reason, and in the metaphysical optimism of Leibniz and Wolff, in due course reasserted itself, as is evident from his next theological fragment, *The Christianity of Reason* (*Das Christentum der Vernunft*).[88]

[85] Cf. LM XIV, 155, 159, 161, and Rousseau II, 56, 52–3, 58.
[86] Lüpke (1989) 29. [87] LM IV, 395. [88] LM XIV, 175–8.

In his *Thoughts on the Moravian Brethren*, Lessing had said of Jesus Christ: 'I consider Christ here only as a teacher inspired by God. But I dissociate myself from all the frightful consequences which malice might draw from this.'[89] This is his first recorded comment on the Holy Trinity, and as he is plainly aware, it embodies the Arian (or unitarian) heresy by implicitly denying that Christ, the Son, is of the same substance as the Father. As such, it is in keeping with the purely natural religion to which he seems to have subscribed during the early Berlin period. *The Christianity of Reason* marks a complete departure from this position, though not a return to Christian orthodoxy: for Lessing now attempts to defend the Christian doctrine of the Trinity by demonstrating its truth with the help of Wolffian and Leibnizian metaphysics, and the title of his fragment underlines his new and rational approach to theology.

The approximate date of the fragment can be inferred from a letter written on 1 December 1753 by his friend Naumann, who had joined him again in Berlin, to a young theologian who had previously shown an interest in Lessing's theological principles.[90] Naumann's letter accurately summarizes the content of the fragment, and since he describes this as Lessing's 'new system' and the result of his 'recently revised' opinions, the fragment was presumably written at some time in the course of 1753. The orthodox Christian view of the Trinity, as outlined in St Augustine's *De Trinitate*, is that it is a mystery incomprehensible to reason, though defensible in rational terms; or, as it has often been put, such mysteries are above, but not contrary to reason.[91] (This, it will be noted, is not the same as Bayle's view that they are indeed contrary to reason.) Over the centuries, various philosophers and theologians had nevertheless attempted to demonstrate the necessary truth of the doctrine by rational deduction, usually at the cost of being condemned as heretics. Lessing must certainly have encountered such attempts, for two of them are referred to in Leibniz's best known work, the *Theodicy*,[92] and others again were put forward in Lessing's time by Lutheran theologians of Wolffian sympathies such as Franz Budde (or Buddeus) and Siegmund Jacob Baumgarten, whose relevant deliberations are mentioned in Naumann's letter; these theologians were careful, however, to present them only as speculative elucidations of the doctrine, and not as demonstrations of its truth. Such rationalizations of the Trinity—or at least those which claim demonstrative force—change little in character from the scholastic period to the eighteenth century, and assume roughly the following form. God's understanding, being necessarily perfect, must have a perfect object; and since God is infinitely good, he must also will the objective existence of his own perfection, which he 'eternally begets' as the Son. The Holy Spirit—regularly described since Patristic times as the *vinculum* or bond of love between Father and Son—is then defined as the necessary relation between these two Persons, i.e. between the subjective and objective manifestations of God.

[89] LM XIV, 158; on the following see also Nisbet (1999) 66–70. [90] D 58–9.
[91] Leibniz II/1, 158–9. [92] Loc. cit.

Lessing's fragment puts forward essentially the same argument, although in greater detail and with considerable philosophical sophistication, employing concepts and terminology derived from the metaphysics of Leibniz and Wolff (pre-established harmony, the principle of continuity, the striving of all things towards perfection, etc.). But the real novelty of the fragment is that Lessing deduces not only the generation of the Son, but also the creation of the universe, from his initial premise that thought and creation are identical for God. This implies that God's action as creator is governed by some kind of metaphysical necessity, which is difficult to reconcile with the orthodox doctrine of the absolute freedom of the divine will. Leibniz was aware of this difficulty, and duly distinguished between the moral necessity underlying God's choice of the best of possible worlds and the metaphysical necessity inherent in deterministic systems like that of Spinoza, from which he took care to dissociate himself. But determinism is never far away from his, or Wolff's, philosophical optimism; and Lessing, who would himself draw deterministic conclusions from it in later years,[93] already brings out some of these implications in *The Christianity of Reason*, as when he attributes the same kind of necessity to the temporal creation of the universe as he does to the eternal generation of the Son.

We do not know for sure why Lessing failed to complete this second theological fragment. But he later indicated that Moses Mendelssohn, who had become his friend by 1754, dissuaded him from doing so—perhaps by defending his own Jewish (i.e. unitarian) conception of the deity with enough conviction to persuade Lessing, at least for the present, to abandon his Trinitarian deduction. The fragment nevertheless marks the beginning of a long-term preoccupation on Lessing's part with the doctrine of the Trinity, culminating in his late philosophical work *The Education of the Human Race*, in which it assumes central importance. It is also of wider significance in that it represents the first of a series of attempts by modern German thinkers to deliver rational accounts of the Christian mysteries, attempts which are more fully realized in the thought of the German Idealists, and in Hegel's philosophy of religion in particular.[94]

In the context of Lessing's early thought, *The Christianity of Reason* stands out by virtue of its contrast with the sceptical attitude which preceded it. It would seem that, at some point during 1753, Lessing put aside, at least for the present, that scepticism towards the doctrines of revealed religion which characterized both his fragment on the Moravians and some of his Wittenberg writings, especially the 'vindication' of Cardano (which will shortly be discussed). Naumann's letter of December 1753 refers to Lessing's 'new system', and states that he has 'recently revised his opinions completely'. This has been interpreted by editors of his works as indicating a recent revision of *The Christianity of Reason*, superseding an earlier, now lost, version of the same text.[95] But it is hard to imagine how this text, provided that it dealt with the same topic, could ever have differed greatly from its

[93] See, for example, LM XII, 298.
[94] See Nisbet (1999) 77–84.
[95] See LM XIV, 175 n.1; B II, 995.

present form, because the argument it employs to rationalize the Trinity was the only serious argument available for this purpose, and it had followed the same basic lines since medieval times. What Naumann had noted was a new and more positive interest in Christian theology on Lessing's part, and a change in method from the inductive, empirical, historical, non-systematic approach he had employed in recent years to a deductive, rational, abstract, systematic approach. It is easy to overlook this change for two reasons. In the first place, it affected only his attitude towards Christian theology, and there is no reason to suppose that he ever abandoned the basic articles of rational religion, and their Leibnizian basis, during his early years. And secondly, his basic philosophical position remains eclectic or pluralistic throughout this time, allowing him to experiment with different methods as circumstances or the problems in hand required. Why he devoted renewed attention to the Leibnizian tradition in 1753 should become clear in the following chapter of this book.

Most of the works Lessing wrote during the ten to eleven months he spent in Wittenberg deal, appropriately enough, with the history of religion and of Lutheran Christianity in particular. As the headquarters of the Lutheran establishment, Wittenberg was slow to accept those Enlightenment tendencies in theology which had already prevailed in Leipzig and Halle, and although attacks on Pietism were now rare, the intolerant confessionalism of the early part of the century was by no means extinct.[96] The contrast with freethinking Berlin must have struck Lessing forcibly, especially when an acrimonious controversy broke out in the spring of 1752.

One of the university's most distinguished scholars was the professor of physics, Georg Matthias Bose, who is credited with the first successful attempt to ignite gunpowder by electrical means.[97] Bose produced an explosion of greater magnitude, however, when he presented some of his publications to the learned Pope Benedict XIV (to whom Voltaire had earlier dedicated his drama *Mahomet*), praising him as an enlightened scholar. This at once aroused protests from colleagues in the faculties of theology and law, and the ensuing quarrel continued until it was officially silenced by the Elector of Saxony in the following year. Lessing could not, of course, remain neutral on an issue of this kind. Working in the university library in front of Luther's house, he wrote a series of essays critical, in varying degrees, of Luther and the orthodox tradition. He alludes to the Bose affair in the first of these, his 'vindication' of Simon Lemnius, remarking that the attitudes which led Luther to denounce Lemnius for dedicating a volume of poetry to a Catholic prelate in 1538 'appear to have survived in this university to the present day'.[98]

Students and followers of Luther had been aware from an early date of the dual nature of his personality and legacy.[99] On the one hand, there was his work of emancipation which empowered the individual to interpret the Bible and seek a direct relationship with the divinity without priestly mediation. On the other hand, there was his Erastian tendency and growing intolerance of civil and doctrinal dissent in his later years. Like the followers of Hegel in the nineteenth

[96] Friedensburg 523–4 and 557. [97] Ibid. 613–14.
[98] LM V, 46; cf. L. to G. S. Nicolai, 9 June 1752. [99] See Werner (1984c).

century, those of Luther tended to divide into progressive and conservative factions, depending on which aspect of his teachings they emphasized. The 'innovators' (*novatores*) with whom Lessing's father had taken issue in his dissertation of 1717 included some writers, such as Gottfried Arnold and Johann Konrad Dippel, who had dared to accuse Luther of human weakness and to defend a number of heretics;[100] such 'innovators', along with the radical wing of Pietism as a whole, regarded the Reformation as incomplete, and they were duly condemned by the Lutheran establishment. Predictably, the young Lessing had much sympathy with such critics, and his feelings towards Luther remained ambivalent throughout his life. He would later defend the emancipatory 'spirit' of Luther's doctrine against its now ossified 'letter';[101] but it is this second, negative side which occupied his attention most during his stay in Wittenberg.

Lessing's 'vindications' (*Rettungen*), or rehabilitations, of heretics and oppositional figures are a characteristic expression of his attitude towards individual freedom, and they embody both its offensive and defensive modes. They simultaneously attack or criticize an authority or attitude which he perceives as oppressive, and defend the object of this oppression. Many of his writings belong in a wider sense to this category—for example, his defence of the Jews in the drama of that name, or of the Moravian brethren in the fragment of 1751. But the 'vindication' as a literary form is an apologia for a specific historical individual, defending him against his detractors and upholding the right of all individuals to freedom of thought and expression. Its immediate ancestry includes Bayle's defence of heretics at large in his *Commentaire philosophique* (1686), Gottfried Arnold's defence of persecuted sects and individuals in his *Impartial History of Church and Heresy* (*Unparteiische Kirchen- und Ketzerhistorie*, 1699–1700), and a series of essays by Lessing's Leipzig teacher J. F. Christ in defence of such controversial figures as Cardano (also defended by Lessing), Hutten, and Machiavelli.[102] But more significantly, the individuals whom Lessing defends are (with the exception of Cochlæus) in a sense *alter ego*s. They are individuals with whom he himself has some important quality in common: they include two poets and a satirist, and the faults of which they were accused include heretical opinions, lack of respect for religious authority, and alleged immorality on the evidence of their poetic productions.

The first of Lessing's 'vindications', like his critique of Jöcher, appeared in the second volume of his collected *Writings* in 1753, and it occupies several of those *Letters* which he described as the 'friendly letters of a pedant'. It defends Simon Lemnius (or Lemm), who had enraged Luther by dedicating a collection of epigrams to Cardinal Archbishop Albrecht, Elector of Mainz. Lessing successfully argues that Lemnius's collection of epigrams was relatively innocuous, that Luther reacted intemperately,[103] and that the genuinely calumnious attacks on Luther

[100] See Pons, Introd. to J. G. Lessing, *De religionum tolerantia*, xx–xxiii and xxxix.
[101] Cf. Loewenich 19.
[102] See E. Schmidt I, 45; on *Rettungen* in general, see Multhammer *passim*.
[103] Cf. B II, 1288.

which Lemnius published after his flight from Wittenberg were subsequently misrepresented as the cause, rather than the effect, of Luther's rage.[104] Nevertheless, this work is not an impartial piece of historiography, although it employs the techniques of critical historical scholarship in so far as they serve its ideological purpose, which is to promote the cause of religious tolerance. Lessing's opening *captatio benevolentiae* is manifestly disingenuous: 'My veneration of Luther is such that I am on the whole very glad to have discovered that he has a few minor blemishes, because I was really in danger of deifying him.'[105] It was, of course, against Lessing's nature to deify anyone. And like a defence counsel, he refrains from mentioning any circumstances which might undermine his case, such as the fact that Lemnius explicitly referred to Archbishop Albrecht in his epigrams as a defender of the ancient (Catholic) faith.[106]

On this occasion, Lessing succeeds brilliantly in bringing an at first sight antiquarian subject to life. His controversial presentation of Luther and his linking of the subject to a recent *cause célèbre* are in themselves enough to do so, but their effect is greatly enhanced by the bravura style of the work as a whole. A sparkling introductory letter, refuting the imaginary correspondent's views, analyses the different categories of misfortune endured by poets in the course of history, before turning to Lemnius as an especially sad example. The remaining letters are full of vigorous criticisms of Luther's apologists and responses to the correspondent's objections, and the correspondent—along with the reader—is kept waiting almost until the end for the promised description of Lemnius's rare and scandalous satire, the *Monachopornomachia*, in which he took scurrilous revenge on Luther for driving him out of Wittenberg.

Understandably, this particular 'vindication' attracted considerable critical attention. One critic, wary of offending Lessing, defended Luther against Lemnius rather than against the author.[107] Another anonymous critic (Andreas Gottlieb Masch) was less restrained and published a book-length rebuttal of Lessing's short work, accusing him—with some justification—of devious tactics;[108] this monograph was itself the subject of several reviews. If Lessing's aim was to stir up the Lutheran establishment, he had unquestionably succeeded.

The other two 'vindications' which deal with the history of Protestantism did not appear until 1754, in the third volume of Lessing's *Writings*. Unlike the 'vindication' of Lemnius, they no longer employ the device of a fictitious correspondence, but submit the evidence directly to 'the impartial reader'.[109] The first of these, the *Vindication of the 'Ineptus Religiosus' and its Anonymous Author* (*Rettung des Ineptus Religiosus und seines ungenannten Verfassers*),[110] seeks to unravel some of the mysteries surrounding the *Ineptus Religiosus* (1652), a rare Latin work which appears on first inspection to reject religion altogether: it advises its readers, among other things, to scorn Catholics and Protestants alike, to despise the catechism, to

[104] See Paul Rilla's comment in R X, 46–7.
[105] LM V, 43.
[106] See B II, 1287; J. Schneider (1953) 93.
[107] B II, 1262–3.
[108] Extracts in B II, 1263–9.
[109] LM V, 335.
[110] LM V, 334–52.

read the Bible as a secular work, and to plan the downfall of church and state. As Lessing notes, it was duly condemned as godless and evil in the *Catalogus historico-criticus librorum rariorum* (1732) compiled by the Lutheran pastor and bibliographer Johann Vogt. Lessing's objection to Vogt's verdict is simple: his judgement is mistaken, for the sense of the book is ironic throughout. It is a satire on various sects and tendencies in Protestant theology around 1650, and Vogt's quotations from it are misleading, because he leaves out those words or phrases which reveal that the author's subversive advice is ironic. To correct this misinterpretation, Lessing translates a substantial portion of the text, including the most glaringly ironic passages, and offers some conjectures as to the anonymous author's identity.

These conclusions are substantially correct, although there is still no agreement on the identity of the author, whose background is almost certainly Calvinistic rather than Lutheran.[111] The work is also more complex than Lessing suggests, since some passages—for example, the author's contention that all Christians should be brothers—do not accord with Lessing's claim that the sense is invariably the reverse of what it appears to be. But as in all the 'vindications', such points of accuracy and interpretation are of less consequence than the underlying ideological purpose. Lessing's real quarrel with Vogt concerns freedom of speech and the evils of censorship. As he notes in conclusion: 'I see little point in increasing the number of dangerous books unnecessarily. It would be better to reduce it as far as possible.'[112]

The last of the 'vindications' devoted to the history of Protestantism is entitled *Vindication of Cochlæus, but only in a Minor Particular* (*Rettung des Cochläus, aber nur in einer Kleinigkeit*).[113] As the second half of the title confirms, Lessing knew he was on dangerous ground here, for Johannes Cochlæus, a Catholic theologian, was one of Luther's most vociferous opponents. On this occasion, Lessing's criticism is directed at Friedrich Wilhelm Kraft, author of a recent work defending Luther against the time-honoured Catholic accusation that he and other Reformers were motivated by envy (in this case the envy of Luther's Augustinian order towards the Dominicans, to whom the former had lost some of its privileges in the sale of indulgences). Lessing's point is, on the face of it, again a minor one: Kraft had maintained that Cochlæus, in 1549, was the first to make the accusation in question, which had never been directed at Luther during his own lifetime, whereas Lessing is able to quote a remark to the same effect by Alfons Valdez in a letter of 1520. But in this case too, Lessing has a larger purpose in view. Significantly, he does not himself attempt to defend Luther, declaring instead that it is immaterial whether or not he was motivated by envy: whatever its material causes, the Reformation was plainly the work of a beneficent providence, and to maintain that Luther, as its human agent, was totally without faults is to turn justifiable admiration into idolatry. As in the 'vindication' of Lemnius, Lessing is here encouraging his readers to adopt a more critical view not only of Luther himself, but of Lutheran orthodoxy and its inflexible attitudes.

[111] See PO XVII, Part 20, 67–9. [112] LM V, 352. [113] LM V, 353–67.

The last of Lessing's 'vindications' on religious topics, also published in 1754, is the *Vindication of Hieronymus Cardanus*,[114] in which he turns his attention to the wider sphere of comparative religion; it marks the culmination of his studies of heretics and critics of religion before and during his stay in Wittenberg. Already in 1750, he had become familiar not only with the atheistic writings of La Mettrie, but also with those of the notorious Johann Christian Edelmann,[115] who found little of value in revealed religion and associated himself with the pantheism of Spinoza. (He may indeed have known him personally, for Edelmann made the acquaintance of many Berlin intellectuals, including Moses Mendelssohn, after Frederick II gave him sanctuary from persecution in 1749 on condition that he ceased to publish his heretical opinions.)[116] Karl Lessing also tells us that, during the Wittenberg period, Lessing planned to publish a critical edition of the Dutch theologian Balthazar Bekker's attack on superstition, *The World Bewitched* (1691), as well as a selection of extracts from the works of Giordano Bruno, Tommaso Campanella, and Girolamo Cardano;[117] his interest in Bruno was no doubt increased by the knowledge that the Italian philosopher had taught for two years in Wittenberg before he returned to Italy to die at the stake for heresy.[118]

The only tangible fruit of these studies was the 'vindication' of Girolamo Cardano, philosopher, physician, mathematician, astrologer, and gambler, who wrote, among other things, a defence of the Emperor Nero and whose autobiography Lessing once described as the most interesting book he had ever read.[119] This strange and eccentric figure had already been defended against charges of atheism by Bayle, who saw him as more inclined to superstition than to libertinism, and by J. F. Christ, who praised him as an independent spirit while denying that he abandoned religious belief.[120] Lessing's 'vindication', which he himself describes as a supplement to Bayle's article, develops these initiatives further by defending Cardano against accusations of atheism aimed specifically at his work *De subtilitate* (1550), the first edition of which had been drawn to Lessing's attention by his librarian friend Schwarz.

In this work, Cardano had briefly compared the arguments advanced by each of four major religions—paganism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—in favour of its own exclusive validity. The discussion ends inconclusively, although Christianity, as Lessing points out, is given significantly stronger arguments than the others. But what had caused particular offence were Cardano's words on the eventual outcome of the religious conflict, which were taken to mean that chance alone could decide which religion was superior. As Lessing attempts to show, it is in fact more likely that the Latin sentence in question refers not to the intrinsic claims to truth of the religions themselves, but to the outcome of wars fought on their behalf, which might well be decided by chance.

[114] LM V, 310–33. [115] See L. to J. G. Lessing, 2 November 1750; also LM III, 224.
[116] Cf. Mendelssohn to L.,19 November 1755; also Scheweleit 312.
[117] KGL 95; cf. LM II, 77 and L. to J. G. Lessing, 11 April 1755.
[118] See Junghans 164. [119] LM V, 310–33; D 323. [120] See Göbel (1980) 171–5.

Though this conclusion forms the climax of the 'vindication', the real focus of Lessing's interest is Cardano's comparison of the arguments in support of the major religions, and in particular two issues of principle which this comparison raises—namely whether or not such comparisons are legitimate in the first place, and whether or not the comparison in question has been conducted in an equitable manner. It is essential to Lessing's ideological purpose—and to the cause of Enlightenment itself—to defend comparative religion as such, and he employs considerable rhetorical skill in so doing. He argues that the true religion has nothing to lose by the exercise, and the false religions everything to gain. (He omits to add—although his previous writings show that he was aware of the possibility—that such comparisons, by highlighting the equally non-rational elements in all of the faiths, may promote suspense of judgement rather than conviction.) Secondly, by showing that Cardano has deployed the strongest available arguments in favour of Christianity while addressing the claims of the other religions in a more perfunctory manner, he gains an excellent pretext for strengthening the arguments in favour of Jewish and Islamic monotheism (neither he nor Cardano takes pagan polytheism seriously) by placing eloquent monologues in the mouths of a Jewish and a Moslem apologist; in the process, he casts doubt on that very doctrine of the Trinity which he would shortly defend in *The Christianity of Reason*. The effect of all this is to highlight the common factors in the three major religions, especially their monotheistic basis and shared moral principles, and in short to lend support to that natural religion which underlies most of Lessing's religious pronouncements before 1753. This, of course, takes him well beyond his stated intention of defending Cardano. He modifies and amplifies Cardano's arguments in the interest of his own ideological ends, and the freedom he implicitly demands is the freedom not just to defend, but also to attack, any particular religion. It is worth noting here that he at one point draws an important distinction between forensic enquiries, where probability rather than certainty is the criterion of judgement and where one of the litigants must inevitably lose, and philosophical enquiries, in which truth is the sole criterion and both parties stand to gain by its discovery.[121] As Lessing would concede many years later, this distinction is far more difficult to sustain in religious disputes than he here maintains: it is to a judge rather than to a philosopher that the claims of the rival religions are submitted in his last completed work, *Nathan the Wise*, and the only criterion the judge can employ is that of relative probability.

The essay on Cardano is the most substantial of the early 'vindications', both because it extends the discussion beyond the Lutheran tradition to world religion in general, and because it foreshadows the religious preoccupations of Lessing's later years. Its affinities with *Nathan the Wise* have long been noticed: the same three religions are compared, Islam as well as Judaism is taken seriously, both works stress the importance of practical morality and the need for religious tolerance, and the Cardano essay even employs semi-dramatic means in the monologues attributed to

[121] LM V, 322–3.

Jewish and Moslem speakers. There is also a deeper historical connection between the two works, for both reflect Lessing's preoccupation with an ancient heretical tradition[122] according to which, ever since the Emperor Frederick II was excommunicated in 1239 for allegedly maintaining that three impostors—namely Moses, Christ, and Mohammed—had successively deceived mankind, a clandestine work defending this thesis had been in circulation. This legendary treatise, of which no one managed to produce a copy, was attributed over the centuries to almost every heretical or progressive-minded thinker from Averroes and the Emperor Frederick to Bruno, Campanella, Cardano, Spinoza, and many others, and the bibliographical references in Lessing's 'vindication' to those critics who had at various times accused Cardano of atheism are mainly to discussions of the elusive treatise and its putative author. Since Boccaccio's parable of the three rings, the central inspiration of *Nathan the Wise*, features prominently in most of these discussions, it seems likely that Lessing's plans for his last and greatest work go back to his early studies of heretics and unbelievers in the university library of Wittenberg.

The 'vindications' published in 1754 were well received by reviewers, though not everyone was convinced by all of Lessing's conclusions. The breadth of his learning, his intellectual rigour, and above all the liveliness of his writing attracted special praise. He had now mastered the art—and he had indeed turned the 'vindication' into an art-form—of engaging a broad public in scholarly and religious issues which, in Germany at least, had hitherto been mainly the preserve of specialists.

Lessing's studies at Leipzig University had been chiefly concerned with classical philology. This interest remained alive during his early years in Berlin and bore fruit in his life of Plautus and his translation and adaptation of two of the latter's plays. His brother Theophilus, whom he joined in Wittenberg in 1752, had recently received the same thorough grounding in the classics at St Afra that Lessing himself had enjoyed, and the two amused themselves in February of that year by translating Klopstock's *Messiah*, whose German hexameters invited speculation as to a possible classical counterpart, into Latin. They abandoned the exercise on hearing that someone else had already completed the task, although Lessing eventually published the first 113 lines of their translation.[123] He continued to reflect in Wittenberg on problems of translating the classics, and gave some thought to Virgil's *Georgics* in particular.[124]

But of all the Roman poets, the work of Horace was most suited to the temper of the times. His practical wisdom, his affirmation of his prosperous but subordinate station in life, his ironic good humour, his celebration of friendship, of rural tranquillity, and of worldly pleasures in moderation, all endeared him to the early Enlightenment, and his undogmatic philosophical reflections lent his poetry a gravity which the playful Anacreontic lyric lacked. He was the most frequently quoted of all the Latin poets, and the letters and publications of the time—including the

[122] On the following see Nisbet (1979b) *passim*.
[123] See KGL 88; B II, 1303; LM V, 90–5.
[124] LM V, 65–6.

writings of Lessing—are full of *moralia Horatiana*. But he was also the most imitated of the ancient poets, and the odes of Hagedorn, whom Lessing described in 1749 (before he had fully come to terms with Klopstock) as 'the greatest poet of our times',[125] are often free adaptations of those of Horace. Lessing had studied his works intensively at St Afra and again under Christ at Leipzig, and he regarded him as the supreme model for lyric poets, and consequently as the supreme challenge to translators from the Latin.[126] In addition, he himself had extensive experience as a translator from Latin and other languages, and took a professional interest in the problems involved. For all these reasons, he looked forward to the publication of Samuel Gotthold Lange's translation of Horace's odes in May 1752 as an event of major importance.

Lange, whose father was a professor of theology at Halle and the author of a widely used grammar of Greek and Latin, was co-founder, with Jakob Immanuel Pyra, of the Halle circle of poets. They opposed Gottsched's French-inspired reforms and wrote rhymeless verse in classical metres, often inspired by that of Horace. After Pyra's untimely death in 1744, Lange, now a pastor in Laublingen near Halle, perpetuated his memory in a sentimental cult of friendship, with which a number of literary figures in Prussia, including Gleim, Sulzer, and Georg Friedrich Meier, associated themselves. As host at their convivial gatherings, Lange was readily accorded the title of 'the German Horace', although his own *Horatian Odes* of 1747, even by the standards of that time, were no more than moderately accomplished. With the help of his friends—and a series of poems in praise of Frederick II—Lange gained the patronage of General Christoph Ludwig von Stille, a close military and literary associate of Frederick since his days as Crown Prince. A number of honours followed, including election to external membership of the Berlin Academy in 1751, and Lange felt emboldened, despite his lack of experience as a translator and classical philologist, to seek permission—which was duly granted—to dedicate his planned edition and translation of Horace's odes to the king himself. The bilingual edition, appropriately dedicated and emblazoned with the Prussian eagle, appeared in 1752, with a preface detailing Lange's nine years of gruelling work, his careful scrutiny of the earliest editions and variants, and his decision to give accuracy priority over elegance.[127] But despite his declared willingness to accept criticism, the preface exudes an aura of complacency and self-importance. Apart from the crucial uncertainty as to whether his translation would come up to his self-proclaimed standards, Lange was, on this showing, ideally qualified as a candidate for Lessing's critical attentions. Unfortunately for him, his translation failed the test.

The controversy arose in the following way. Lessing discovered over two hundred serious errors in Lange's translation, and sought advice from his friend G. S. Nicolai of Halle University, who was himself a friend of Lange, on how to proceed; he added 'I have a strong desire to publish an assessment of the entire

[125] L. to J. G. Lessing, 28 April 1749.
[126] See Riedel (1976) 122–3.
[127] See PO XII, Part 14, 10–12.

work, and have already completed it.' Nicolai, who had personally assisted Lange with the proofs of his translation, found himself in an invidious position, but suggested that Lessing should send his corrections to Lange. He also offered to act as mediator, and pointed out that, in view of Lange's influence at the Prussian court, it would be unwise to attack him publicly. Having observed the straitened circumstances in which Lessing was living in Wittenberg, Nicolai added that Lange ought certainly to recompense him for his labours by paying him the equivalent of a publisher's fee. Lessing then agreed to send Lange a list of one hundred errors to test his reaction, whereupon Nicolai informed the latter of Lessing's intention, simultaneously urging him to offer Lessing appropriate remuneration. But Lessing meanwhile had second thoughts. Lange's preface betokened a man who would expect to be approached on bended knee, and as the months passed by with no adverse press reactions, the prospect of deflating his pretensions, and at the same time showing his own critical teeth in the second volume of his collected *Writings*, seemed increasingly attractive. As with the other two most sensitive items in that volume—namely the 'vindication' of Lemnius and the critique of Jöcher—he adopted the distancing device of fictitious letters, which gave him a degree of freedom to criticize Lange without appearing to attack him personally. The 'letter' in question (no. 24), which lists fourteen fundamental errors in Lange's translation, is relatively restrained in tone, although it begins with a dramatic account of how the writer's sanguine expectations of the work were rudely shattered.[128] Lessing cannot, however, refrain from rubbing in the contrast between the grandiose claims of the preface and the woefully inadequate result, suggesting that Lange's nine years of labour have been wasted; and his irresistible desire to puncture Lange's pomposity comes through in a remark which he must have known was bound to provoke him, for he urges his imagined correspondent 'to run through this short list of classroom howlers to remind yourself of your childhood. I call it a short list, but it could easily be extended indefinitely by your younger brother if you do not yourself have time to do so.'

With or without Lessing's knowledge, this critique was reprinted a few weeks later in the review section of a Hamburg newspaper, through which it came to Lange's attention. A week later, Lange published an intemperate thirty-page letter to the review editor of the paper concerned,[129] seeking to silence Lessing by disdain, evasion, and bluster rather than by rigorous refutation of his criticisms. Lessing is condemned as an impertinent upstart, ignorant, lazy, and presumably briefed by others; he has sought to make his name by attacking first Luther, and then Jöcher and Lange; and worst of all, he has tried unsuccessfully to blackmail Lange by threatening to publish his criticisms unless Lange pay him the equivalent of a publisher's fee to hand them over. As the published correspondence of those involved would shortly show, the latter allegation was based on an over-hasty, but genuine misunderstanding on Lange's part of Nicolai's inept attempt to mediate between him and Lessing; but the damage was done, and Lessing had no option

[128] LM V, 122–7. [129] Reprinted in PO XXII, 557–70.

but to reply. He at once inserted a notice in the BPZ declaring Lange a malicious libeller, and promised a fuller reply in the near future.[130] This was published in January 1754 as *A Vademecum for Samuel Gotthold Lange, Pastor in Laublingen, Presented in this Pocket-Book Format by Gotthold Ephraim Lessing*.[131]

Lessing had exercised his talent for disputation and argument on numerous occasions since the school debates at St Afra, and derived much pleasure from doing so. Polemical tendencies had emerged in his early journalism, as in his attacks on La Mettrie and on Gregorius's incompetent translation of a Latin treatise. His serious public engagement with figures of authority begins, however, with the Wittenberg 'vindications', in which various representatives of the Lutheran tradition such as Vogt and Kraft, with Luther himself always in the background, are taken to task for promoting illiberal views. Behind all such figures stands, of course, his own father, who had long personified for him the attitudes in question, and with whom he continued to clash sporadically until around 1753. Lange, a Lutheran pastor eighteen years Lessing's senior, fitted admirably into this series. But the virulence of Lessing's polemic on this occasion was due above all to Lange's ill-advised assault on his moral character, for he had already been sensitized in this respect by his father's attacks on the morality of his poetry, drama, and friends, by Voltaire's accusation of literary theft, and by the recent rumours in Leipzig that he had attempted to blackmail Jöcher. Lange's accusation of attempted extortion was the last straw.

In the *Vademecum*, Lessing again employs the letter form, but he now addresses his adversary directly. The first part of the work reaffirms the original list of errors in Lange's translation, refuting the evasions in Lange's reply, and enumerates a large number of further errors. Lange is convicted of factual, logical, and philological inaccuracies, and the Latin usage of other ancient writers and the opinions of scholiasts and earlier editors are cited in support. The aim of this section is to establish Lessing's credentials as a scholar, and to place his original verdict on Lange's translation beyond doubt. It is entirely successful in these aims, although the enumerative presentation and wealth of philological detail do not make for fluent reading. The second part, which is much shorter, seeks to substantiate Lessing's charge that Lange has groundlessly libelled him, and does so conclusively by showing that the proposal to pay him for his corrections emanated not from him but from Nicolai, whose letter is now cited as evidence.

Though Lessing's case is overwhelming, his criticism is of necessity wholly negative, and its object, as he readily acknowledges, is hardly a worthy one. The real interest of the work lies in its polemical artistry. Lessing brings the dispute to life by dramatizing his and Lange's roles, in a nice inversion of their real ages and positions, as those of irate schoolmaster and dull-witted pupil (simultaneously introducing an echo of the schoolroom disciplinarian Orbilius in Horace's *Epistles*). Although it was Lessing who had first introduced the schoolroom imagery in his original critique of Lange's translation, Lange had unwisely taken it up in his reply,

[130] LM V, 221–2. [131] LM V, 223–63.

urging Lessing with heavy sarcasm to put his cane aside for a moment. Lessing develops this motif mercilessly throughout the *Vademecum*, periodically reaching for his cane, ridiculing the doltish Lange before the assembled class, and belabouring him with his father's manual of Latin grammar. The very title of the work returns Lange's insults with interest, for it was he who had pronounced the duodecimo (or 'pocket-book') format of Lessing's *Writings* appropriate only for a popular 'vademecum' but of no use for serious study.[132] (His comments nevertheless indicate that he had studied the volumes closely.) All this, together with the drastic shifts of register from finer points of classical philology to flagrant insults and scenes from common life, has a grim humour about it, and there is farcical comedy in the confrontation of student and academician (described at one point as an 'arrogant old ignoramus')[133] in the roles of schoolmaster and dunce. But as the blunt language and forceful peroration confirm, Lessing's purpose is of the utmost seriousness:[134]

> With my knowledge and ignorance I will gladly take my chances; what I lose on the one hand, I hope to gain on the other. But I shall never allow my heart to be vilified with impunity, and I shall always cite your name in future whenever I should require an example of a vindictive liar.

The aftermath of this episode needs little comment, for it did not materially alter the situation. In February 1754, Lange published another rambling letter, addressed this time to Nicolai, protesting his innocence of Lessing's charge of libel and asking Nicolai to confirm or deny that it was he who had proposed that Lessing should be paid for his efforts;[135] Lange rightly suspected that the entire misunderstanding had been caused by Nicolai's inept efforts to forestall a public contretemps between his friends. Nicolai, who must by now have been writhing with embarrassment, remained silent for almost three months, and finally issued a public reply confirming Lange's suppositions, but he neither accepted responsibility nor apologized for the consequences of his actions.[136] He claimed that both parties were equally justified, and made the absurd suggestion that they should jointly undertake a new translation of Horace. It is little wonder that no further communications between Nicolai and Lessing are recorded.

Lange was the victim of a devastating assault occasioned at least in part by circumstances beyond his control, and the translation of which he had been so proud had brought him only heartache. But Lessing cannot have derived much pleasure from his victory either. Nicolai's warning of Lange's influence at the Prussian court could not be dismissed lightly, for Lange retained sufficient credit to be appointed soon afterwards to a senior post in the regional administration.[137] It is nevertheless unlikely that Frederick took much notice of the controversy:[138] he knew no Latin, he had no interest in German literary disputes, and his formal letter of thanks for Lange's translation indicated, with unintentional irony, that he

[132] PO XXII, 558–9. [133] LM V, 251. [134] LM V, 263.
[135] PO XXII, 570–83. [136] PO XXII, 583–9.
[137] PO XII, Part 14, 12. [138] Cf. Consentius (1903) 526.

thought the translation was designed to assist the study of Latin in schools.[139] Several reviewers of Lessing's contributions were puzzled and shocked by the ferocity of his attack, and at least two were hostile.[140] The one bright spot, for which Lessing was profoundly grateful, was that his verdict on Lange's translation was firmly endorsed by a top-ranking scholar, the Göttingen theologian and philologist Johann David Michaelis. Lange's reputation as a scholar was now destroyed, and his translations of Horace were before long replaced by the superior versions of Lessing's friend Ramler; as one of the reviewers predicted,[141] the *Vademecum* went on to outlive its unworthy object. (Lessing's attack was in fact so devastating that not only Lange's defective translation of Horace, but his genuine, albeit modest, achievement as a poet was overlooked until relatively recent times.) Lessing's later polemics may have greater subtlety and refinement, but it was this work which first established his reputation as a force to be reckoned with in German criticism.

In his *Vindications of Horace* (*Rettungen des Horaz*),[142] Lessing combines the 'vindication' form which he had developed in his historical studies of heretics with his interest in classical philology and in the poetry of Horace in particular. As in the earlier 'vindications', he is again concerned, in the manner of Bayle, to set the historical record straight by critical scrutiny of the sources; but he now extends that protective attitude he had adopted towards religious heretics to the pagan poets of antiquity, saying on one occasion of another botched translation 'As far as the ancient writers are concerned, I am a true knight errant; my blood boils at once when I see them so woefully mishandled.'[143] The *Vindications of Horace*—the title is plural because Horace is defended on several separate counts—is therefore closely related to the Wittenberg writings, and more particularly to the controversy with Lange, of which it is a by-product. But as Lessing's preface indicates, it cannot have been written (or at any rate completed) before the end of 1753. It was published together with the 'vindications' of Cardano, the *Ineptus religiosus*, and Cochlæus at Easter 1754, and was probably written immediately after the *Vademecum* in the first months of that year.[144] It is the positive counterpart to the negative criticism of the *Vademecum*; and whereas the *Vademecum* had defended the integrity of Horace's text against the distortions of a translator, the *Vindications* defends his integrity as a poet and individual against the moral and religious censures of his critics.

The Roman writers had, of course, been the object of Christian censure since medieval times, especially with regard to their sexual mores and pagan beliefs. Such criticisms continued to be voiced in the eighteenth century, as in a recent study of the Latin poets by Gottfried Ephraim Müller which Lessing mentions in his essay.[145] Lessing takes issue with three of the most frequently voiced accusations, the first based on a report in Suetonius' *Vita Horatii* and the two others based on

[139] Oehlke I, 211–12. [140] Braun I, 15–32; hostile reviews ibid. I, 17–19 and 27–8.
[141] Ibid. I, 21. [142] LM V, 267–309. [143] To F. Nicolai, 21 January 1758.
[144] Cf. L. to J. J. Wippel, 5 January 1754.
[145] LM V, 274 and 297–8; cf. Riedel (1976) 129.

autobiographical readings of Horace's poems. Firstly, Horace is alleged to have been an immoderate voluptuary, who lined a room with mirrors to maximize his enjoyment of his mistresses; secondly, he was denounced as a coward who, by his own admission, had thrown away his shield and fled the field of battle at Philippi; and thirdly, he was said—again on his own testimony—to have treated religion with almost complete indifference. Lessing's reply to the first charge is that the passage in Suetonius is probably spurious, for it closely resembles a report by Seneca concerning a notorious sexual deviant by the name of Hostius (which might easily have been confused with Horatius). Besides, many of Horace's own sexual allusions, especially those involving pederasty, are demonstrably modelled on those of earlier poets such as Anacreon; and by selective quotation (for example, of his defence of marital purity in the sixth ode of Book 3), one might just as easily make a case for him as a moral rigorist. To the accusation of cowardice, Lessing correctly observes that the incident of Horace's abandoning his shield and comrades is a topos encountered in earlier poets such as Alcaeus and Archilochus; he also perceives that it is a joke, an example of that ironic self-deprecation of which Horace (like Lessing himself) is fond. And to the charge of religious indifferentism based on Horace's famous description of himself (Odes 1, 34) as a 'perfunctory and infrequent worshipper' until thunder and lightning from a clear sky forcibly reminded him of the deity, Lessing replies that the ode should not be read as a religious or philosophical statement, but simply as a poetic response to the awesome power of a storm; the poet will draw on whatever religious or philosophical formulas he requires to reinforce the emotional impression he wishes to produce in a given context, without necessarily subscribing to the belief-systems with which such formulas are associated.

Lessing's essay contains a number of insights which, though uncommon in his time, later became standard tools of literary criticism. While he argues convincingly that there is insufficient evidence to convict Horace himself of sexual practices unacceptable to most eighteenth-century readers, he also points out that sexual mores vary greatly between different ages and cultures, and that Horace must not be blamed for presenting them in a manner congenial to his contemporaries.[146] As in his defence a few years earlier of Plautus' broad jokes in the context of Roman society,[147] Lessing here adopts a historical relativism akin to that on which Herder would base his philosophy of history two decades later. In his comments on the room of mirrors and on Horace's discarding of his shield, he shows an awareness of the formulaic element in ancient poetry, of the role of the topos or locus communis, and thereby transcends the naive biographism which was still prevalent in the classical scholarship of his age. Most striking of all, perhaps, is his rejection of what would later be described as the 'biographical fallacy', and his clear distinction between the lyrical 'I' and the voice of the author himself. He declares: 'It is true that the writer of odes in particular nearly always speaks in the first person, but this "I" is only rarely his own "I".'[148]

[146] LM V, 283. [147] LM IV, 171–2. [148] LM V, 298.

This is the first of several occasions in Lessing's critical writings when he insists that art and biography are fundamentally distinct; and since this distinction was by no means self-evident at the time, it is worth asking what prompted him to make it. The most obvious reason is that he had experienced its truth for himself, having written, for example, Anacreontic poetry without adopting an Anacreontic lifestyle. Similarly, the last thing he wanted was to see his favourite Latin poet convicted on poetic evidence of the very kind of amoral hedonism which he had recently deplored in La Mettrie. But in the wider context of Enlightenment thought, a more fundamental principle was at stake. There was a growing feeling that art is, or should be, essentially autonomous, and that while it must not gratuitously offend ethical, political, or religious values, it has no need of these to justify its existence.[149] Clearly, the process of secularization had helped to encourage this view, as had the decline of religious and political patronage. But in Germany in particular, an additional factor was involved, namely the rise of aesthetics as a distinct branch of philosophy shortly before the middle of the eighteenth century. The extent to which the young Lessing was aware of this development has not been fully investigated, but there can be little doubt that he was informed of the essential facts. He does not mention the work of the founder of aesthetics, Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten, until later years, but he does refer more than once to the critical and philosophical writings of Baumgarten's pupil and popularizer Georg Friedrich Meier, including his *Elements of All Belles-Lettres* (*Anfangsgründe aller schönen Wissenschaften*, Halle, 1748–50), describing him in 1751 as 'the author of the aesthetics'.[150] Since the latter word denotes not the title but the content of Meier's work, it can be presumed that Lessing knew what it was about; and since his friend G. S. Nicolai was a fellow-philosopher and close associate of Meier at Halle, it is not unlikely, given Lessing's keen interest in literary theory, that aesthetics figured in their conversations when Nicolai visited Wittenberg in 1752. And since the new discipline's chief aim was to demonstrate the autonomy of aesthetic judgement,[151] it may well have reinforced Lessing in the views he expressed in his essay on Horace. At any rate, he proceeded a few months later, in collaboration with Moses Mendelssohn, to defend the same views in a more philosophical context in their jointly written treatise *Pope a Metaphysician!*

The essay on Horace is a fine piece of criticism and a substantial contribution to classical philology. The old Horatian Hagedorn, shortly before his death, copied out Lessing's interpretation of the ode on the thunderstorm, and commented that a Bentley (i.e. Richard Bentley, the eminent classical scholar and editor of Horace) would have been proud of it. This must have pleased Lessing, for he filed this report in a collection of reminiscences of the writer he had once described as the greatest poet of the times.[152]

Such poetry as Lessing wrote in Wittenberg consists almost entirely of epigrams. Although he does not appear to have employed this form before he left Leipzig,[153]

[149] Cf. Nivelle 56, 60, and 68. [150] LM V, 75; cf. IV, 14–15.
[151] See Reiss *passim*. [152] LM XV, 354.
[153] See Danzel/Guhrauer I, 115; also GEL: Sämtliche Gedichte, ed. Grimm, 254.

his early poetry, as noted in the first chapter of this study, already had strong affinities with the epigram, especially in its brevity, wit, and climactic endings. His work on the epigram proper seems to have begun around 1751, and he published some of his first productions in 'Das Neueste' of that year.[154] A larger collection, including two aimed at Voltaire and over twenty Latin epigrams, appeared in the first volume of his *Writings* in 1753,[155] and a greatly enlarged collection was included in a revised edition of his poems in 1771;[156] others again were published posthumously. Although Lessing wrote epigrams sporadically for the rest of his life,[157] the majority of those which survive date from around the Wittenberg period, during which, as Karl Lessing reports, he composed them on various contemporary events and individuals:[158] the theologians' attack on the physicist Bose, for example, and even his own funeral oration on the death of a friend, provided him with targets for his barbed wit.[159]

As Lessing himself admits in the preface to his *Writings*,[160] his chief models are Martial and the poets of the Greek Anthology. In the course of his work on classical philology in Wittenberg, he seems to have studied the history of the epigram, and it may have been in this way that he first encountered Simon Lemnius, whose collection of epigrams, it will be recalled, caused offence to Luther. At any rate, Lessing's own epigrams are plainly influenced by numerous ancient and Renaissance writers, and they include imitations and translations of earlier prototypes and elements borrowed from these.[161] This does not, however, mean that they are entirely derivative; as with most epigrammatists before him, Lessing's originality lies not so much in the ideas and topics he treats—which are often traditional—as in their striking reformulation in his own language and idiom. For this reason, it is not easy to convey their quality without direct reference to the German text; but the brief account which follows should, with the help of one or two translations, indicate at least some of their main features.

Lessing's epigrams, like those of Martial, vary considerably in length, from the one-liner 'On a Hanged Man' ('He rests in peace—when winds are still')[162] to the thirty lines of that on Voltaire's legal conflict with Hirschel, an epigram which differs from verse satire only in its characteristically pointed ending.[163] They are for the most part short, often more concentrated than any model they may follow, and it is for their brevity that Lessing, in the epigram which opens both his main collections, commends them to the reader (mischievously contrasting them with Klopstock's prolixity):[164]

> Who will not join in Klopstock's adulation?
> But will they all have read him?—No.
> We'd rather do without such celebration,
> And see our readers' numbers grow.

[154] LM IV, 436–7 and 450. [155] B II, 635–45. [156] LM I, 3–34.
[157] LM I, 42–52. [158] See Danzel/Guhrauer I, 237; KGL 84. [159] LM I, 43 and 26.
[160] LM V, 36. [161] See GEL: Sämtliche Gedichte, ed. Grimm, 254–84; also PO XXI, 15–19.
[162] LM I, 51; for versions of this epigram by earlier writers see B III, 1520–1.
[163] LM I, 39–40. [164] B II, 635 (1753); LM I, 3 (1771); cf. I, 55.

In subject matter, only a minority of them deals with specific people, events, or institutions: to satirize these, Lessing prefers the medium of comedy or polemical prose. They deal rather with perennial human foibles and vices, often of a sexual nature; and like their Latin models, they are frequently scurrilous. The following example (in Coleridge's translation), though not as coarse as some, is not untypical:[165]

To Doctor Sp**

Thy babes ne'er greet thee with the father's name;
'My Lord', they lisp—. Now whence can this arise?
Perhaps their mother feels an honest shame
And will not leave her infants to tell lies.

That distinction between poetic expression and authorial opinion on which Lessing insisted in his essay on Horace is nowhere more pronounced than in his epigrams. They are full of Martial's bile, of misogyny and indeed misanthropy, with wicked thrusts at illegitimacy, old age, ugliness, and physical handicaps as well as moral failings. Though their mood is, in very general terms, in keeping with the acerbic temper of some of Lessing's other Wittenberg writings, their specific sentiments are for the most part remote from his known humanitarian views. He is experimenting once again with an established literary mode, and with a particularly biting kind of humour which, though not absent from his early comedies, can be delivered more effectively through the concentrated medium of the epigram. He had not yet attempted to deal with this form in theoretical terms, as he would do in his *Scattered Observations on the Epigram* of 1771, but here again, as in the cases of comedy, tragedy, didactic poetry, and fable, his practice precedes his theory. This discussion of the epigrams may conclude with one of the more relaxed examples, 'On a Fire at **', which is modelled on an epigram by the Renaissance humanist Euricius Cordus aimed at Franciscan monks. Lessing's firefighters are likewise from a monastery, but since there were no monasteries in Protestant England, the nearest equivalent the translator (again Coleridge) could find was a collegiate university; and since he was a Cambridge man himself, he naturally chose Oxford:[166]

An Oxford brothelhouse caught fire
At midnight. From their peaceful pillows
Leapt up a dozen reverend Fellows
  To quench the conflagration dire—
This brave, this philanthropic band,
Where were they? – O – they were at hand.
  It was a brothelhouse, caught fire.

[165] LM I, 7. [166] LM I, 14.

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Berlin 1752–1755: the Academy Quarrel; Translations and Collected Writings; Social Circle and the Death of Mylius; Mendelssohn, Nicolai, and Other New Friendships; *Pope a Metaphysician!*

At some time in November 1752, Lessing left Wittenberg and returned to Berlin. That he had no real wish to abandon his life as a scholar and freelance writer is evident from a letter he wrote just before he left, in which he expresses his interest in the vacant post of library assistant to Count Brühl in Dresden:[1] his return to Berlin and journalism was dictated not by any vocational commitment, but by financial necessity and by his obligation to relieve Mylius as review editor of the BPZ. His relations with Mylius may have grown cooler since their jointly produced theatrical journal, the *Contributions*, ceased publication at the end of 1750 after editorial disagreements, and there is a hint of a sneer in Mylius' only surviving note to Lessing, which informs him of the stir caused by his failure to return Voltaire's proofs when he left for Wittenberg, adding 'You have become better known since your departure than you were while you were here.'[2] At any rate, Lessing sought independent accommodation on his return to Berlin. He lived, as a friend later recalled, 'in a very small room' on the second floor of a house on the square surrounding the Nikolaikirche, just round the corner from his old quarters in Spandauerstrasse and close to Voss's business premises in the Town Hall buildings and his bookshop in the Königstrasse.[3]

Just as Lessing arrived in Berlin, a long-running controversy in the Berlin Academy came to a head, a controversy whose origins go back to the appointment of Maupertuis as President in 1746. As a Newtonian, Maupertuis had little sympathy with the philosophy of the Academy's founder Leibniz, who was still held in high esteem in Berlin; and with the support of his fellow-academician Euler, he did all he could to discredit his illustrious predecessor's legacy. The topic set for the essay prize of 1747, for example, invited criticism of Leibniz's theory of monads, and the

[1] L. to G. C. Walther, 1 November 1752. [2] To L., January 1752, cited in KGL 81.
[3] D 75; according to Danzel/Guhrauer I, 260 the house number was 20, but Oehlke I, 232 gives it as 10. This is L's only Berlin residence to have retained something of its original character.

Fig. 11. Berlin, Lessing's lodgings from 1752 opposite the Nicolaikirche.

prize went to a feeble essay attacking it.[4] (This competition figures prominently, as earlier mentioned, in Lessing's comedy *The Young Scholar.*) But Maupertuis' opposition to Leibniz was not confined to scientific matters. A morose and touchy individual, he was also a pessimist, and one of his favourite sayings was 'la somme des maux surpasse celle des biens';[5] he consequently found the metaphysical optimism of Leibniz and Wolff unacceptable. The fact that Wolff's influence was so widespread in Germany did little to reconcile him to that country, where he had the misfortune to be taken prisoner by the Austrians during Frederick's first campaign in Silesia, and it cost Frederick a great deal of effort to retain his services in Berlin.

After the Hirschel case in 1751, Voltaire's relations with Frederick deteriorated, and he, too, became discontented with his situation in Prussia. He realised that the role envisaged for him by the king was merely that of a provider of diversion during his leisure hours, whereas Maupertuis wielded autocratic powers in the Academy and enjoyed Frederick's unqualified support.[6] Voltaire's envy

[4] B I, 1070–1. [5] Harnack 318: 'The sum of evils is greater than that of life's benefits.'
[6] See Mervaud 209; Schieder 445.

mounted, and just as he began to wish for Maupertuis' downfall, events played into his hands.

In the winter of 1750 to 1751, the Swiss mathematician Samuel König, an external member of the Academy who currently held a chair of philosophy and the office of librarian to the Stadtholder in the Hague, visited Berlin and submitted a paper to the Academy criticizing the central concept of Maupertuis' physical theory, his so-called 'principle of the least action', according to which nature always expends the minimum amount of energy required to produce a given effect. Maupertuis had claimed too much for this principle, which he even adduced as a proof of God's existence; and König also argued that such truth as the principle embodied had already been established by Leibniz, as confirmed by an unpublished letter of that philosopher to Jacob Hermann which he had studied in Switzerland.[7] Maupertuis at once took offence, and told König that he would have to publish his paper elsewhere. König duly did so, and his paper appeared in March 1751 in the Leipzig journal *Nova acta eruditorum*. Maupertuis challenged König to produce the relevant letter of Leibniz, the text of which he had now published and which he claimed to have been shown by the Swiss patriot and man of letters Samuel Henzi; but the letter could no longer be found—not surprisingly, for Henzi had since been beheaded for conspiring against the oligarchic rulers of Berne and his affairs were now in disarray. In the following year, Maupertuis pressed the Academy to declare that the letter was a forgery designed to discredit him, and although only half those eligible to vote turned up, the motion was passed. König thereupon resigned his membership and published an appeal to the public, citing the relevant facts; and since his arguments were cogent and he had behaved with scrupulous correctness throughout, he gained widespread sympathy.[8] (The debate over the authenticity of the missing letter continues to this day.)[9] In the autumn of 1752, Maupertuis fell ill and Frederick left Berlin on a visit to Silesia. Voltaire realised that Maupertuis' position was now extremely vulnerable, and despite the fact that his own philosophical views were closer to those of Maupertuis than to those of Leibniz and Wolff, he resolved to destroy him.

On 18 September, he published an anonymous pamphlet, ostensibly in reply to a scholarly enquiry from Paris, accusing Maupertuis of plagiarism, outlining the irregularities in the Academy's treatment of König, and depicting the academicians as divided and demoralised. Frederick, who instantly guessed who had written the pamphlet, thereupon rose to Maupertuis' defence in an anonymous pamphlet of his own.[10] As the conflict intensified, the identity of the two opponents became clear, and Voltaire resorted to his strongest weapon, that of literary satire. Maupertuis, growing increasingly obsessive and eccentric, had recently published a series of essays full of abstruse speculations on such matters as the philosopher's stone, tailed men, judicial astrology, and a journey to the centre of the earth. Voltaire now held this up to ridicule in his *Diatribe du Docteur Akakia, Médecin du Pape*, which

[7] On the following see Harnack 318.
[8] See the more recent accounts of this controversy in Goldenbaum (1999a) and (2004b).
[9] See Breger *passim*. [10] Mervaud 220; Harnack 340–1; Aldridge 201–18.

he published—again anonymously—at the end of November, arguing that Maupertuis' essays must be the work of an impostor, since no President of a learned academy could possibly have invented such absurdities. Frederick again intervened and demanded that the edition be destroyed; and when he heard that another edition was due to appear abroad, he had all confiscated copies burned publicly by the executioner on 24 December. Voltaire's departure from Berlin was now inevitable, and although Frederick hinted at a rehabilitation if he recanted his errors, his position was untenable.[11] He left on 26 March for Leipzig, where he launched further attacks on Maupertuis and arranged for more copies of the *Diatribe du Docteur Akakia* to be printed.[12] This was doubtless the reason why Frederick, whose arm was long, had him arrested and detained for several weeks in Frankfurt on the charge—ironically reminiscent of Voltaire's own treatment of Lessing at the end of 1751—that he had taken with him a collection of the king's poems without permission.

Voltaire and Frederick were in truth too alike to live together in harmony: both were distrustful, scheming, unscrupulous, and cynical, while ceaselessly proclaiming their allegiance to humane attitudes and liberal values; but above all, both found it essential to be always at the centre of the stage. This, then, was the drama which reached its climax just as Lessing returned to Berlin, and which affected him personally in two ways. Firstly, his association with Mylius, who was deeply involved in the conflict, undermined his prospects of a career in Prussia; and secondly, the sustained attack by leading members of the Academy on the Leibnizian basis of the German Enlightenment had far-reaching effects on his own thinking.

During Lessing's absence in Wittenberg, Mylius, now actively seeking support for his planned expedition to the Americas, had cultivated his relations with leading intellectuals and scientists in Berlin and elsewhere, including both Maupertuis and Voltaire. Already in 1751, he had produced a German translation of Maupertuis' *Essai de cosmologie*, in which the French scientist expounded his 'principle of the least action'.[13] Although he continued to profess his friendship for Maupertuis throughout the following year, he was by this time intriguing against him: partly in order to please Albrecht von Haller, who was now emerging as the chief sponsor of his planned expedition, he published an anonymous attack on the Academy's treatment of Haller's compatriot König, of whose cause Mylius had become a strong supporter.[14] He quarrelled with Maupertuis' ally Euler,[15] and when the conflict between Voltaire and Frederick finally erupted, he not only sided with Voltaire, but produced a German translation of the *Diatribe du Docteur Akakia* for circulation in Berlin; and to crown it all, when this pamphlet was publicly burned, he composed and circulated a satirical ballad, the last verse of which declared that, whereas attacks on God and religion were permissible in Berlin, attacks on the French were not.[16] Mylius' departure now became imperative, for his conduct had

[11] Mervaud 228. [12] Harnack 343; Goldenbaum (1999b) 89–90.
[13] See LM VI, 404, where L. ascribes this translation to Mylius; cf. also LM XXII, 134–6.
[14] Consentius (1903) 541; cf. also Trillmich 115–16.
[15] Consentius (1903) 522. [16] Ibid. 783; Hermsdorf 77.

put him at risk of arrest.[17] He accordingly left Berlin on 28 February 1753 to begin his expedition.

Since Lessing took no part in these events, they posed no direct threat to him: on the contrary, he was around this time given the task of translating into German two works of political significance to Prussia, one of them written by the king himself (see p. 155 below). But a number of incidents had now occurred which were likely to prejudice his chances of appointment to senior office in the future. Ever since his arrival in Berlin, he had been closely associated with Mylius, whose periodical *Der Wahrsager* had twice been the target of official complaints, the second of which had led, in 1749, to the closure of the periodical and the introduction of press censorship in Prussia. He had also collaborated with Mylius for several years in editing one of the capital's two main newspapers, the BPZ, whose review section, under Lessing's editorship, had on several occasions scathingly criticized French members of Frederick's entourage. Then there was the hue and cry over his misappropriation of the proofs of Voltaire's *Siècle de Louis XIV* at the end of 1751, and before long, his punitive attack on Lange would receive widespread publicity. We do not know to what extent Frederick was informed of Lessing's role in these events, all of which came to the notice of at least some of his close advisers. But we can be certain that, when Lessing's name eventually came up for preferment, the king would remember or be reminded of at least some of them, including Lessing's association with the now notorious Mylius.[18]

The Academy quarrel also served to focus attention on the philosophical foundations of the Enlightenment, and in particular on the relative merits of Leibniz's metaphysics on the one hand, and the mechanistic philosophies of nature—whether Newtonian, Cartesian, or Epicurean—to which Maupertuis and others who supported his anti-Leibnizian campaign subscribed. The effect of this on many Germans was to strengthen the attraction of Leibniz's philosophy, and more especially Christian Wolff's popular reformulation of it, as an antidote to the materialistic, mechanistic, and sceptical tendencies of the French Enlightenment.[19] Lessing, who met and was impressed by Samuel König during the latter's stay in Berlin,[20] was firmly on the side of the Leibnizians, and there are signs of a renewed interest in the thought of Leibniz and Wolff both in his fragment of 1753 *The Christianity of Reason* (see p. 130 above) and in the essay *Pope a Metaphysician!* (*Pope ein Metaphysiker!*) which he wrote in the following year in collaboration with Moses Mendelssohn. The quarrel may also have helped to stimulate that increased interest in English as distinct from French thought which is evident in Lessing's circle during the mid- and later 1750s. At any rate, serious damage was done to the Academy's reputation by Maupertuis' autocratic handling of König's submission, and its atmosphere was poisoned for a considerable time. Maupertuis' health and confidence were destroyed by the affair, and he was never again able to function effectively as President. He left Germany for good in 1756 and died three years later.[21]

[17] Consentius (1903) 519–20.
[18] Ibid. 520–4 and Oehlke I, 206.
[19] See Thomann *passim*.
[20] See L. to J. G. Lessing, 29 May 1753; also Oehlke I, 197.
[21] Harnack 344–7.

Lessing resumed his work as review editor of the BPZ on his return from Wittenberg, and continued to perform this task until he left Berlin again in October 1755. The same problem of identifying the authors of reviews arises as before, although Lessing's authorship is almost certain where the works reviewed are by persons close to him or about whom he felt particularly strongly, such as Mylius, Naumann, Kästner, Mendelssohn, Voltaire, and Rousseau, and such adversaries as Lange and Gottsched's disciple Schönaich, who specialized in feeble satires of 'Gnissel' (his anagram for Lessing). Lessing's own works are, of course, invariably reviewed—usually in a short descriptive notice, but with an occasional joke at his own expense.[22] Otherwise, a wide selection of books on many subjects and in several languages is again covered.

Soon after his return to Berlin, Lessing turned once more to translation in order to augment his income. His first major assignment, commissioned by his friend C. F. Voss, was the *Histoire des Arabes sous le gouvernement des califes* (1750) by the Abbé Augier de Marigny; the translation appeared in three volumes, of which Lessing was responsible for the first (published at Easter 1753) and the greater part of the second (1754). He chose this particular work because, as he points out in his preface,[23] Marigny modelled his history on the *Histoire romaine* of Charles Rollin, which Lessing admired and had in part translated four years earlier. Like that of Rollin, Marigny's history was a popular work aimed at a general readership—a variety of historiography still uncommon in Germany but favoured by Lessing as a means of bringing the fruits of scholarship to a wider audience. Marigny, who knew no Arabic, drew his information from secondary sources such as Herbelot's *Bibliothèque orientale* (1697); he had been sharply criticized on this score by the eminent theologian and historian S. J. Baumgarten. Lessing, who is plainly familiar with Herbelot and the other main accounts of Islamic history in European languages,[24] devotes most of his preface to defending Marigny, on the grounds that he had used the best non-Arabic sources then available, and that a history of this kind is much better than no history at all. But the real motive for his defence—and no doubt the main reason why he undertook the translation in the first place—is his own sympathy with the Islamic world and his desire to publicize Marigny's positive account of Arab civilization; he even contemplated writing a supplement to the work himself in order to cover the history of the Moors in Spain.[25] His motives are in this case similar to those which led him to strengthen the arguments of the Jewish and Muslim apologists in his 'vindication' of Cardano, and to include in his translation of Voltaire's historical essays the latter's favourable portrayals of Islam: he wishes to present the other monotheistic religions as no less respectable than Christianity, and so to undermine Christian claims to a monopoly of religious truth. He concludes his defence of Marigny by pointing out that Baumgarten's own translation of a French chronology contains much more serious errors with regard to Arab history than does Marigny's work; and to avoid a personal clash

[22] See, for example, LM VII, 2–4.
[23] LM V, 23.
[24] See Kuschel (1998) 48–53.
[25] See L. to J. G. Lessing, 29 May 1753.

with the influential Baumgarten, he published his translation and preface anonymously.

The other two translations which Lessing published in the spring of 1753 were no doubt undertaken primarily for financial reasons, but also with a view to improving his standing in Prussia. The author of the first, as Lessing took care to inform his father,[26] was none other than the king himself. Frederick's *Trois lettres au public*, published in March 1753 as three separate broadsheets amounting to a dozen pages in all, are written in the manner of Voltaire's satirical *contes*.[27] They deal with an international treaty, incorporating both definitive and secret articles, supposedly concluded between Prussia and the Republic of San Marino, concerning the performance or non-performance of certain minuets composed in Aix-en-Provence, and the military and diplomatic implications thereof. As Lessing pointed out to his father, no one was sure what all this meant, but the sense of the satire was no doubt clear enough to the representatives of Austria and Russia, for it contained a coded warning that Frederick was informed of a secret article in the treaty of 1746 between those two powers concerning their future relations with Prussia.[28] Although Lessing's version lacks the lightness and easy jocularity of the French, it is thorough and broadly accurate. How exactly he obtained this commission is unclear, but it may have come from the Cabinet Secretary August Friedrich Eichel.[29] It was no doubt from the same source that he received a request to translate another short work, *An Impartial Foreigner's Remarks upon the Present Dispute between England and Prussia* (*Anmerkungen eines unparteiischen Fremden über die gegenwärtige Streitigkeit zwischen England und Preussen*). This work was written in French, but claimed to be based on an English original, which was produced by George Keith or some other English-speaker at Frederick's behest. It is not known whether Lessing translated from the French or English version. It was then published simultaneously in bilingual English-German and English-French versions. Although it purported to be a letter, originally in English, from a nobleman resident in The Hague to his friend in London, it was in fact the work of a Prussian diplomat, Johann Gotthilf Vockerodt.[30] The letter protests at the detention of Prussian ships by the Royal Navy in search of goods of use to an enemy, and the fiction of a neutral observer is plainly designed to lend weight to what is in fact a protest by the Prussian government. The content of this work, which again appears to be competently translated, can have interested Lessing only minimally.

Lessing's main literary enterprise of the years 1753 to 1755 was the edition of his collected *Writings* (*Schriften*) in six volumes, two of which appeared simultaneously in each of those years; like nearly all of his subsequent writings, they were published by his friend C. F. Voss. The content of the individual volumes and the sequence of their publication were designed to achieve the maximum impact. The first volume, with Lessing's collected songs, odes, fables, epigrams, and didactic verse, served to demonstrate his mastery of most poetic genres then in currency,

[26] Ibid. [27] French text in B II, 1148–57; L's translation in B II, 567–78.
[28] Cf. B II, 1146–7. [29] See Kirschstein 41.
[30] Cf. B II, 1175–7; extract from L's translation in B II, 593–8.

while the second, with its twenty-five *Letters* (*Briefe*) on assorted literary, historical, and philological topics, revealed his competence in several varieties of criticism and scholarship. The third contained all but one of his 'vindications', displaying his credentials as a learned and forceful defender of enlightened values, and the last three volumes, which contained all of his major dramas to date (including the newly completed *Miss Sara Sampson* of 1755), instantly established his position as the foremost German dramatist of the period.

The reception of this edition was overwhelmingly positive,[31] and the publication of the first two volumes in the autumn of 1753 was in itself sufficient to transform his status from that of a relatively obscure journalist and talented writer of popular verse to that of a major author; and when the second two volumes were equally well received in the following year, he had reason to hope that his prospects as an independent writer and scholar had improved decisively. His reaction to these events was, however, profoundly affected by changes in his personal relationships, and especially by the loss of his closest friend and long-time mentor Christlob Mylius. These changes must now be examined before his further development as a critic and dramatist towards the end of his second Berlin period is considered.

Before he met Mendelssohn early in 1754, Lessing had few close friends in Berlin. As late as October 1754, he described himself—with some self-dramatization—as 'a man with no employment, no friends, and no luck'.[32] Naumann, with whom he remained on terms of bluff familiarity derived from their student days in Leipzig[33] and who now eked out a living as a house-tutor, could of course be relied on to attend any convivial occasion, and some of Mylius' scientific friends, such as the jovial astronomer Johann Kies,[34] became Lessing's friends in turn. His circle of acquaintances widened considerably when, late in 1752, he joined the so-called Monday Club, founded in 1748 by Johann Georg Schulthess, a Swiss clergyman and friend of Klopstock and Bodmer who visited Berlin for a time as Sulzer's guest.[35] The club, which had a maximum of twenty-four members, met in a hostelry in the Mohrenstrasse across the river from the old city, devoting Monday evenings to discussion of literature and the arts, followed by dinner and informal conversation in which local and national politics no doubt also figured. Clubs of this kind, like Gottsched's literary societies before them, were important vehicles for the development and dissemination of enlightened ideas in Germany,[36] and the Monday Club was not the last such organization whose meetings Lessing would attend in the course of his career. Other members included the publisher Voss, who may well have nominated Lessing for membership, the engraver Meil, whom Lessing had known in Leipzig and who now designed the title-pages of his collected *Writings*, court musicians such as the opera-composer Agricola and the flute

[31] On the reception of the edition see B II, 1182–1217 and 1262–8; also Braun I, 32–41 and III, 10–12. On the reception of the early dramas see Chapters 2 and (on *Miss Sara Sampson*) 6 of this book.

[32] To Michaelis, 16 October 1754.

[33] See D 75–6.

[34] See L. to Kästner, 25 August 1753; D 75.

[35] See Gumbinner, Column 8; Oehlke I, 234; Vierhaus (1983) 87.

[36] See van Dülmen *passim*.

virtuoso Quantz, and the theologian and pioneer of statistics Süssmilch; the philosopher and academician Johann Georg Sulzer was an occasional visitor, and the poet and officer Ewald von Kleist, who became a close friend towards the end of the decade, visited as a guest.[37]

Two other figures were members of the French-speaking community in Berlin. The first was Richier de Louvain.[38] The second was André-Pierre Le Guay de Prémontval, a minor *philosophe* and early associate of Diderot.[39] A mathematician by training, Prémontval had drawn crowds to his public lectures on that subject in Paris. He was vain and disputatious, and since he was also a spendthrift, he had been obliged to flee France to escape his creditors, making his way on foot to Geneva and later to The Hague, where he became friendly with Samuel König. König, who was at that time still on good terms with Maupertuis, recommended him for election to the Academy; he was duly elected in 1752 and moved to Berlin.[40] Prémontval was untypical of the French academicians in Berlin. He took some interest in German culture, he defended monogamy on religious and other grounds, and he rejected the materialism and determinism of most of his French colleagues, arguing in his work *Du hasard sous l'empire de la providence* (1754) that the existence of providence implies a genuinely arbitrary and unpredictable factor in human affairs; but by the same token, he could not accept the philosophy of Leibniz and Wolff, for their principle of sufficient reason appeared to him—as it did to Friedrich Jacobi twenty-five years later—to imply a universal causal determinism.[41] Lessing, to whom he had no doubt been recommended by König, met him on a number of occasions and published favourable reviews of three of his works in the BPZ, among them that on chance and providence, a topic in which he was himself profoundly interested;[42] it has even been suggested that Prémontval served as a model for the character of Riccaut de la Marlinière in *Minna von Barnhelm*.[43] Ramler noted in 1754 that Lessing was remarkably well informed on the doings of the French in Berlin;[44] in addition to Richier and Aaron Salomon Gumpertz (who retained close connections with the Berlin Academy since serving as secretary to d'Argens and Maupertuis), Prémontval was one of his informants.

Mylius' ill-starred expedition and untimely end warrant close attention, for they made a profound impression on Lessing and led him, as he tried to make sense of Mylius' career, to reassess his own past life and future prospects. When he left Berlin on 28 February 1753, Mylius' status was very different from that of the droll bohemian Lessing had first encountered in Leipzig. He now mingled with leading scientists and academicians and had participated in their debates. The last and most substantial of his journals, the *Diversions in the Physical Sciences* (*Physikalische Belustigungen*) had been running since the beginning of 1751, and his work on it had attracted favourable comment from such figures as Linnæus, Euler, Lyonnet, and Réaumur;[45] Kästner agreed to edit it during Mylius' absence. His

[37] Oehlke I, 463. [38] See Chapter 3, p. 87. [39] See Furbank 15.
[40] Harnack 332 and 469. [41] See Danzel/Guhrauer I, 273 and LM VII, 12–13.
[42] LM V, 173–4, 178–9 and VII, 12–13. [43] See Baldensperger *passim*.
[44] D 60–1. [45] Trillmich 106–7; Krätzer 516.

campaign to secure support for the expedition was assured of success as soon as Haller (whose poetry Mylius, as an anonymous drudge in Gottsched's pay, had once reviled) agreed to co-ordinate the appeal and supervise the organization of the expedition. Mylius was soon able to announce that he had been promised support from the kings of Denmark and Great Britain (the British administration in Hanover had expressed an interest), and enough money was pledged for the first year to allow the expedition to proceed.[46]

The plan, as originally announced, was for Mylius to sail from Holland to Surinam in South America and spend one year there, followed by a further eighteen months in the British colonies of Georgia, Virginia, Carolina, and Pennsylvania, with a final six months in the Danish Virgin Islands before he returned to Germany.[47] In each of these places, he would undertake scientific observations and collect specimens in all departments of natural history for distribution to his sponsors; he would depart from Holland in March 1753.[48] His own announcement of the project concluded with a ringing poem in Haller's manner, in which he expressed his readiness to brave the ocean and extend the bounds of knowledge for the glory of God.[49] Lessing likewise wrote a poem on Mylius' departure, and informed his father, not without a note of triumph, that Mylius had been promised a chair at the university of Göttingen on his return.[50]

From the start, the expedition was compromised by imprecise contractual arrangements and inadequate planning. Haller's draft instructions required Mylius, at six-monthly intervals, to send to a London agent detailed meteorological, botanical, geographical, and commercial observations, with appropriate drawings and statistics, as well as large quantities of dried plants and seeds, insects, molluscs, stuffed animals, birds and fish, and fossils and geological specimens, for despatch to Göttingen; these would then be distributed to sponsors in accordance with their wishes and in proportion to the amounts of money subscribed.[51] The level of subscription had, however, been left to the individuals' discretion, and the complex logistics and administrative arrangements which all this required were nowhere addressed. Crucially, no formal contract was ever signed between Mylius and Haller,[52] so that Mylius felt free to modify the original plan radically on more than one occasion: he was persuaded, for example, by Gerlach Adolf von Münchhausen, the founding Curator of Göttingen university, to sail to America not from Holland but from London, where he would receive extra commissions from the British government,[53] and to proceed directly to the British colonies rather than to Dutch Surinam.[54]

The expedition was also bedevilled by increasingly serious delays, some of them occasioned by unforeseen circumstances but others by Mylius' own lack of urgency. He left Berlin two months late,[55] and instead of travelling directly to Holland, he

[46] Hildebrandt (1981) 132. [47] Ibid. 10; cf. LM V, 147–8.
[48] Consentius (1903) 546.
[49] Mylius, Vermischte Schriften, ed. GEL (1754; reprint 1971) 597–600.
[50] LM IV, 393; L. to J. G. Lessing, 29 May 1753. [51] Details in Trillmich 141–2.
[52] Consentius (1904) 73. [53] Trillmich 118; Consentius (1903) 785.
[54] Cf. Kästner's preface to Mylius' Tagebuch Part 5 (1786) 91. [55] Consentius (1903) 776.

proceeded to Leipzig to take his leave of Kästner.[56] Dental surgery, he explained, held up his departure once again; but it did not prevent him from making extensive purchases (mainly of clothes) amounting to nearly 400 talers, or from attending a grand celebration organized by Gottsched to mark a royal name-day.[57] The tattered dropout and hack writer of old, now accompanied by his own servant-cum-draughtsman, was plainly relishing his role as elegant world-traveller. By the time he left for Göttingen two weeks later to finalize arrangements with Haller, Haller had left for Switzerland on family business,[58] leaving control of the expedition in the hands of a deputy, Samuel Christian Hollmann, who hesitated to take decisions without Haller's explicit agreement. Another fortnight went by, and Mylius decided to spend a further two weeks on meteorological and geological fieldwork in the Harz mountains, apparently at the request of Sulzer.[59] And so it went on, via Brunswick, Hildesheim, Hanover, Celle, Lüneburg, Hamburg, Bremen, Oldenburg, Emden, and Groningen to Amsterdam. His progress was admittedly delayed by his roundabout route through Germany, which he chose—apparently with some justification—for fear of arrest by Frederick's agents if he travelled due west through the Prussian Rhenish territories.[60] He resolved to sail instead to Amsterdam from Hamburg, but he discovered there, as he informed Haller,[61] that the voyage would entail protracted stops en route, so he continued overland via Bremen and Emden (which in fact lay in Prussian territory) instead. He was lionized by fashionable society in Hamburg and Bremen, in each of which he spent a fortnight; the elderly Telemann composed a 'Farewell to Europe' in his honour.[62] When he eventually reached the Netherlands, he visited König and spent no fewer than seven weeks touring the country, taking on an additional servant (for motives of charity, as he later told Haller),[63] and at last sailed for England on 19 August. But instead of proceeding promptly to America, he spent over six months sightseeing, visiting museums and collections, attending concerts and the theatre, and establishing literary and scientific contacts in London. The most tangible fruit of all this was his lively and varied travel diary, an incomplete version of which was published over thirty years later.[64]

The ultimate cause of the expedition's failure was Mylius' attitude. As time went by, the journey itself—or at least the European part of it—assumed greater importance than its agreed destination; and without admitting it to himself, he was soon grasping at every pretext to postpone his departure. The financial consequences were disastrous. He had been promised 1,000 talers per annum for three years, this sum to include all costs of travel.[65] By the end of 1753, as Haller later calculated, he had already received over 1,500 talers,[66] but this is almost certainly an underestimate, for

[56] Ibid. 547. [57] Ibid. 778–9; Tagebuch Part 5 (1786) 100.
[58] Consentius (1903) 779. [59] Ibid. 785.
[60] Ibid. 520 and 785; Tagebuch Part 6 (1787) 96. [61] Consentius (1903) 786.
[62] Tagebuch Part 5 (1786) 171. [63] Consentius (1904) 71.
[64] The negative result of enquiries in Göttingen (Kästner papers) and Basel (Bernoulli archive) suggests that the original diary is lost.
[65] Trillmich 137.
[66] Hildebrandt (1981) 47; see also Haller (1754) for Haller's report on Mylius' income and expenditure in the course of his travels.

Mylius' diary refers to numerous sponsors, receipts of money, and generous hospitality on the way.[67] After some weeks in London, he realized that he no longer had sufficient resources to leave for America, and he delayed his departure to await the final 200 talers which Haller had promised him. By the time this sum arrived in mid-October,[68] the costs which he had meanwhile incurred more than cancelled it out, and when the ship on which he had been due to sail on 8 November sank after a collision on the Thames, his reaction was one of relief.[69] Sailings were now less frequent, and by January, his position was critical. His letters to Haller grew increasingly frantic, and he begged him to advance enough money for the passage.[70] Haller's agent in London, the scientist and businessman Peter Collinson, had by now washed his hands of Mylius and advised Haller accordingly, whereupon two devastating letters arrived from Germany. Haller's deputy Hollmann declared that, in view of Mylius' misuse of his first year's income, there was no prospect of raising funds for a second year, adding that, unless he left at once for America, Haller would publicly disown him and expose him as a fraud;[71] and Michaelis, as editor of the *Göttingische Gelehrte Anzeigen*, wrote that Haller had already instructed him to publish a notice in these terms, and invited Mylius to consider the effect which this notice would have on his numerous distinguished sponsors.[72] Writing in English so that Collinson could read his letters, Mylius was by this time desperate; the following is an extract from his last letter to Haller, dated 22 February 1754:[73]

> You will become my Angel, if you help me this time [...] I assure you that I will make all good, what I have spoiled since, so that my subscribers shall be satisfied, and both your and my honour saved [...] help me for God's sake, otherwise I am be [*sic*] forsaken for ever. You shall find me quite another man for the future [...].

But the future was fast running out. Realizing that Mylius was seriously ill, Collinson wrote that same day to Haller, requesting £50 for Mylius' passage; his landlord would settle for a promissory note. Haller raised the required sum among his Swiss friends and sent it on.[74] On 7 March, Lessing published a notice in the BPZ, announcing that Mylius' delayed departure for America was now imminent.[75] But just a few hours before the notice appeared—and before the money from Haller could reach him—Mylius had died of pneumonia. He owed his landlord £120, almost the equivalent of his projected income for the following year. An official of the Hanover administration in London paid for his funeral.[76]

Lessing's immediate reaction to the news of Mylius' death is not recorded, but his comments over the next few months reflect conflicting feelings of grief and anger, sympathy and disapproval, as he tried to come to terms with his loss. As his periodic notices in the BPZ show, he had taken a supportive interest in Mylius'

[67] Tagebuch Part 5(1786) 156–7; Part 6 (1787) 62 and 112; Part 7 (1787)114; see also Trillmich 116 and 119.
[68] Tagebuch Part 7 (1787) 81; Trillmich 121. [69] Tagebuch Part 7 (1787) 120.
[70] Consentius (1904) 71. [71] Trillmich 143–4. [72] Ibid. 145–7.
[73] Consentius (1904) 77–8. [74] Ibid 78; Trillmich 122–3. [75] LM V, 391.
[76] Consentius (1904) 79–80; Trillmich 149.

enterprise,[77] and he had written to him at least once since his departure.[78] His short obituary notice of 26 March is well informed (probably thanks to Kästner, who had kept in touch with Mylius on his travels),[79] and he puts the best possible construction on the interminable delays: Mylius was anxious to meet his sponsors' requests for data on the Harz, he wished to improve his English, and illness prevented him from sailing. But soon afterwards, Lessing edited an extensive selection of Mylius' published writings, and his preface to this edition reads more like an act of revenge than a memorial tribute.[80]

Sending an advance copy of the edition to Kästner in October 1754, Lessing declares that he was pressed by others to compile it.[81] Of the others who might have done so, the likeliest is surely C. F. Voss, for whose family firm Lessing and Mylius had worked ever since they came to Berlin and who continued to publish Mylius' *Physikalische Belustigungen* as well as Lessing's own collected works. But oddly enough, the edition was published by the rival house of Haude and Spener; and given Mylius' reputation in Berlin and the complete failure of his expedition, it is difficult to imagine who else—apart, perhaps, from Naumann, whom Lessing hardly took seriously—would have urged Lessing to edit it. His real motives for doing so must be inferred from the preface itself, which is indeed, as he admitted to Kästner, a 'strange monument' to their deceased friend.

Like the critical writings in the second volume of his *Writings*, the preface takes the form of letters to an imaginary friend. Their dates range from 20 March to 20 June 1754, covering roughly the period during which Lessing must have worked on the edition; the changing tone of the six letters may even mark some of the stages through which he came to terms with Mylius' death. He begins in a mood of melancholy and muted grief, then casts around, as the bereaved so often do, for someone or something to blame for his friend's untimely end. This provides the cue for a tirade against the lack of support and encouragement in Germany for young men of genius born in modest circumstances—Lessing speaks here from the heart—and against the drudgery and frustrations which condemn so many of them to a premature end (he doubtless has such poets as Günther, Pyra, and J. E. Schlegel in mind). But his harshest reproaches are directed at those who exploit such individuals for selfish ends, and particularly at Gottsched, who becomes the scapegoat (this term is actually applied to him at one point)[82] for the failure of Mylius and others like him to produce more than mediocre poetry and rushed and venal journalism. The condemnation of Gottsched soon gives way, however, to caustic criticisms of Mylius' own writings, and half-hearted praise of his first periodical *Der Freigeist* followed by a damning indictment of *The Soothsayer*, the periodical which Frederick banned for its satire of various groups and individuals in Berlin. From this point onwards, negative judgements predominate.

[77] LM V, 147–8, 156, 391, 395–6; cf. Guthke (2000b) 44–5.
[78] Cf. L. to Kästner, 25 August 1753.
[79] L's correspondence with Kästner immediately after Mylius' death does not survive: see B XI/1, 737–8.
[80] Mylius, ed. GEL (1754) iii–xlv; also in LM VI, 392–408.
[81] To Kästner, 16 October 1754. [82] LM VI, 406.

The fourth letter, on Mylius' lightweight dramas, has no good word to say about them, and Kästner understandably reproached Lessing for including the weakest of them in the edition at all.[83]

The unkindest cuts are reserved, however, for the last two letters, which deal with Mylius' more recent activities. The fifth begins harmlessly enough with qualified praise for his translations from several languages, though it wrongly credits him with the English text of a letter to the poet Richard Glover, whose publication in London Lessing had noted in the *Monthly Review* (it was in fact translated for him by someone named Maclean),[84] and mistakenly claims that Mylius anglicized his name as 'Christpraise Myll' (his London *nom de plume* was in fact 'Crisp Mills').[85] But Mylius' Gottschedian criticisms of Glover provide an excuse for Lessing to return to his early journalism, and he now reveals that the anonymous vilifier of Haller's poetry in one of Gottsched's periodicals was none other than Mylius. Given Haller's role as patron and supervisor of Mylius' expedition, this was a cruel and unnecessary revelation. Finally, the sixth letter gives short shrift to those subscribers who, having paid Mylius to supply specimens for their cabinets of natural history, were aggrieved when they found that they had lost their money. For Lessing has unearthed a satirical proposal in one of Mylius' early periodicals to the effect that those with more money than sense should be persuaded to finance world tours by 'knights errant, Don Quixotes and daredevils' who might—or again might not—make discoveries of scientific value;[86] the reprinted proposal itself is prefixed by a vignette of a horned devil. Perhaps, Lessing adds—before concluding with a brief disclaimer and a renewed expression of his grief—this proposal was prophetic.

These are bizarre comments for a memorial tribute, and Kästner drily observed that anyone who had edited the works of Horace as Lessing edited those of Mylius would have brought down a batch of 'vindications' on his head.[87] And not just what Lessing says, but what he omits to say, is extraordinarily ungenerous. Of his own relationship with Mylius, he says only 'I was one of his closest friends for a number of years'. There is no mention of family ties, of Mylius' introducing him to journalism, of those periodicals such as *Der Naturforscher* in which he published many of Lessing's works, of their collaboration on the BPZ and Mylius' assumption of the review editorship to allow Lessing to study in Wittenberg, of his introducing him to Caroline Neuber and the Leipzig stage, of his hospitality towards him when he first arrived in Berlin and his recommendation of him to various employers[88]—in short, of his decisive and largely positive influence on Lessing's formative years. It has often been argued that Lessing wished to dissociate himself from Mylius to enhance his own career prospects.[89] This may well have reinforced his wish to do so, but it is too out of character to have been his principal motive,

[83] Kästner to L., October or November 1754. [84] Tagebuch Part 7 (1787) 148.
[85] Cf. A Letter to Mr. Richard Glover. On the Occasion of his Tragedy of Boadicia, by Crisp Mills, London 1754 (British Library); see also Monthly Review 10 (1754) 74.
[86] Mylius, ed. GEL (1754) 280–91. [87] To L., October or November 1754.
[88] See also Krätzer 516. [89] Cf. for example Schmidt I, 245; Consentius (1900) 79.

for no such considerations had deterred him from publishing trenchant criticisms of Jöcher, Lange, and Gottsched or of prominent members of Frederick's entourage. More plausible is the suggestion that, in distancing himself from Mylius, Lessing was distancing himself from aspects of his own past, and from that day-to-day existence without thought for the future which had proved Mylius' undoing.[90] This may indeed be so, but it is also true that, well before Mylius' death, he had taken decisive steps to establish himself as a scholar and writer of literary works of a different calibre from Mylius' journalistic ephemera; four volumes of his collected works already testified to the success of these efforts.

Lessing's contempt for Mylius' literary productions and for the Gottschedian school which inspired them accounts for at least some of the animus behind his preface. But it does not explain it fully. There is an anger in the preface reminiscent of his polemical writings, an anger which can only be explained by a feeling that his friend had personally offended him or let him down. The same sharp wording with reference to his late colleague is evident in another work of around the same date, namely his preface to the *Theatrical Library*, in which he speaks of his decision 'to distance myself at the first opportunity from an associate [Mylius] who might further disfigure the execution of my project' (i.e. their jointly edited *Contributions* of 1750).[91] In the preface to Mylius' works, his moral indignation is evident when he condemns *The Soothsayer* as a *chronique scandaleuse*: 'The writing is slovenly, the morality base, the jokes are vulgar and the satire is insulting.'[92] Those who were able to study this periodical closely (most issues of it are now lost) describe this verdict as extreme and unjust,[93] and we are again left wondering why Lessing reacted so vehemently. The likeliest explanation is that, after years of defending Mylius against his father's moral strictures, he felt personally betrayed: Mylius had died in ignominious circumstances after abusing the trust of numerous people, giving the lie to Lessing's repeated protestations of his integrity. It is a curious fact that, on the same day on which he wrote his sheepish letter to Kästner on the Mylius edition (in French, to conceal his embarrassment), he also wrote to Michaelis in Göttingen, including in his brief description of his own career and background an unprecedented, and not strictly relevant, tribute to his father: 'What praise I would bestow on him if he were not my father!'[94] The old man had been right after all.

As his lingering affection for his early mentor was gradually outweighed by contempt for his writings, resentment at the damage he had done to both their reputations, and anger that his own confidence in him had been so badly misplaced, the edition became a means not so much of commemorating as of exorcizing Mylius' memory and that part of the past which the two had shared. His claim to Kästner that his acerbic preface was designed 'de sauver les Manes de Mylius de la honte'—to save him the shame of having his poetry praised by Gottsched—is patently hollow, for Gottsched knew very well that Mylius had long ago deserted his cause. Just as Lessing's edition of his own writings marked the end of his early development

[90] Krätzer 520. [91] LM VI, 4. [92] LM VI, 401.
[93] Consentius (1900) 63 and 74; cf. Trillmich 97. [94] To Michaelis, 16 October 1754.

and the beginning of a new phase, so did his edition of Mylius' writings draw a line under a once important relationship: both enterprises were, in a sense, rites of passage. Never again would he let himself be so dependent on another person as he had once been on Mylius. He kept none of his letters, and he no doubt wished to forget him. But his actions less than two years later suggest that he had not succeeded in doing so; and it will be seen in due course how Mylius' fate, through a projected tragedy which it prompted Lessing to work on, had remarkable indirect consequences for German literature.[95]

Mylius' death caused Lessing to reassess the position of the freelance writer in Germany, and his bitter and pessimistic conclusions in the preface to Mylius' works apply as much to himself as to his late friend. For those without private means who could not accept the loss of freedom which a career in church or university entailed, some compromise with commercial publishing was inevitable. This usually meant writing for periodical publications which yielded a regular income, but this in turn made it difficult or impossible to write on the topics or in the manner one wished. Lessing reflects on this dilemma in his letters of 16 October 1754 to Kästner and Michaelis, both of whom held university posts. He says to Kästner of his latest journalistic venture, the *Theatrical Library* (which aimed, like the earlier *Contributions*, to combine scholarly discussion of theatre history with appeal to a non-specialist audience):[96]

> You will see that it is the work of someone who is an author half by inclination and half by necessity. What am I to do? I could not possibly study at my own expense, so I am trying to study at the expense of the public.

With his studies at Wittenberg and his work on Horace still fresh in his mind, he is drawn more in the direction of historical scholarship than of creative writing. (Six months later, he even seems to have contemplated applying for a post at the newly established University of Moscow.)[97] His mood is one of resignation, and he writes as follows to Michaelis of his present position and prospects in Berlin:

> I look for no advancement here, and I am living here simply because I cannot live in any other large community [...] What lies ahead I have left in the hands of providence. I find it hard to imagine that anyone could be more indifferent to the future than I am.

Lessing writes here with unusual openness to someone he has never met, because it was Michaelis, in his favourable review of the first two volumes of Lessing's *Writings*,[98] who had given him the kind of encouragement whose absence he had lamented in his account of Mylius' development. Significantly, he seems now to have given up hope of official recognition in Berlin; this confirms that his harsh judgements on Mylius were not motivated primarily by a desire to enhance his own career prospects.

[95] See Ch. 13, pp. 406–8 below. [96] B XI/1, 739.
[97] See L. to J. G. Lessing, 11 April 1755. [98] B II, 1184–8.

As his celebrity increased with the publication of his *Writings*, Lessing's personal relationships took a turn for the better. Karl Lessing reports that his father, on hearing his son's works praised in influential circles in Dresden, could no longer conceal his delight: he no longer condemned the theatre as such, but only the behaviour of some of those associated with it.[99] This more positive attitude towards his son is evident in his decision to send one of his younger sons, the sixteen-year-old Gottlob Samuel, to continue his schooling in Berlin under Lessing's supervision;[100] and there is no suggestion that he held Lessing responsible when the experiment failed and the boy was transferred to a more authoritarian establishment in Halle. Several other friendships which Lessing formed around this time were also the direct or indirect result of his growing celebrity. Johann Georg Sulzer, the Swiss philosopher from Bodmer's circle who taught mathematics at the Joachimsthal Gymnasium and became an influential figure in the Academy after his election in 1750, followed Lessing's progress in 1754 and made his acquaintance in the following year.[101] The relationship was never close, but Sulzer's support for the Wolffian cause against Maupertuis, and his interest in aesthetics—he would eventually publish a major reference work on that subject—gave him common ground with Lessing and his immediate associates, with whom he remained on fairly cordial terms until the late 1750s. Karl Wilhelm Ramler, teacher of belles-lettres at the Military College (*Kadettenschule*) since 1748 and a Prussian patriot, also sought Lessing out and gained his friendship in 1755.[102] Ramler's own poetry, much admired in its own time—not least for its patriotic sentiments—had little originality and was distinguished mainly for its elegant facility and formal correctness. But Ramler shared Lessing's interest in older German poetry, and the two would jointly edit a collection of epigrams by the baroque poet Friedrich von Logau, which appeared in 1759. He was himself a keen anthologist, and he 'corrected' the works of earlier poets in a ruthless manner to bring them into line with contemporary taste, publishing them without attribution in a series of larger collections. Though Lessing never approached earlier literature in so unhistorical a manner, he defended his friend's procedure on at least one occasion, and he was happy to let him edit and amend his own early poetry, in which he now had little interest, for a new edition in 1771.[103]

The closest of Lessing's Berlin friendships, which lasted for the rest of his life, was with the Jewish philosopher Moses Mendelssohn,[104] who was born in Dessau near Wittenberg in the same year as himself; his father was Mendel Heymann, scribe and secretary to the local Jewish community. Given his obviously high intelligence, the boy received an early training in Hebrew and Talmudic studies, and was before long able to immerse himself in the Judaeo-Arabic philosophy of the

[99] KGL 93.
[100] Ibid. 97; Karl Lessing wrongly gives Gottlob Samuel's age as fourteen: see Hildebrandt (1982) 94 for the correct age.
[101] D 66–8 and 84; Harnack 451; Oehlke I, 247; van der Zande *passim*.
[102] D 60–1 and 96; E. Schmidt I, 247–8; Capua *passim*.
[103] Capua 367; GEL: Sämtliche Gedichte, ed. Grimm, 247–8.
[104] On the following see Altmann (1973) 3–40.

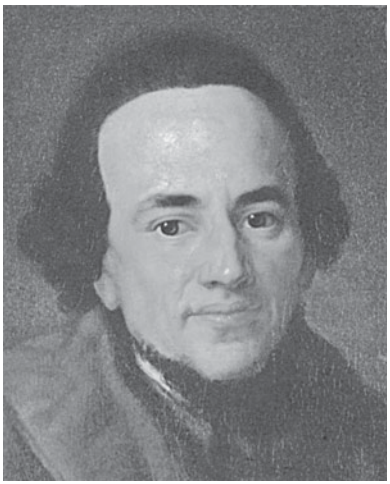

Fig. 12. Moses Mendelssohn, painting by Anton Graff.

Middle Ages. In 1743, he followed his teacher, the Rabbi David Fränkel, to Berlin, where he was known at first as 'Moses of Dessau', and to Lessing and his friends simply as 'Herr Moses'; he later adopted the German-style surname of Mendelssohn. He soon formed a wish to study modern philosophy, but first had to master the necessary languages. Gumpertz, who befriended him, helped him initially with French and English, and after some elementary tuition in Latin, he mastered that language with the aid of a dictionary and a Latin edition of Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*; private lessons in Greek followed later. Although he spoke German fluently, it was not his mother tongue, and he still needed help with the written language when he composed his first published works. In all of these respects, the example of Gumpertz was of crucial importance, for the secular European education which Mendelssohn now acquired represented a radical break with Jewish tradition.

Since he was without private means, the young Mendelssohn had to rely on the hospitality of his co-religionists, supplemented by a modest income earned by copying Fränkel's manuscripts, to see him through his initial years in Berlin. In 1750, he became house-tutor to the family of the silk manufacturer Isaak Bernhard, whose firm he subsequently served as accountant and eventually as manager and partner; he was able to marry in 1762 and raise a family. Like other Jews who lived among the German community—there was no ghetto in Berlin—he and his family suffered not only the official discrimination described earlier (see Chapter 2 above), but also the public abuse to which the ordinary populace routinely subjected the Jews on account of their distinctive customs and appearance.[105] Mendelssohn himself stood out not only as a bearded man in a beardless age, but also for his diminutive stature, for his spine was severely deformed by childhood

[105] See Hermsdorf 96; Stern 392.

illness. He bore the daily insults with philosophical fortitude, and soon earned the respect of his eminent contemporaries for his abilities as a philosopher—he won the Academy's essay prize in 1763—and later for the dignity with which he defended his religion against the importunities of the Christian proselytizer Lavater. So successfully did he emancipate himself that his children and grandchildren moved easily in distinguished German society: his daughter Brendel, now known as Dorothea, obtained a divorce from her Jewish husband[106] (her father, fortunately, was by then no longer alive) and married Friedrich Schlegel, with whom she converted to Catholicism and was elevated to the aristocracy, and one of his grandsons was the composer Felix Mendelssohn-Bartholdy.

Lessing first met Mendelssohn, to whom he was introduced by Gumpertz, early in 1754,[107] and the two were soon close friends. Noting Mendelssohn's philosophical interests, Lessing drew his attention to Shaftesbury's dialogues *The Moralists*, and encouraged him, when he expressed his admiration for the dialogue form, to try his hand at writing dialogues himself. The result was the *Philosophical Dialogues* (*Philosophische Gespräche*) of 1755, which Lessing secretly arranged to have published as a surprise for his friend.[108] He likewise assisted him with his second major work, the letters *On the Sentiments* (*Über die Empfindungen*), also published in 1755,[109] and saw to it that both works were favourably reviewed in the BPZ. The treatise *Pope a Metaphysician!*, published anonymously in that same year, was jointly written by the two friends. In short, Lessing took decisive steps to launch Mendelssohn's career as a writer, and Mendelssohn expressed his enduring gratitude to him in the *Epistle to Lessing* (1756) which he appended to his translation and edition of Rousseau's second discourse, another enterprise undertaken at Lessing's suggestion.[110] The benefits of this friendship were nevertheless by no means one-sided. Lessing's interest in philosophy, and in aesthetic theory in particular, was greatly stimulated by his conversations and correspondence with Mendelssohn. It was in his correspondence with Mendelssohn and Nicolai that he first developed his distinctive theory of tragedy, and without Mendelssohn's detailed criticism and systematic rigour, it is unlikely that he would ever have completed the published version of *Laocoön*, his main contribution to aesthetics; he might also have made more progress with the planned continuation of that work if his consultations with Mendelssohn had not been interrupted by his move to Hamburg in 1767.

Lessing's encounter with Mendelssohn took place at a decisive moment in the development of German philosophy. The death of Wolff in 1754, the continued presence of the eclectic tradition inherited from the previous century, and the influx of French and English ideas by way of the Berlin Academy and the translation industry all left scope for a shift towards the sceptical and empirical traditions of western Europe and away from the rationalism of Leibniz and Wolff. But one of the effects of the Academy quarrel was to provoke a strong reaction in favour of the latter tradition, which proved remarkably resilient and durable: even after the

[106] Altmann (1973) 724–5. [107] D 62; Altmann (1973) 36.
[108] Mendelssohn JA I, 1–39; Altmann (1973) 38; D 85. [109] JA I, 41–123.
[110] JA II, 81–109; see also Altmann (1973) 48–50.

advent of Kant's critical philosophy, elements of Leibniz's philosophy survived well into the Romantic era. The rationalist influence was strongest in metaphysics and ontology, and in a modified form (through the work of Baumgarten and his followers) in aesthetics, whereas French and English influences were more readily accepted in ethics and psychology. In these respects, Mendelssohn's philosophical writings are typical of their time, and they incorporate many of the elements subsequently encountered in Lessing's philosophical thinking.

As the above account indicates, Mendelssohn's philosophy is for the most part derivative, and its originality consists rather in its recombination of existing ideas than in the invention of new ones. In the years before he met Lessing, Mendelssohn seems to have undergone a period of radical doubt as his philosophical enquiries led him from ancient Jewish wisdom to the rival modern systems of Lockean empiricism and German rationalism;[111] his eventual solution was to combine elements of all three. In aesthetics in particular, he would draw freely on Shaftesbury, Burke, and other English writers and on French theorists such as Du Bos, accommodating their findings within the metaphysical framework of Wolff and Baumgarten; and in his lifelong attempts to reconcile Judaism with Enlightenment thought, the rational optimism of Leibniz and Wolff supplied a philosophical underpinning for his faith in God, divine providence, and the pursuit of virtue—all the more so since the natural religion which these philosophers taught seemed to him to accord more closely with Judaism than with the mysteries of Christianity. At the same time, he felt a strong affinity to Spinoza, whose Jewish background and rationalist principles were akin to his own, and one of the chief aims of his first published work, the *Philosophical Dialogues*, was to show that Leibniz's philosophy has more in common with that of Spinoza than is commonly realized. (Some three decades later, Friedrich Jacobi would turn this argument against Leibniz and Mendelssohn himself.) Lessing's serious interest in Spinoza probably dates from his discussions of these matters with Mendelssohn in 1754 and 1755. And finally, that animus against French superficiality and hedonism which runs through Lessing's writings of those years is also prominent in Mendelssohn's early works;[112] for both of them, it is the obverse of a renewed commitment to rational optimism.

Thanks to his association with Lessing—and also with Sulzer, to whom Lessing introduced him—Mendelssohn developed a strong interest in aesthetics. That this extended before long to literature and to literary theory and criticism was largely the work of Friedrich Nicolai, whose interests lay predominantly in that area. Mendelssohn was introduced to Nicolai—again by Lessing—in the early part of 1755,[113] and when Lessing left Berlin for Leipzig in the following October, Nicolai soon drew their common friend into his own literary circles, which included a new coffeehouse society—less exclusive than the Monday Club referred to above—established towards the end of that year for informal learned discussion.[114] As a result, Mendelssohn became a regular reviewer of literary as well as philosophical works for the successive periodicals which Nicolai established, and along with

[111] Cf. Altmann (1973) 28–30. [112] Ibid. 30.
[113] Ibid. 65; cf. D 71. [114] Ibid. 74–5.

Fig. 13. Friedrich Nicolai, painting by Anton Graff.

Nicolai, he was soon able to participate in Lessing's discussions of literature and literary theory. This, however, lies outside the period covered by this chapter, which will now consider Nicolai himself and his friendship with Lessing during the latter's remaining years in Berlin.

Friedrich Nicolai, the younger brother of Gottlob Samuel Nicolai whom Lessing had met in Wittenberg, was born in Berlin in 1733. After attending schools in Berlin and Halle, where he received a grounding in the classics, he was apprenticed to a bookseller in Frankfurt an der Oder at the age of sixteen and received no further formal education. Like Mendelssohn, he was essentially an autodidact, and he taught himself English, philosophy, and numerous other subjects, augmenting his knowledge in Frankfurt by associating with students and eavesdropping on some of A. G. Baumgarten's lectures on logic and aesthetics.[115] Always touchy about his lack of formal training, he liked to dismiss academic theorizing as 'pedantry'; but what he lacked in intellectual discipline, he made up for by extensive reading, and he in due course amassed a library of 16,000 volumes, the largest private collection in Berlin.[116]

In 1752, he returned to that city, and when his father died soon afterwards, he for a time helped his elder brother Gottfried Wilhelm to run the family's bookselling business. But as his own reading and work as a critic made increasing demands on his attention, he withdrew from the book trade in 1756 to live on his modest inheritance. When his brother died two years later, however, he felt obliged to abandon this independent existence and took over the family firm. He was gifted with exceptional energy and commercial acumen, and the business expanded rapidly, with branches in Stettin and Danzig; he became Catherine the Great's main supplier of books in Germany.[117] His periodicals, devoted mainly to reviews and

[115] Möller 9–20; Engel (1983) 9–12. [116] Möller 22–5. [117] Raabe (1983) 67.

criticism, attained national importance, and his *Allgemeine deutsche Bibliothek* (*Universal German Library*), which he himself edited, ran from 1765 to 1805 and was for most of that time the leading review journal in the German language: in its first three decades, it came close to reviewing all German books of any significance (over 80,000 in all), and its contributors included many of the foremost writers of the age.[118] As a publisher, Nicolai was no less successful. Apart from the *Allgemeine deutsche Bibliothek*, his firm published well over a thousand titles,[119] specializing in popular literature, translations from French and English, and works on practical and useful knowledge, in keeping with Nicolai's own dedication to popular welfare and social improvement.[120] He was himself the firm's leading author, publishing some forty-five of his own works and editions on literary, historical, biographical, and topographical subjects, as well as several satirical novels. He became extremely rich, and his splendid mansion in the Brüderstrasse became a centre of social and cultural life in Berlin in the later 1780s.[121] The honorary doctorate and membership of the Berlin, Munich, and St Petersburg Academies which were bestowed on him in later years were by no means undeserved. He had, however, the misfortune to outlive his wife and all of his eight children, but he continued to run his business through personal and national adversity until he died in 1811, thirty years after Lessing.

Though Nicolai's greatest fame and influence date from a time after his contact with Lessing had virtually ceased—and indeed from after Lessing's death—his reputation in literary and intellectual circles during his last twenty years, and thereafter with posterity, is so negative that it is difficult to see beyond it to his personality as Lessing first knew it. This task is made no easier by the fact that the older Nicolai liked to discourse on his early friendship with Lessing from the perspective of his later years. His early strengths, which did not desert him as he grew older, tended to compound rather than to counteract his weaknesses. He was direct to the point of bluntness, energetic, self-assured, practical, a brilliant organizer, and devoted to liberal and enlightened causes, especially to those likely to yield tangible benefits for the populace at large (in short, to what was already known as *Volksaufklärung*). He was at the same time short on imagination, impatient with abstraction, and increasingly inclined to assess everything by narrowly moral and utilitarian criteria. His consequent inability to comprehend such new developments as the philosophy of Kant and German idealism, and that belief in the autonomy of art to which the Storm and Stress movement, Weimar classicism, and the German Romantics all in different ways subscribed, would have done little harm if he had kept it to himself. Instead, he became ever more dogmatic and self-righteous, ridiculing and satirizing Goethe's *Werther*, Herder's collections of folksongs, Friedrich Schlegel's *Lucinde*, and other literary works of major importance.[122] And he felt equally justified, in his homespun belief in the self-evidence of rational common sense, in pouring scorn on the epistemologies of Kant, Fichte, and Schelling, dismissing them as 'scholasticism' and declaring that he belonged

[118] Ibid. 64. [119] Hermsdorf 103. [120] See Raabe (1983) 77–82.
[121] See Hermsdorf 100; Raabe (1983) 84. [122] See Möller 40; Albrecht (1989) 9–12.

'to no philosophical school but that of truth'.[123] In short, his own philosophy, such as it was, was grounded only in an unreflecting faith in its own correctness.[124] It is therefore little wonder that his satires were returned to him with interest by people whose verdicts were likely to command enduring respect, such as Goethe, Schiller, and Fichte; and his denunciations of Catholicism and Jesuit subversion in his widely read *Tour through Germany and Switzerland in 1781* served to aggravate that antipathy towards all things Prussian which the Silesian wars had already generated in Austria and the Catholic territories of southern Germany.[125]

Unperturbed by this opposition, Nicolai stuck to his principles to the end. For all his reading—and his vast correspondence and ever more demanding business duties left him less and less time for that—his mind ceased to develop in the 1760s, and he lived on to perpetuate a fossilized image of the popular Enlightenment as he had known it in his youth. He did more than any other individual to give the German Enlightenment a bad name, especially in Germany.[126] But the blustering philistinism which he came to represent—Heine was among the few to speak well of him[127]—is far removed from the *Aufklärung*'s most creative and original achievements, not least from those of Lessing himself, whose views on knowledge, religion, and the course of human history soon left those of Nicolai behind. The gap between the two was such that, soon after 1770, Lessing ceased to inform Nicolai of his developing views, knowing in advance what his uncomprehending reactions would be.[128] But by that time, Nicolai himself was no longer the lively young man who, in collaboration with Lessing and Mendelssohn, had made his most valuable contributions to literary criticism and theory in the 1750s.

Lessing introduced himself to Nicolai towards the end of 1754,[129] after Voss had drawn his attention to the proofs of an anonymous work by the hitherto unknown young bookseller entitled *Letters Concerning the Present State of Belles-Lettres in Germany* (*Briefe über den itzigen Zustand der schönen Wissenschaften in Deutschland*), published by Voss in the following year.[130] The signed preface to the work was by Nicolai's brother Gottlob Samuel, who, still smarting from his disastrous involvement in the Lange affair and uneasily aware of his younger brother's admiration for Lessing, says little about his brother's work and covers his own back by extolling the aesthetic theories of his colleagues G. F. Meier of Halle and A. G. Baumgarten of Frankfurt an der Oder, the first of whom had been criticized by Lessing during the previous year.[131] Lessing was favourably impressed by the work itself, however, for it is very much in accord with his own views. But whereas his own opinions on German literature had hitherto been expressed in piecemeal form (for the most part in reviews), Nicolai addresses the current situation as a whole, identifying the strengths and weaknesses of the most prominent writers. His aim,

[123] Möller 20. [124] Cf. Schmidt-Biggemann (1983) *passim*.
[125] Möller 33–4. [126] Cf. Vierhaus (1983) 95; Raabe (1983) 65.
[127] Heine, Gesamtausgabe VIII/1, 68–70 (Zur Geschichte der Religion und Philosophie in Deutschland, Bk. 2).
[128] Cf. Steinmetz (ed., 1969) 34. [129] D 69–71.
[130] Nicolai, Sämtliche Werke III, 53–160. [131] LM V, 80; cf. Möller 37.

like that of Lessing and Gottsched before him, is to find ways of raising the standard of German literature to a level comparable with that of France and England.

Nicolai's central thesis is that the progress of German literature has been hindered rather than helped by schools and rules, which have encouraged bias and mutual congratulation within the schools in question, sterile squabbles between them, and adherence to poetic dogmas and mechanical formulas to the detriment of individual creativity. The schools he has in mind, of course, are those of Gottsched and the Swiss; and like Lessing, he criticizes them equally harshly and dissociates himself from both. He sees criticism itself as the main agent of progress, declaring that 'precise and healthy criticism is the only means of preserving and defining good taste'.[132] But Nicolai's own criticism is not systematic, and it lacks that theoretical basis which would eventually underpin that of Lessing. It is practical and confined largely to matters of style and diction (not unlike Lessing's close analysis of passages from Klopstock's *Messiah*), and within these limits, it is often well founded and incisive: in Bodmer's epics on Noah and the Flood, for example, Nicolai castigates awkward hexameters, imprecise and stilted turns of phrase, inept metaphors, provincialisms, and other faults of register, rightly concluding that the overall effect is unpoetic, and that the content, as Bodmer conceives of it, is more appropriate to homiletics or scriptural commentary than to the verse epic.

Lessing's influence is obvious throughout the work, from the letter form in which it is cast to individual turns of phrase and mannerisms (such as the condemnation of 'schoolboy howlers').[133] Lessing is explicitly praised on several occasions, as is Klopstock,[134] and the section on drama, with its praise of the English, its criticism of Gottsched and the French, and its demands for more realistic characters and acting reads like a pastiche of Lessing's recent writing on the theatre.[135] Not surprisingly, some readers assumed that Lessing himself was the author.[136] But there are also insights which reflect an independent perspective. Nicolai rightly comments that lack of patronage (which Lessing was fond of lamenting) is not enough to explain the lack of creativity among German writers. Wider sociological and commercial factors are involved, such as a lack of central institutions for public debate and for the formation of national opinion and taste, as encountered in Paris and London: 'Germany is too extended, and governed by too diverse rulers, for the taste of one city to be able to shape that of the rest.'[137] Only rigorous and impartial criticism on a national scale, through the public forum of the press (and here, the bookseller Nicolai senses an expanding market), can rectify the deficiency.[138] Nicolai's criticism cannot compare with Lessing's in concentrated forcefulness and precision, but he does have a sufficiently distinct point of view to qualify not just as a disciple of Lessing but as a potential ally.[139] His *Letters*, along with Mendelssohn's theoretical contributions and Lessing's capacity to show the way by poetic innovation as well as by critical insight, laid the basis for

[132] Nicolai, Sämtliche Werke III, 89–100 and 136–43.
[133] Ibid. III, 80, 101, etc. [134] Ibid. III, 104, 108, 116, 143, 157.
[135] Ibid. III, 118–21. [136] Möller 79. [137] Nicolai, Sämtliche Werke III, 154–7.
[138] Ibid. 149–52 and 156–7. [139] Cf. Möller 67–8.

that tripartite collaboration which would culminate in the *Letters Concerning Recent Literature* (*Briefe, die neueste Literatur betreffend*), published by Nicolai between 1759 and 1765.

A recurrent topic in the discussions of the three friends, and an increasingly prominent feature of Lessing's own writings during the 1750s, is the literature and thought of Great Britain.[140] This growing interest in British culture as an alternative to that of France was by no means confined to Lessing's circle. It is the product of a widespread belief, or indeed prejudice, to the effect that the cultures of Britain and France are fundamentally opposed and incompatible, a prejudice which, ironically enough, was first given currency by French or French-speaking writers. In the wake of the settlement of 1688, Britain became associated, in the eyes of many continental observers, first with political freedom and subsequently also with freedom from oppressive rules and conventions in society and the arts in general. This image was developed by, among others, the Swiss traveller Béat Louis de Muralt in his *Lettres sur les Anglais et les Français* of 1725, a work which was well received in Germany, and given more memorable (and greatly simplified) expression in Voltaire's *Lettres anglaises* of 1734. The cult of English freedom took firmer hold when Montesquieu lauded the virtues of the British constitution in *L'Esprit des lois* of 1748, and by the 1750s, it had become a commonplace. In Prussia in particular, it received an extra boost when, in January 1756, Frederick II and George II of England entered into a military alliance directed primarily against France, an alliance which lasted throughout the Seven Years War.

The popularity of English literature likewise rose steadily in Germany as the Swiss critics, with their defence of the free poetic imagination as exemplified by Milton and other English writers, drove Gottsched and his school into an ever more rigid and backward-looking adherence to French classical poetics, despite the fact that the translation of Addison's *Spectator* by Gottsched's own wife Luise (1739–43) probably did more than all the exhortations of Bodmer and Breitinger to popularize English literature.[141] Even before he met Lessing, the young Nicolai, for example, had immersed himself in the main English writers, and his first critical work was a defence of Milton against accusations, which Gottsched supported, that Milton's *Paradise Lost* was in large measure plagiarized from Latin sources;[142] a few years later, he would contribute a 'History of the English Stage' to Lessing's periodical the *Theatrical Library*.[143] And although Mendelssohn's interests were primarily philosophical rather than literary, his intellectual development, as already noted, likewise owed a great deal to English writers such as Locke, Shaftesbury, and Burke.

One of the many English works which Lessing studied during the 1750s was William Hogarth's *Analysis of Beauty*. Mylius had translated this work into German during his last months in London, meeting Hogarth himself on several occasions and seeking his advice on the translation; he arranged for it to be published by the

[140] See Danzel/Guhrauer I, 278–86; Michelsen (1990g), esp. 285–9; Nisbet (2002) *passim*.
[141] Cf. Paulin (1998). [142] Möller 18–19; Nicolai, Sämtliche Werke III, 7–51.
[143] See LM VI, 249 n. 1.

London bookseller Andreas Linde, and the German edition appeared in London and Hanover soon after his death in March 1754.[144] Since the price, as fixed in Britain, was high by German standards, Lessing at once persuaded Voss to issue a cheaper second edition, and himself supplied the preface.[145] After sharp criticisms of Mylius' translation, some of whose errors he says he has corrected, he turns to Hogarth's work itself, which he regards as a significant contribution to aesthetics. For Hogarth's attempt, using diagrams of wavy and 'serpentine' lines, to furnish an objective definition of visual beauty addresses a problem which exercised numerous German thinkers from Baumgarten and Winckelmann to Kant and Schiller. Like Mendelssohn in his letters *On the Sentiments* of 1755, Lessing clings to the Wolffian definition of beauty as a sensuous manifestation of perfection, and he notes its affinity with some of Hogarth's observations.[146] But while he accepts that Hogarth's 'line of beauty' and 'line of grace' are aesthetically pleasing, he objects that Hogarth furnishes no criterion for determining the mathematical limits beyond which the curves of such lines cease to be beautiful, and that he fails to explain why curves within such limits are beautiful in the first place. Lessing continued to reflect on the nature of beautiful forms over the next ten years, and returned to the problem of defining them, and to Hogarth's attempts to do so, in his *Laocoön* of 1766.[147]

Another English writer is the subject of the treatise which Lessing and Mendelssohn jointly composed in 1754, namely *Pope a Metaphysician!* (*Pope ein Metaphysiker!*).[148] The choice of Pope as the subject was not, however, their own, but that of Maupertuis and the Berlin Academy, which in 1753 had announced the following topic (translated here from the original French) for the essay prize of 1755:[149]

> Entrants are required to examine the system of Pope as contained in the proposition 'Whatever is, is right'. They should (1) determine the true sense of this proposition in accordance with the author's hypothesis; (2) compare it with the system of optimism, or the choice of the best, in order to define precisely the affinities and differences between the two; and finally (3) specify the grounds which they consider most appropriate for demonstrating or refuting this system.

Lessing and Mendelssohn addressed this topic not because it involved Pope and English literature, but because it raised one of the most hotly debated issues of the Enlightenment, namely the problem of optimism.

The debate on optimism was a Europe-wide phenomenon in the 1750s, in which Voltaire, Kant, Samuel Johnson, and many others participated. Thanks to Voltaire's *Candide*, it is often associated with the Lisbon earthquake, but in Germany at least, the debate was in full swing before that event took place: Lessing's and Mendelssohn's treatise, for example, appeared several weeks before the catastrophe of 1 November 1755 struck the Portuguese capital. The essay

[144] See Mylius, Tagebuch Part 7 (1987) 114, 120–1, 130; also PO XXI, 327 and L's review in LM V, 405–7.
[145] LM V, 368–72.
[146] LM V, 371; cf. Mendelssohn JA I, 58–60 and 85–8.
[147] LM IX, 137–8.
[148] LM VI, 409–45.
[149] B III, 1347–8.

competition of that year in fact marks the last phase of the quarrel between Maupertuis and his adherents in the Berlin Academy and the followers of Leibniz and Wolff. The former group regarded all natural phenomena as the effects of mechanically operating natural causes, and hence as morally neutral, whereas the latter argued that, however senseless or destructive they might appear, all such phenomena nevertheless contribute to a benign and rational purpose within the divinely ordained whole. A third option, adopted in Germany by a handful of Christian fideists such as Hamann and Friedrich Jacobi (although it is also compatible with the deism to which Maupertuis and Voltaire subscribed), is to declare that the workings of the divine mind are inscrutable, so that any divine purpose served by earthquakes and the like is beyond our comprehension. The conflict between the first two groups was bound from the start to be inconclusive, because each was talking about something different, namely efficient (or natural) causes on the one hand and final causes on the other. And since efficient causes may simultaneously embody a final cause (or 'sufficient reason', in Leibnizian parlance), no amount of natural disasters (or, for that matter, human crimes) of the kind enumerated by Voltaire in *Candide* can rule out the operation of a higher, beneficent design as envisaged by the optimists. But given that ridicule is often a more powerful weapon than logic, a list of such disasters may well make the optimists appear foolish—especially if they claim to know what the higher design is.

The position of Maupertuis was supported by Euler and various others in the Berlin Academy, but in Germany at large, Wolffianism was by now the dominant philosophy, especially in the universities. In Königsberg, for example, the precritical Kant defended the Wolffian position in his *Some Tentative Reflections on Optimism* (*Versuch einiger Betrachtungen über den Optimismus*, 1759), declaring:[150]

> A supremely perfect world is possible because it is real, and it is real because it was a product of the wisest and most benevolent decision [...] Since God chose this world alone among all the possible worlds he knew, he must have considered it the best, and since his judgement is infallible, it is indeed the best.

No empirical evidence can refute this logically impeccable argument, because it is based on an a priori assumption. For those who accept this assumption, any display of pessimism, misanthropy, or the like must consequently be interpreted (as it regularly was by Lessing) as an ephemeral delusion, a product of melancholy or depression rather than a serious metaphysical proposition. This helps to account for the remarkable durability of metaphysical optimism, which survived the onslaught of Kant's critical philosophy and the horrors of the French Revolution among many who grew up with it (Herder's later writings and Goethe's *Faust* are cases in point). Subsequent generations were, of course, less sanguine, and the later Kant, in his essay *On the Failure of All Philosophical Essays in Theodicy* (*Über das Mißlingen aller philosophischen Versuche in der Theodicee*, 1791), voiced an opinion more characteristic of the post-Revolutionary era when he declared that any theodicy, such as that to which Leibniz first applied the name, must be a

[150] Kant AA II, 33–4.

matter of religious faith and moral conviction rather than of philosophical demonstration.[151]

Such was the wider context of Lessing's and Mendelssohn's treatise. No manuscripts survive, so that it is impossible to determine which parts of the work (which is written in the first person singular) were composed by whom. But on the evidence of style and echoes of earlier works, it is generally accepted that Lessing wrote the preface, the opening disquisition on the difference between poets and philosophers, and probably the concluding section on Pope's philosophical sources, whereas the three central sections, which systematically address the three points enumerated in the Academy's question, are the work of Mendelssohn.[152] The treatise was more or less complete by the end of 1754, in time to meet the Academy's deadline for submission by 1 January 1755, but Lessing decided at the last moment not to submit it. Instead, he arranged for the work to be published anonymously in Danzig, where it appeared in the autumn of that year.

From the start, the whole tendency of the treatise is not so much to answer the Academy's question as to demonstrate the impossibility of providing a satisfactory answer. In his initial discussion of the difference between poets and philosophers, Lessing argues that their aims, and the media they employ, are necessarily and fundamentally different. Echoing his *Vindications of Horace* of the previous year, he maintains that the poet, *qua* poet, cannot and should not expound a philosophical system (in the sense of a coherent and logically organized body of doctrines).[153] He thereby implies that any comparison of writers as different as the poet Pope and the philosopher Leibniz (to whose *Theodicy* of 1710 the 'system of optimism' mentioned in the Academy's question plainly refers) will be of doubtful value. Admittedly, Lessing and Mendelssohn were not alone in drawing attention to the difference in medium involved in the required comparison: some of those who submitted entries to the competition also did so.[154] But whereas the latter merely wished to imply that this difference made the comparison difficult, Lessing goes further and declares that those didactic poems such as Lucretius' *De rerum natura* which do expound a philosophical system are not poetry at all, but versified philosophy.[155] This observation (borrowed from Aristotle's *Poetics*, in which Empedocles' philosophical verse is dismissed as unpoetic) cannot be intended to apply to those didactic poems where poetic qualities take precedence over the requirements of philosophical exposition, as Lessing and Mendelssohn clearly believe is the case with Pope's *Essay on Man*. Nevertheless, the distinction is drawn with unusual sharpness, and the rest of the treatise confirms that the two authors are concerned above all to maximize the differences, in both form and substance, between the works of Pope and Leibniz.

In the three central sections, Mendelssohn first extracts a series of metaphysical propositions from Pope's poem, such as his belief in the best of possible worlds, the

[151] Ibid. VIII, 255–71 (esp. 266–7).

[152] Cf. PO XXIII, 961; Leo Strauss in Mendelssohn JA II, xx; Altmann (1973) 46; Michelsen (1990h) 46.

[153] LM VI, 417; cf. V, 298–9. [154] PO XXIII, 963. [155] LM VI, 415.

interrelatedness of all things, the scale of being, the essential role of man in the cosmic hierarchy, and the insignificance of partial evil in relation to universal good. Although Mendelssohn does not say so, nearly all of these propositions were commonplaces of the time, to be found not just in Pope, Leibniz, and others referred to in the treatise such as Shaftesbury and King, but also in a multitude of other writers working within the Platonic tradition.[156] He proceeds instead to compare them, as required by the question, with their nearest equivalents in Leibniz's thought, making every effort to discover differences between the two, and he finally examines their philosophical cogency, claiming to discover a number of inconsistencies and contradictions among them.[157] One is again left with the impression that the authors are scraping together as many differences as possible between Pope and Leibniz, even at the expense of distorting the facts, in order to bolster their contention that a good poet cannot be a good philosopher and vice versa.

One example of this procedure must suffice here. Mendelssohn first notes Pope's contention that the divinely ordered universe contains a gradual and unbroken scale of beings in which all possible degrees of perfection, including that of human beings, are represented. He then maintains that Leibniz detects no such gradual series, believing instead that the universe is full only inasmuch as all available spaces are continually occupied, but without implying that there are beings corresponding to every possible degree of perfection. He also dismisses Pope's hierarchy of forms as a figment of the imagination (an allegation repeated in the concluding section) with no counterpart in the real world. But as some critics have noticed,[158] the supposed contradiction between Pope and Leibniz is non-existent, because Leibniz defends the doctrine of a gradual chain of being on various occasions in his works;[159] besides, Lessing himself, in *The Christianity of Reason*, had subscribed to that very doctrine less than two years before.[160] Apart from confirming that the passages in question were written by Mendelssohn rather than Lessing, these inconsistencies are a product of the two authors' determination to present Pope's ideas as dictated primarily by poetic rather than philosophical considerations. It would appear that Lessing, in preparing the work for press, either overlooked the inconsistencies or went along with them in order not to contradict his friend, whose emerging ambitions as an author he had no wish to discourage.

As Peter Michelsen has shown, the substantive differences between Pope's views and those of Leibniz lie not in these metaphysical commonplaces, most of which occur in the first and last of the four Epistles of the *Essay on Man*, but in Pope's ethical principles, which, though expounded most fully in the second and third Epistles, inform the entire work.[161] In his moral reflections, he repeatedly indicates that such metaphysical pronouncements as he does make in the *Essay* are not dogmas, but provisional assumptions or articles of faith on which moral conduct may

[156] Cf. Michelsen (1990h) 56; also Maynard Mack in Pope (1950) xliii.
[157] LM VI, 432–8. [158] E.g. Strauss in JA II, 384; Michelsen (1990h) 54–6.
[159] See, for example, Leibniz II/2, 257 and 399 (*Théodicée* Part 1, Paras. 31 and 120).
[160] LM XIV,177–8, Paras. 15–17 and 27; cf. Mendelssohn JA II, 385.
[161] Michelsen (1990h) 61–3.

appropriately be based; for human reason overreaches itself as soon as it tries to fathom the mind of the creator:

> From pride, from pride, our very reasoning springs [...]
> The bliss of man (could Pride that blessing find)
> Is not to think or act beyond mankind [...]

This same intellectual humility underlies the famous lines:

> Know then thyself, presume not God to scan;
> The proper study of mankind is Man.

In short, since Pope's ethical principles are more fundamental than his metaphysical speculations, his philosophical attitude is even further removed from that of Leibniz than Lessing and Mendelssohn, who interpret the Academy's question in a narrowly metaphysical sense, acknowledge. Since their whole endeavour is apparently to maximize the difference between Pope and Leibniz, one may well ask why they neglected so obvious an opportunity to highlight it.

In order to answer this question, one must first establish why the two friends planned to enter the Academy's competition in the first place, and what contribution they hoped to make to the debate on optimism by so doing. Their true intention is implicit in the title of the treatise—or more precisely, in the exclamation mark which follows it. This indicates their surprise that anyone should even consider Pope as a metaphysician, and by implication, their belief that the Academy's question is an absurd one. In pointing this out, moreover, they are criticizing not so much the question itself as what they believe is the ulterior motive behind it. As Gottsched—a Wolffian in such matters and no friend of Maupertuis and the dominant faction in the Academy—had pointed out, Pope's name was linked with that of Leibniz soon after the *Essay on Man* first appeared. The Swiss philosopher Jean-Pierre de Crousaz had attacked the poem, accusing Pope of a 'fatalism' allegedly derived from Leibniz and incompatible with the freedom of the divine will, and Gottsched suspected that the Academy's question was designed to renew this association and thereby encourage further attacks on Leibniz's alleged determinism.[162] Lessing and Mendelssohn make the same assumption—not unreasonably, given the known attitude of the Academy's President towards Leibniz and the kind of essay topics which the Academy had set in the past, some of which had been designed to elicit criticism of Leibniz's philosophy.[163]

Since Mendelssohn, in his *Philosophical Dialogues*, had just completed a defence of Leibniz against the very charges which he and Lessing believed the Academy was once more encouraging, it is not surprising that they are hardly able to conceal their contempt for the Academy's presumed intentions, declaring, for example, that 'this question does not seem to be formulated as well as it might be' and suggesting that a comparison between Shaftesbury and Leibniz would have been more rewarding.[164] The treatise accordingly has polemical undertones, and has not

[162] See Strauss in JA II, xvi; also Mack in Pope (1950) xix–xxii.
[163] See Harnack 402–6. [164] LM VI, 441–2.

unfairly been described as a 'vindication' of Leibniz against his detractors in the Academy.[165] As such, it could not realistically hope to succeed in the competition for which it was intended, and this is no doubt the main reason why Lessing decided not to submit it. Once he had made this decision, he was free to criticize the Academy more openly, and it may well be that he inserted some of his most scornful remarks (as in the concluding sentence of the work) in revising the treatise for independent publication.

It has, however, been argued that Lessing, Mendelssohn, and Gottsched misinterpreted Maupertuis' intention, because Maupertuis himself, in his philosophical writings, makes a clear distinction between the theodicies of Leibniz and Pope, declaring that, in Leibniz's view, God was unable to eliminate evil entirely from the best of possible worlds, whereas Pope denied its presence altogether;[166] for this reason, it has been claimed, the invitation in the Academy's question to criticize the 'system' of Pope cannot have been intended to encourage criticism of Leibniz's system. This argument is unconvincing. For Maupertuis was opposed to metaphysical optimism in general, and he may well have reflected that many possible criticisms of Pope's optimism might apply equally to that of Leibniz. Alternatively, he may have hoped that entrants might defend Pope's philosophically less pretentious variety of optimism, with its element of humility and scepticism ('Presume not God to scan') against the more dogmatic metaphysics of Leibniz. If this was indeed his ploy, it could not succeed with Lessing and Mendelssohn, whose aim was not to criticize Leibniz but to defend him. By putting Pope in a completely different, and philosophically inferior, category to that of Leibniz, they rule out all attempts to identify the two and so to invite criticism of both.

There are consequently two possible reasons why they confine themselves to metaphysics and ignore what Pope himself described as his 'system of Ethics'. In the first place, Lessing's objections to philosophical poetry apply primarily to metaphysics rather than to ethics, since the former is by definition abstract and more remote from experience, whereas the latter—as in Lessing's own didactic poetry—is closely bound up with human emotions and personal aspirations. The metaphysical content of Pope's poetry is therefore more conducive to exposing those differences between poetry and philosophy which he and Mendelssohn wish to accentuate. But secondly, since they are chiefly concerned to defend Leibniz's philosophy against Maupertuis and his allies, it suits their purpose to say as little as possible about the ethical basis of Pope's *Essay on Man*: for to air Pope's reservations on the ability of human reason to fathom the divine intentions would be to play straight into the hands of Leibniz's enemies.

It came as no surprise when the prize went to an undistinguished essay by Adolf Friedrich Reinhard denouncing Leibniz's optimism, which the author equated with determinism.[167] The four judges had been equally split, as Sulzer later reported, and the Secretary Formey, in order to humour Maupertuis, gave his casting vote in Reinhard's favour.[168] Reinhard's essay, along with three other entries, was published

[165] See J. Schneider (1953) 116–17. [166] Michelsen (1990h) 43–5; cf. JA II, 384–5.
[167] Harnack 405. [168] PO XXIII, 958–9.

by the Academy soon after that by Lessing and Mendelssohn appeared in Danzig. *Pope a Metaphysician!* was published anonymously not for fear of censorship, as Karl Lessing suggests,[169] but because Mendelssohn had said that he did not wish to be named and Lessing had no wish to be caught up in the aftermath of the Academy quarrel, especially in view of his past association with Mylius.[170] The treatise was virtually ignored. Its chief significance is as a testimony to its authors' strong commitment to Leibniz and metaphysical optimism, a commitment to which, in their different ways, both would adhere for the rest of their lives. Its scholarly value is slight, because its polemical purpose overrules all other considerations: that antithetical mode of analysis which proved so fruitful in other works by Lessing—especially his *Laocoön*—serves on this occasion only to exaggerate genuine differences and to generate others with no basis in fact.

Pope
ein
Metaphysiker!

Danzig,
bey Johann Christian Schuster.
1755.

Fig. 14. Title page of *Pope a Metaphysician!*, 1755.

[169] KGL 100. [170] Cf. LM VI, 411 and L. to Mendelssohn, 18 February 1755.

One final reflection: the treatise concludes by quoting a letter of Pope to Swift, in which Pope concedes that his pretensions as a philosopher are modest and occasional—for he is above all a poet—and declares 'do not laugh at my gravity, but permit me to wear the beard of a Philosopher till I pull it off and make a jest of it myself'. This jest is underlined by a vignette on the title-page of the treatise, which depicts two boys and a faun who holds a bearded mask in front of his face. Apart from underlining the work's central argument on the incompatibility of philosophy and poetry, these allusions embody a private joke: Lessing, as an established poet, and Mendelssohn, as a genuine philosopher with a genuine beard, are qualified to address the problem authoritatively from both directions.

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From Comedy to Tragedy 1754–1757: the *Theatrical Library*; *Samuel Henzi*; *Miss Sara Sampson;* Correspondence with Mendelssohn and Nicolai on Tragedy

Between 1747 and 1750, Lessing's literary energies were devoted chiefly to drama, and to comedy in particular: his early comedies, his studies and translations of Plautus, and the four issues of the *Contributions* all date from that period. For the next three years, however, journalism, translation, and a series of scholarly enterprises left him little time for dramatic work. But around the beginning of 1754, drama once more claimed his attention as he began to revise the early comedies for publication in his collected *Writings*, and dramatic projects continued to preoccupy him throughout the rest of the decade. Apart from the *Writings* themselves (the third and fourth volumes of which appeared at Easter 1754, followed by the last two volumes at Easter 1755), the first product of this renewed interest was the periodical *Theatrical Library* (*Theatralische Bibliothek*),[1] whose first three issues were published at six-monthly intervals from September 1754 onwards; a fourth and final issue, dated 1758, appeared belatedly at Easter 1759.

As Lessing points out in his preface to the first issue, the *Library* was intended as a sequel to the earlier *Contributions*, which he had abandoned as a result of disagreements with his co-editor Mylius. Its aims, however, are somewhat less ambitious: the earlier plan to translate a vast range of dramas from numerous countries is discarded, and the drama and theatre of Germany are excluded altogether. (As the country's leading dramatist, Lessing no longer felt able to comment on this area, and he was in any case reluctant to compete with Gottsched's current project, published in 1757, of a comprehensive historical survey of German drama.) Despite these omissions, the work's intended scope remains encyclopedic: although the articles follow no chronological or geographical sequence, the completed periodical will nevertheless constitute, as Lessing informs us, 'a critical history of the theatre of all ages and all nations'. Its basic purpose, like that of the *Contributions*, is presumably to raise the standard of dramatic writing and performance in Germany by providing appropriate models and guidance. Lessing also hoped, as he told Kästner, to use the *Library* as an outlet for his own scholarly investigations,[2] and he indicates

[1] LM VI, 3–391. [2] To Kästner, 16 October 1754.

in his preface that the drama of classical antiquity remains his central point of reference. The periodical duly includes, as his own main contribution, a study of Seneca's tragedies, matching his earlier study of Plautus' comedies in the *Contributions* and reflecting a growing interest in tragedy which would shortly dominate his work.

In the event, most of the contributions to the *Library*, as to the *Contributions* before it, are translations—mainly from French and English—of works by other hands. But the emphasis has changed. Whereas the *Contributions* dealt mainly with the contemporary theatre of Germany and France and with the French classical tradition which had shaped them both, the *Library*, in keeping with its stated aim, adopts a more historical approach. It includes, in Lessing's translation, the third and final book of Jean-Baptiste Du Bos' *Réflexions critiques sur la poésie et sur la peinture* (1719), which deals at length with the acting and stagecraft of antiquity, as well as brief histories of the Italian and English theatre by Lodovico Riccoboni and Friedrich Nicolai respectively. These three items, along with the extracts from Dryden's *Essay of Dramatick Poesie* which follow Nicolai's history in the final issue, together constitute, if not 'a critical history of the theatre of all ages and all nations', at least a fairly coherent account of ancient theatre and its Italian legacy, followed by an account of the English theatre and Dryden's comparative reflections on ancient and modern drama and on the theatre of France and England. These historical items are supplemented by biographical sketches, translated from foreign originals, of James Thomson, whose neo-classical tragedies Lessing currently admired, and of Philippe Néricault Destouches as a leading exponent of sentimental comedy.

Like the earlier *Contributions*, the *Library* has the air of a work put together in haste, with a far higher proportion of translated and borrowed material than Lessing originally intended. This impression of haste was confirmed by the discovery that Riccoboni's history of the Italian theatre, included in the second issue, was translated from the French original not by Lessing himself, but by the Göttingen scholar and translator Johann Tobias Köhler;[3] and since the two extracts from Italian plays which follow this item are also taken from Riccoboni's history, it is probable that Köhler translated them as well. The standard of translation throughout the *Library* (including Köhler's work) is high; but given that at least one item was translated by someone other than Lessing, we cannot be certain that he translated all the remaining items himself. Sequels are promised to two of these, namely Lessing's essay on Seneca and the extracts from Dryden, but like the journal itself and the *Contributions* before it, they were never completed.

Several of the translated items have affinities with Lessing's own work. Lodovico Riccoboni's collection of scenarios for the *Théâtre italien*, with Harlequin as the most prominent figure, has already been mentioned, and since it was published in the fourth issue of 1759, almost simultaneously with Lessing's attack on Gottsched in the seventeenth *Letter on Literature*, it was plainly intended to underline his support for the popular theatre which Gottsched had condemned. The extract from

[3] See Waldberg *passim*.

Sainte-Albine's work on the art of acting, supplementing Antoine-François Riccoboni's work on the same subject in the earlier *Contributions*, is of direct relevance to *Miss Sara Sampson*, as will shortly be seen. Montiano's republican tragedy *Virginia*, of which a lengthy paraphrase is included in the first issue of 1754, came to Lessing's attention too late to have influenced his *Samuel Henzi*, but its thematic affinity with *Emilia Galotti* will call for mention later. Finally, the discussion of 'natural' and 'arbitrary' signs in Du Bos' piece on the theatre of antiquity foreshadows Lessing's own reflections on semiotics in his *Laocoön* of 1766.

Little remains to be said on Lessing's original contributions to the *Library*, which consist for the most part of brief introductory comments on, or linking passages within, the translated extracts from works of others. Two prominent exceptions—both discussed in Chapter 2 of the present work—are the reflections on sentimental comedy which accompany Chassiron's and Gellert's essays on that genre, and Lessing's reply to Michaelis' criticisms of the Jewish hero of his recently published comedy *The Jews*. His other main contribution, the essay on Seneca, calls for further discussion, because it contains his first significant pronouncements on tragedy.

The essay is unfinished, and it deals with only two of Seneca's nine surviving tragedies. It was long neglected by scholarship, probably because Lessing condemned Seneca's tragedies, in his later *Laocoön*, as vastly inferior to those of the Greeks.[4] Two more recent studies have shown, however, that the essay yields important information on his early theory of tragedy.[5] To anyone acquainted with Lessing's later writings, it may well appear paradoxical, for Seneca—here described as a 'genius'[6]—was a major influence on baroque tragedy, including that of Corneille, whose work Lessing famously belittled in the *Hamburg Dramaturgy*. But in the context of his early writings, the essay is perfectly comprehensible. It appeared only a year after the *Vindications of Horace*, in which he defended the great Roman poet against his modern detractors. It is likely that disparaging comments on Seneca by the French critic Pierre Brumoy, comments which Lessing circumstantially rebuts, induced him to write the Seneca essay as a parallel defence (or 'vindication') of the Roman dramatist;[7] and the fact that Gottsched had condemned Seneca's tragedies as 'bombast' (*Schwulst*) was no doubt an additional incentive. Lessing was aware, of course, that Seneca's tragedies had served as a model for the same French dramatists, especially Corneille, whom Gottsched urged his compatriots to emulate. But it was possible to reject Gottsched's prescriptions for tragedy—especially his requirement that it should teach a moral lesson—without rejecting French classical tragedy itself, which Lessing continued to revere at this time: indeed, he explicitly praises 'the inimitable works of Corneille and Racine' in the essay.[8]

The essay on Seneca shows that, in 1754, Lessing's views on tragedy remained much more conservative than his views on comedy. He criticizes Seneca, for example, for occasionally failing to observe those same three unities which, four years

[4] LM IX, 31. [5] Barner (1973); Riedel (1976) 86–106. [6] LM VI, 188.
[7] LM VI, 190–3; cf. PO XI, Part 13, 27 and Barner (1973) 20. [8] LM VI, 232.

earlier, he had defended Plautus for violating: he plainly prefers the tighter and more unified structure of heroic tragedy on the Senecan model to the more open forms which would shortly become common in the new domestic tragedy.[9] He also declares that the chief aim of tragedy is to arouse the passions, and he explicitly rejects Gottsched's doctrine that tragedy should impart a moral lesson, rightly pointing out that, in ancient tragedy, one looks in vain for practical moral guidance in events controlled by gods whose own morality is scarcely beyond reproach.[10] These clearly expressed views should be borne in mind when considering Lessing's own early experiments in tragedy, which are all too often interpreted in the light of theories which he formulated in later years.

As a study of Seneca and his art, the essay is of little interest today, for most of its conclusions have been superseded by more recent scholarship.[11] It is now generally accepted, for example, that Seneca's plays were intended primarily for reading or recitation, rather than for live performance as Lessing believed. But like the earlier essay on Plautus, this study is commendable for its historical approach, its insistence on the need to judge a poet according to the circumstances of his age. Lessing does, it is true, hold up Seneca's plays—just as he had done with those of Plautus—as possible models for modern dramatists to follow, and he at one time planned to write a tragedy himself on the Neapolitan rebel Masaniello, basing it on Seneca's *Hercules furens*.[12] But he rightly insists that the psychology of Seneca's characters, influenced as it is by supernatural agencies and now unintelligible religious factors, must be radically modernized and reduced to natural causes.[13] This attempt to reconcile classical models with modern subject-matter and psychology is typical of Lessing's thinking on tragedy in the early 1750s, which is again apparent in his first tragic experiments, *Samuel Henzi* and *Miss Sara Sampson*.

In addition to Lessing's twelve completed plays and his numerous translations from the works of other dramatists, records survive of at least sixty more plays which he planned at one time or another to write.[14] Their diversity of form, theme, and origin is remarkable. Of some, only the title is known, perhaps with a list of *dramatis personae*; others reached the stage of one or more scenarios, fragments of dialogue, scenes or even acts, and in one case (*The Widow of Ephesus*) the play was all but completed. Some plans involved adaptation of works by Greek, Roman, French, English, Italian or Spanish authors; others again arose out of motifs which Lessing encountered in his multifarious reading. Several are of uncertain date, but the majority were conceived before 1760.

As one might expect, comedy predominates in the early years, although tragedy, pastoral, and even burlesque opera are also represented. But in the 1750s, the emphasis shifts towards tragedy—as the Seneca essay of 1754 confirms—and both of the plays which he did complete during that decade were tragedies. A planned

[9] See Barner (1973) 94 and 97–100. [10] LM VI, 187 and 196–7.
[11] See Barner (1973) 23; Riedel (1976) 91; Korzeniewski 194–5.
[12] LM III, 331; cf. PO XXII, 539–40 and Riedel (1976) 102.
[13] LM VI, 197; cf. Korzeniewski 443. [14] LM III, 235–495.

volume of six comedies inspired by Goldoni was abandoned in 1756,[15] and tragedy became the main focus of his dramatic theory and practice for the rest of the decade. This shift of interest calls for some explanation.

The young Lessing was drawn towards comedy—especially in its more popular forms—by its informality of expression, contemporary settings, and potential for critical or satirical engagement with current social problems. By the same token, he found tragedy, particularly of the heroic and courtly variety, fundamentally uncongenial. Nevertheless, his early ambition to try his hand at all major poetic genres obliged him to turn his attention to tragedy as well as comedy, and his first recorded tragic projects—a translation of Marivaux' *Hannibal* (1747) and an original drama of courtly intrigue entitled *Giangir, or the Throne Disdained* (*Giangir, oder der verschmähte Thron*, 1748),[16] both in alexandrine verse—lie firmly within the heroic tradition of French classicism. His first attempt to liberate himself from this tradition is the two-act fragment *Samuel Henzi*, a tragedy based on the unsuccessful rebellion of Henzi and his fellow-conspirators in 1749 against the patrician oligarchy which then ruled the Swiss republic of Berne.[17] Although the play's alexandrine metre and grandiloquent rhetoric adhere to classicistic convention, its contemporary setting, republican ethos, and non-aristocratic protagonists constitute significant departures from French courtly tragedy. It marks, in short, a transitional stage in Lessing's development as a tragedian, soon to be succeeded by the prose dialogue and domestic realism of his next tragedy, *Miss Sara Sampson* (1755), which leaves French classicism far behind. These two plays, as the decisive tragic experiments of his early years, laid the basis for all his subsequent work as a tragedian, and the second of them profoundly influenced his theory of tragedy as expounded in 1756 and 1757. They also left their mark on his unfinished tragic projects of the 1750s, and their influence is still conspicuous in his last and most successful tragedy, *Emilia Galotti* (1772).

Samuel Henzi's conspiracy of 1749 was the culmination of years of political discontent among the patrician families of Berne, more and more of whom, though theoretically entitled to present candidates for election to government office, had in practice become disenfranchised over the years. By 1735, no more than a tenth of such families were represented on the republic's governing bodies, which were now monopolized by a self-perpetuating oligarchy.[18] Protests grew louder in the 1730s—the young Albrecht von Haller was among the protesters—and a formal memorandum of complaint was submitted in 1744, shortly before the elections to the Grand Council, demanding that life tenure of office should cease and that seats on the Council should henceforth be allocated by lot.[19] Further provoked by anonymous lampoons, the authorities over-reacted: the elections were postponed until 1745, and several of the protesters were banished for up to ten years—Henzi for five and his younger supporter Samuel König (the same who later clashed with

[15] See D 132–3; L. to Mendelssohn, 8 December 1755; Danzel/Guhrauer I, 317–22.
[16] LM III, 235–51. [17] LM V, 97–122.
[18] Feller III, 447; on the following, see ibid. III, 448–62. [19] See Hafner 284–6.

Maupertuis) for ten. Re-admitted under an amnesty in 1748, Henzi remained disaffected and joined in a conspiracy to overthrow the oligarchy, if necessary by force. The conspiracy was, however, betrayed before it was properly organized, and three of its ringleaders—Henzi, Emanuel Fueter, and Nikolaus Wernier—were arrested, put on trial, and executed within a fortnight. (Ironically, Henzi had dissociated himself from the conspiracy before his arrest, and was captured as he left to begin a new life in France.) Others who had played a lesser role, including the Genevan Micheli du Crest or Ducret, were imprisoned or exiled.

Lessing's interest in Henzi and his fate is eminently understandable, for the two men had a great deal in common:[20] Henzi was a clergyman's son, a poet, dramatist, and lover of the classics who had worked as a librarian and supported Haller and the Swiss literary theorists in their quarrel with Gottsched. The precise sources from which Lessing drew his information on the conspiracy are uncertain, although he does say that he learned of it from newspapers and by word of mouth.[21] He must at all events have encountered the regular reports from various Swiss correspondents which were published in the BPZ, presumably by Mylius (who also corresponded with Samuel König), from July to September 1749.[22] But news from Switzerland reached Berlin by many routes, including the Swiss members of the Academy such as Euler, the Bernoullis, and Sulzer; besides, the Swiss canton of Neuchâtel (or Neuenburg), where Henzi lived in exile between 1744 and 1748, was a Prussian territory. Although some reports—especially those from Berne—welcomed the suppression of the conspiracy, others glorified Henzi as a hero and true patriot, shifting the blame for the conspiracy's more sanguinary aims to the Genevan interloper du Crest or Ducret.[23] Samuel König, it will also be remembered, met Lessing on his visit to Berlin in the winter of 1750 to 1751, and he doubtless spoke in defence of Henzi as his friend and former mentor.

It is generally assumed that *Samuel Henzi* was written, or at least begun, in the latter months of 1749.[24] For although the first edition—in the second volume of Lessing's *Writings* of 1753—gives no date of composition, Karl Lessing appended the phrase 'Berlin 1749' to the title when he reprinted it with Lessing's other dramatic fragments in 1786. Like Andreas Gryphius' tragedy *Carolus Stuardus* exactly a century before, *Samuel Henzi* thus seems to have been written under the immediate impression of the events it describes; indeed, it is probably the first German tragedy since that of Gryphius to deal with such topical material, although on this occasion, the events took place much nearer to home.[25] Since Lessing drew his material from real life, critics have for once been at a loss to discover literary models for the work in question; for although he was familiar with various dramas of conspiracy (such as Crébillon's *Catilina*, which he began to translate in that same year),[26] none of them is sufficiently similar to *Samuel Henzi* to qualify as a likely source.

[20] See B I, 1198–9; Feller III, 451–2. [21] LM V, 97. [22] Reprinted in B I, 1167–97.
[23] Feller III, 462. [24] See E. Schmidt I, 209; PO VI, Part 8, 16; Batley (1984) 252.
[25] Cf. G II, 763. [26] LM III, 258–61; cf. B I, 1200–1.

Two literary influences do, nevertheless, call for mention. The first is Gottsched's drama *The Dying Cato* (*Sterbender Cato*, 1731), which is not only a tragedy in alexandrine verse with a commoner as hero; its theme is also that of republican resistance to despotic seizure of power, and its stark rhetorical contrasts of republican virtue and tyrannical vice, of patriotic freedom and dishonourable servitude, are similar to those in Lessing's play.[27] It may well be that, just as he had refashioned the Gottschedian comedy of types to invest it with contemporary significance, so likewise did he recast Gottsched's model of republican tragedy to accommodate a live political issue. The second literary precedent lies not in drama, but in didactic poetry. It will be remembered that, in his early Berlin years, Lessing wrote a number of didactic poems, most of them in alexandrine metre, in the manner of Albrecht von Haller. Thus even before the Henzi conspiracy took place, he knew something of the social and political crisis in Berne from such poems as 'The Decline of Morality' ('Die verdorbenen Sitten', 1731) and 'The Man of the World' ('Der Mann nach der Welt', 1733), in which Haller excoriates the decadence of contemporary Bernese society in contrast to the austere republican virtue of former times.[28] Haller's republican sentiments are also akin to those in Gottsched's tragedy; but it is on his sustained denunciations of moral depravity, rather than on Gottsched's more succinct republican sentiments, that Henzi's long tirades on the vices of his compatriots in Lessing's play are modelled. If proof of Haller's influence is required, one need only note that the same Isaak Steiger who is singled out in Haller's poem of 1731 as a rare example of virtue in a degenerate age reappears in Lessing's fragment as the only member of the otherwise corrupt Grand Council who, in Henzi's opinion, deserves to become 'the father of Berne'.[29] (The real Samuel Henzi, on the other hand, roundly denounced Steiger and his family in the memorandum of protest which he drew up shortly before his arrest.)[30]

The main problem confronting critics of this play is that of its political significance—or lack of it. For some, it does not deal with political issues at all, but reduces them to contrasts of individual character and moral attitude:[31] Henzi's eulogies of patriotic virtue, his reluctance to resort to violence and his consequent failure to act, are contrasted with Ducret's personal vindictiveness and unprincipled, but equally inactive, lust for violence. For others, the theme of republican resistance to oligarchic repression is inherently fraught with political significance, even if the revolutionaries spend most of their time debating moral principles instead of actively resisting their oppressors;[32] besides, the events which Lessing dramatized were already a *cause célèbre*, and the execution of Henzi, as a liberal-minded man of letters, was seen by many as a judicial murder and political scandal. To assess these rival interpretations, one must first examine the political

[27] See Gottsched, ed. Birke, II, 31, 36, 48, 70, 75, 99.

[28] See Haller, Gedichte 86–98 and 102–8.

[29] Haller, Gedichte 90; LM V, 109.

[30] See M. Krebs 45–7; L. seems to have confused Isaak and Christoph Steiger: the old, reactionary S. (whom Haller nevertheless praised) and the young, liberal S.

[31] See, for example, Stenzel in B I, 1202–3; E. Schmidt I, 209; Bergethon 64–5; Hillmann I, 92.

[32] See, for example, Batley (1984) 258–60; Fick (2010) 97–8.

connotations of literary republicanism, and secondly, the role of Swiss republicanism in eighteenth-century political thought.

From the Renaissance to the eighteenth century, republican principles, typically associated with the Roman republic, are regularly shown in a favourable light in European literature. They are contrasted with arbitrary despotism, which is in turn associated either with the Roman kings whose expulsion preceded the republic, or with the Roman principate which succeeded it. From Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* to Nathaniel Lee's *Lucius Junius Brutus, Father of his Country* and Addison's and Gottsched's Cato tragedies, the Roman republican ideal is a constant presence in European drama.[33] It is both a moral and a political ideal, just as it was for Roman writers such as Tacitus, who simultaneously glorified the frugal piety of earlier times and mourned the lost freedoms of the republic. That such plays were widely performed and published suggests, however, that they were not perceived as politically subversive or as a threat to the monarchic systems of the major European states: Gottsched's *Cato*, for example, was applauded no less warmly at court theatres than at civic venues and school performances.[34] (This is no doubt because classical, Ciceronian republicanism is compatible with various constitutions, including monarchy, provided that the state is governed in the interest of the people as a whole, *res populi*, as distinct from the private interest of the ruler or rulers.)[35] Lessing's play makes use of the same tradition, as when Henzi is at one point likened to Brutus (not Caesar's assassin, but his earlier namesake who expelled Tarquinius Superbus from Rome after the rape of Lucretia).[36]

The familiar topoi acquired a new significance, however, when applied to the modern Swiss republics. The Swiss themselves were fond of using them: the Bernese authorities, for example, applied Roman terminology (such as 'SPQB'), to their institutions, and Haller often compares Bernese society to that of ancient Rome in his poems, even likening the revered Isaak Steiger to the Roman Cato.[37] But in the decades before the American and French Revolutions, the Swiss republics, and Berne in particular, were regarded by Hume, Adam Smith, Ferguson, Rousseau, Raynal and many others as test-cases of republican virtue and its viability in the modern world. Whereas Venice and Holland, for example, were widely perceived as decadent, having sold out to self-interest and commercialism, the agrarian economy, civilian militia, and republican institutions of Berne made it appear—for instance to Montesquieu, in his *Considérations sur les causes de la grandeur des Romains et de leur décadence* of 1734—as the closest surviving equivalent to early Rome. On the other hand, both insiders such as Haller and Henzi and outsiders such as Edward Gibbon (*Lettre sur le gouvernement de Berne*, *c.* 1758) saw the increasing luxury and decline of self-sufficiency which accompanied the rise of oligarchy in Berne as symptoms of political failure and threats to the republic's

[33] On this, see Fink (1998) 54–6. [34] See C. G. Köllner in Gottsched, ed. Birke, II, 170–1.
[35] See Cicero, De re publica, Book 1, 45; also Jamison *passim*. [36] LM V, 102.
[37] Haller, Gedichte 90–1, 93, 108; on the following see Kapossy II, 228, 234–5, 239 and Hafner 290–9.

survival. The moral virtue which all such writers extolled was therefore a profoundly political quantity, not to be confused with the apolitical *Tugend* of the moral weeklies and the literature of sensibility. Such virtue was not so much a precondition as a product of true republican freedom, and as soon as this freedom was eroded, luxury and self-interest took over. The ancient laws, cemented by religious oath, were the basis of morality and freedom alike, and it is the republican constitution itself—or more precisely, the spirit which informs it—which Montesquieu, in *De l'Esprit des lois* (1748), presents as the foundation of republican *vertu*. As far as Lessing is concerned, it matters little whether or not he was conversant with Montesquieu's great work when he wrote *Samuel Henzi* (although he must certainly have encountered it when he moved to Leipzig in 1755 and resumed contact with his old friend and teacher Kästner, who had translated the work into German two years before). In the Swiss republican discourse which he employs in *Samuel Henzi*, politics and morality are no less inseparable than they were for Montesquieu, and the modern Swiss setting gives the old republican commonplaces an actuality which Roman republican tragedies, from Shakespeare to Gottsched, could hardly attain.

It is therefore wholly legitimate to interpret *Samuel Henzi* in the light of Montesquieu's principles, as one critic has done[38]—at least in so far as Lessing, unlike Christian Wolff, makes virtue a consequence rather than a precondition of sound political arrangements. For Henzi, the only alternative to moral decay is political revolution, whereas his unwelcome ally Ducret is already so depraved that republican virtue is beyond his comprehension. But the republican principles which inform the play are not merely implicit in its moral attitudes. There is also explicit praise of popular sovereignty and criticism of monarchic rule, with obvious reference not to ancient Rome but to modern Europe.[39] And even if the epigraph from Aristotle's *Politics* which follows the title (to the effect that genuine freedom requires an alternation of rulers and ruled) was added by Karl Lessing,[40] such additions were commonly based on Lessing's own annotations to copies of his works, as was presumably the case here. The idea in question is, in any case, reaffirmed in the text itself, as when Henzi longs for the day when the Council will 'allow itself the glory which no king can boast—of ruling a free people by free election', or declares that the government should be 'the people's voice and hand'.[41] And there are harsh words on kings, as when Henzi commends 'the gratifying duty of fighting for the fatherland instead of a king's imperious vanities, for which a frenzied sword would sooner exterminate a thousand citizens than forfeit a single word of his [i.e. the king's] title'.[42] The political content of such remarks is unambiguous: monarchs, especially belligerent ones, are the last thing a people needs. In short, just as Lessing employed the vehicle of comedy in 1749 to express liberal political opinions (on Jewish emancipation), so also did he use the vehicle of tragedy in that same year to air liberal views on popular sovereignty. In Frederick's Prussia, this was

[38] Fick (2010) 101–2.
[39] Cf. Hillmann I, 89; Batley (1984) 260.
[40] See LM V, 98 n.3.
[41] LM V, 104 and 108.
[42] LM V, 118; cf. V, 104.

sailing close to the wind, and the risks involved may well be connected with the play's unfinished state.

The political contentiousness of the work, especially in Switzerland, is confirmed by its reception.[43] Bodmer sought to have Lessing's *Writings* banned in Zurich, and Johann Conrad Fuesslin, in an article on the conspiracy published in Germany (although the author is plainly Swiss), condemns the play as an incitement to rebellion. Haller, who had taken the Bernese government's side since his election to the Grand Council in 1745, strove to dissociate himself from the work by pointing to substantial inaccuracies in Lessing's portrayal of Henzi, Wernier, and Ducret. German critics were generally more positive, and Michaelis of Göttingen called for the fragment's speedy completion.

It is likely that, even before the fragment was published, Lessing had decided not to complete it, for in his editorial remarks, he invites an imaginary correspondent (and by implication, anyone who pleases) to complete it for him.[44] Various explanations have been suggested for his abandonment of the fragment—for example, that the ideals which inspired Henzi could not be given dramatic expression, and that even if Henzi had succeeded, his own (unelected) rule would negate the very ideals he fought for.[45] But since the play is a tragedy, it is precisely Henzi's failure to realize these ideals that Lessing is concerned to dramatize. The moral dilemma remains, and Lessing was certainly no friend of violent revolution.[46] But no revolution was envisaged in the planned drama, so that the need to confront it can hardly have prevented him from completing his task. His own comments on the play point to a more serious difficulty. The aim of the work, he declares, was to present 'the agitator in opposition to the true patriot, and the oppressor in opposition to the true head of state. Henzi is the patriot, Ducret the agitator, Steiger the true head of state, and this or that Councillor the oppressor'.[47] His vagueness concerning the identity of the 'oppressor' reveals a major difficulty. If he had completed the fragment, he would not only have had to present the Grand Council in a negative light, but also to single out some real individual as the embodiment of its most oppressive qualities. To defend those convicted, on irrefutable evidence, of conspiring against an elected government—even if the electoral procedures left much to be desired—was all very well, given that there was widespread sympathy outside Berne for Samuel Henzi himself. But to single out an individual member of the governing Council, without access to protocols of the Council's deliberations, and pillory him as an 'oppressor' who had rushed through an unjust decision without the consent or foreknowledge of his fellows, would have risked political repercussions, even in Prussia, and done no good to the cause for which Henzi had died.

Samuel Henzi is Lessing's first serious attempt at writing tragedy. It is an experimental work, an uneasy compound of baroque tradition and contemporary realism. Its two principal characters are not so much individuals as types, embodying diametrically opposed moral and political attitudes, namely republican virtue in

[43] See B I, 1203–18; E. Schmidt I, 211. [44] LM V, 112. [45] See Kraft 22 and 31.
[46] Cf. LM XIII, 400–1. [47] LM V, 111.

the Romano-Helvetic mode and a ruthless lust for power reminiscent of Lohenstein's villains. The four remaining characters have little independent substance: they are simply pulled to and fro by the conflicting demands of the two main figures, and they convey little impression of the specific grievances of the populace they represent.[48] The ponderous alexandrine couplets, more suited to stylized antitheses and aphoristic pronouncements than to ongoing argument, underline the abstract, schematic quality of the whole, and Lessing's strict adherence to the three unities, which oblige the conspirators to meet in the very town hall where they will subsequently go on trial, is stilted and contrived. (His ironic comment that novices like himself cannot afford to disobey the rules betrays his own uneasiness on this score.)[49] In sum, Lessing's twin aims of competing with Gottsched on his own ground and addressing a contemporary political issue through the medium of tragedy were incompatible, and it may well be that his growing awareness of their incompatibility reinforced his decision to leave the work unfinished. Its positive legacy was, on the one hand, a series of experiments in republican tragedy, culminating in *Emilia Galotti*, and on the other, the recognition that a completely new type of tragedy, with realistic psychology, informal dialogue, and a less artificial style of acting, was needed in order to deal successfully with contemporary issues of interest to the public which he wished to address. Several years elapsed before he came up with a solution in the shape of *Miss Sara Sampson*, subtitled *A Domestic Tragedy* (*Ein bürgerliches Trauerspiel*).

Lessing first mentions this new kind of tragedy in conjunction with that equally new kind of comedy which he describes as *rührendes Lustspiel* (sentimental comedy). The sentimental comedy aims to promote morality not by satirizing vice, but by presenting virtuous characters in affecting situations likely to arouse sympathetic emotions on the part of the audience. In his preface to Chassiron's and Gellert's essays on sentimental comedy in September 1754—barely four months before he began work on *Miss Sara Sampson*—Lessing depicts the two new kinds of drama as closely related.[50] On the one hand, sentimental comedy aims not 'to jeer at tasteless vices', but 'to let the world shed a tear for once, and derive a noble pleasure from quiet virtues'; and conversely, the new kind of tragedy rejects the idea that 'only rulers and high-ranking personages' can arouse pity and fear, preferring 'heroes from the middle class' who had previously been given tragic roles only for satirical purposes. The aim of both kinds of drama is to elicit a sympathetic response on the part of the audience by depicting recognizable people in a realistic manner. In his preface of 1754, Lessing goes on to discuss only sentimental comedy, promising to discuss its tragic counterpart on some later occasion. That occasion never arose. Instead, he proceeded to write *Miss Sara Sampson* as a concrete example of the new variety of tragedy, and what exactly he understood by the latter must be deduced from the nature of this play. Its close relation to the sentimental comedy, already hinted at in the preface of 1754, soon becomes apparent.

[48] See Hillmann I, 92; Loeb 352–3. [49] LM V, 110. [50] LM VI, 6.

The expression *bürgerliches Trauerspiel*, usually translated as 'domestic tragedy', is notoriously ambiguous, and its precise meaning in eighteenth-century Germany has been the subject of endless critical debate.[51] But roughly speaking, the noun *Bürger* signified a citizen, burgher, bourgeois, or private individual of any social class (apart from persons without means and holders of high political office), and the adjective *bürgerlich* had the corresponding meanings of civic (or civil), bourgeois or middle-class, domestic or private (as distinct from public), and universally human in character.[52] Most of these connotations can be encountered in early references to the *bürgerliches Trauerspiel*. The term first appears in Lessing's works in 1750 as a translation of the French *tragédie bourgeoise*, a term first recorded in 1733 which appears to mean much the same as *comédie larmoyante* or sentimental comedy;[53] Gottsched similarly uses the term in 1751 with reference to tragi-comedy or *comédie larmoyante* (which he treats as synonymous).[54] The association with the middle class is already present, as noted above, in Lessing's definition of the new genre in 1754, and the term is frequently used, from the 1750s onwards, to denote a tragedy whose main characters do not occupy the highest ranks in society.[55] But the importance of the bourgeoisie in such early references should not be overestimated, as it often has been by twentieth-century critics (especially the Marxists); for one critic has shown that eleven out of sixteen plays subtitled *bürgerliches Trauerspiel* have aristocratic protagonists, and another estimates that two-thirds of the characters in such dramas are aristocrats.[56] *Miss Sara Sampson* is no exception: Sara's father is a baronet and member of the provincial aristocracy. All such characters—whether commoners or aristocrats—are drawn from the middle ranks of society because they are better equipped than characters from the highest and lowest classes to represent the universal human attributes with which the dramatists in question are primarily concerned, and it is not until the 1770s that tensions between the social classes become a regular theme in German drama. As the English term 'domestic tragedy' indicates, the situations depicted in such tragedies may arise in families from any walk of life, and in so far as class differences are explicitly discussed before 1770, they have no political significance: they are criticized at most as artificial distinctions between individuals who share a common humanity. The early domestic tragedies incorporate middle-class values only inasmuch as literary sensibility and the moral ethos which attaches to it are primarily—but not exclusively—associated with the private life of the emergent middle classes.

The foregoing account of the term *bürgerlich* does not in itself supply an adequate definition of the type of tragedy in question. For in addition to the ambiguity of this crucial term, a further difficulty in defining the domestic tragedy is that most definitions, from the eighteenth century to the present, are definitions

[51] On the following see Guthke (2006) *passim*.
[52] See Wierlacher *passim* and Weimar *passim*.
[53] See PO X, Part 12, 73; Guthke (2006) 7–8.
[54] Gottsched, *Versuch einer kritischen Dichtkunst* (1751 edition) 643–5.
[55] In this sense, an anonymous reviewer applies the term 'bürgerliches Trauerspiel' to L's *Samuel Henzi*, all of whose characters are non-aristocrats; see B I, 1218.
[56] Pikulik (1966) 6; Vogg 56.

ex negativo: that is, they define the tragedy in question not so much by its intrinsic properties as by its difference from something extraneous to itself, namely classical tragedy as defined in seventeenth-century poetics. Lessing's definition of 1754 began by rejecting the traditional requirement that 'only rulers and high-ranking personages' should figure as tragic heroes, and the earliest extended discussion of the new genre, Gottlob Benjamin Pfeil's essay *On the Domestic Tragedy* (*Vom bürgerlichen Trauerspiele*), which was published anonymously in 1755,[57] defines it primarily in terms of its deviations from what Pfeil calls 'heroic tragedy'. Later definitions proceed along similar lines, and they are perfectly justified in doing so, because the domestic tragedy acquired its most distinctive properties by rejecting the conventions of classical tragedy. But the extent to which these conventions are rejected varies from one play to the next, so that, depending on which plays are taken as representative, definitions of the domestic tragedy may incorporate some or all of the features in the following list (which is by no means exhaustive): its characters are drawn from the 'middle class' (which may include all but the highest aristocracy); it deals not with affairs of state, but with private, domestic, and family life; its ethos is not that of courtly and aristocratic honour, but that of (originally, though not exclusively) middle-class virtue; it exercises a positive moral influence on the audience not through precept and example, but by arousing emotional sympathy; it elicits not admiration for stoic fortitude, but pity for virtuous suffering; its plots are not historical or mythological, but freely invented; its events take place not in the distant past, but in the present; its medium is not verse but prose; its dialogue is not stylized and rhetorical, but informal and even colloquial; and it need not observe the formal rules of classical tragedy such as that of the three unities. To conclude: most disagreements among modern interpreters of the domestic tragedy concern firstly, the precise meaning of the term *bürgerlich,* and secondly, the relative importance of the various qualities which distinguish tragedies of this kind from the classical and 'heroic' tragedies which preceded them. Lessing's *Miss Sara Sampson* is generally recognized as the archetype of the genre in Germany, not least because all of the qualities listed above are, in varying degrees, present within it.

Lessing and Pfeil both saw the domestic tragedy as an English invention, citing such plays as George Lillo's *The London Merchant* (1731) and Edward Moore's *The Gamester* (1753) as examples.[58] Tragedies on domestic themes were in fact written as early as Shakespeare's time—for example, *Arden of Feversham* (1592), *A Yorkshire Tragedy* (1608), and Thomas Heywood's *A Woman Killed with Kindness* (1607)—but their relative obscurity and remoteness from contemporary life denied them the widespread interest which Lillo's and Moore's productions aroused, particularly since the latter were soon translated into French and German. The success of such plays no doubt encouraged Lessing to try his hand at something similar, but his own earlier attempt, in *Samuel Henzi*, to write a new kind of tragedy with topical

[57] Reprinted in GEL: *Miss Sara Sampson*, ed. Eibl, 173–89.
[58] LM VII, 68; cf. 312 and Pfeil in GEL: *Miss Sara Sampson*, ed. Eibl, 175.

relevance, along with his reflections of 1754 on sentimental comedy and the domestic tragedy as its tragic counterpart, probably played no less important a part in his decision to write *Miss Sara Sampson*. It was, at any rate, the first *bürgerliches Trauerspiel* written in German,[59] and together with Diderot's work on similar lines shortly afterwards, it marks the beginning of post-classical realism in continental drama.

According to one report, Lessing wrote his tragedy for a wager. After watching a tear-jerking sentimental comedy with Moses Mendelssohn, he observed that 'no art is required to reduce old women to tears'. When Mendelssohn demurred, Lessing wagered that he could turn out a play of this kind within six weeks, whereupon he withdrew for roughly that time (from late January to mid-March 1755) to Potsdam, and shut himself up until the play was completed.[60] The anecdote may well be true, for this was not the only occasion on which Lessing began work on a play in response to a challenge.[61] But the decisive factor in this case was probably his desire to include at least one complete tragedy in his collected *Writings*, the final two volumes of which were due to appear that Easter: significantly, the only person he visited while in Potsdam was his publisher's agent.[62]

Miss Sara Sampson opens with the remorseful heroine confined to the inn to which she eloped over two months before with her lover Mellefont, whom she vainly urges to marry her. Mellefont's former mistress Marwood, hoping to separate the couple, has meanwhile notified Sara's father Sir William of their whereabouts, and the latter now arrives, ready to forgive his daughter. After threatening to harm their illegitimate offspring Arabella if Mellefont refuses to co-operate, Marwood persuades him to introduce her, under a false name, to Sara. Enraged to discover that Sir William now approves of his daughter's union, she revisits Sara and poisons her before taking flight, holding Arabella hostage until she can leave the country. Sara thereupon dies, forgiving her assassin, Mellefont kills himself in despair, and Sir William accedes to his daughter's dying request that he adopt Arabella on her release.

As usual, Lessing borrows elements from a number of earlier works. Marwood and her relationship to Sara and Mellefont are modelled on the ancient Medea (to whom she explicitly likens herself), reflecting Lessing's recent study, likewise published at Easter 1755, of Seneca's tragedies. But the plot is derived for the most part from Thomas Shadwell's Restoration comedy *The Squire of Alsatia* (1688), supplemented by tragic elements from Charles Johnson's domestic tragedy *Caelia* (1733).[63] Despite superficial similarities to Lillo's *The London Merchant* (for example, like Lillo's ruthless seductress Millwood, Lessing's Marwood is disparagingly referred to only by her surname), Lessing's play has little in common with Lillo's study of crime and punishment in the commercial world. And despite his later disclaimer,[64] the most important literary influence on his work is not a drama at all, but a novel, namely Richardson's *Clarissa*, which had enjoyed immense popularity

[59] See Guthke (2006) 26–7.
[60] Cf. D 81–3; B XI/1, 742; Kania *passim*.
[61] Cf. KGL 43 and 214–15.
[62] KGL 102.
[63] See Kies (1926–7).
[64] LM XV, 38–9.

in Germany since Michaelis's translation appeared in 1748–49.[65] Apart from external features such as the names of the characters (some of which are taken from Richardson, and the remainder from Congreve), the entire predicament of the heroine, with her moral agonizing, vain pleas for marriage, anxious dream and saint-like death, resembles that of Clarissa. The type of sensibility which pervades Lessing's play, and the style in which it is expressed, are also closer to Richardson's epistolary novel than to the domestic tragedies of Lillo, Moore, and Johnson.

Despite its multiple ancestry, Lessing's play has a unified structure akin in many respects to that of classical tragedy. Its form is analytical inasmuch as most of the decisive events, including Sir William's decision to forgive and reinstate his daughter and Marwood's resolve to terminate Sara's liaison with Mellefont, have already taken place; and since all of the characters have reason to refer constantly to the past,[66] the exposition (with the exception of further information supplied in Act IV concerning Marwood's past) is promptly and naturally delivered. The unity of time is strictly observed, giving an impression of remorseless necessity, and the unity of place is only marginally infringed, with scenes in different rooms of Sara's inn and at Marwood's inn nearby. There are, it is true, two distinct actions, but they constantly interact and finally converge in a simultaneous resolution: Acts I and III deal with Sara's remorse and forgiveness by her father, Acts II and IV with Marwood's intrigue against Sara's liaison, while Act V unites death and forgiveness in a tragic yet conciliatory dénouement. The peripeteia or turning point comes in Act III with the news that Sara's father has forgiven her, thereby obliging Marwood to consider more drastic measures. Sir William's delay in appearing in person to reinstate his daughter provides the traditional retardation in Act IV, giving Marwood time to implement her murderous plan; and her second confrontation with Sara, in which she reveals her true identity, constitutes the dramatic climax and anagnorisis whereby Sara recognizes her rival as the murderous assailant of her nightmare.

There are, however, major obstacles to equating the action with that of a classical tragedy. Sara's death is at least in part the result of fortuitous circumstances (such as her father's improbable delay and the intervention of a jealous rival), and it is in any case out of all proportion to her fault, for which she has in any case repented and been forgiven; and even if it is her own reference to her nightmare of being murdered by 'a person like myself' which first puts the idea into Marwood's head, this may well precipitate the murder, but it neither motivates nor justifies it. There is certainly no poetic justice here.[67]

The whole drift of Lessing's play is in fact to relativize and extenuate—if not to condone—Sara's lapse from virtue.[68] Every effort is made, even by her father and his spokesman Waitwell, to present it as understandable, in the light of her father's original refusal to take her love seriously. Not even Mellefont, as the author of the entire crisis, is condemned, and Sir William declares after the latter's death 'he was

[65] See Cerf *passim*; GEL: *Miss Sara Sampson*, ed. Eibl, 119–33.
[66] See Schmiesing (1995). [67] Cf. Mönch 44–5. [68] Cf. Steinmetz (1972).

more unfortunate than wicked', adding 'One grave shall contain them both.' Given the Church's refusal in those days to accord suicides a decent burial, the latter statement is strikingly liberal: its underlying spirit is that of 'tout comprendre, c'est tout pardonner', the Pelagian belief of the *Aufklärung* that human error is not the result of inherent evil, but of imperfect understanding.

But if this is the case, ought we not to consider Marwood, too, as 'more unfortunate than wicked', as a victim of adverse circumstance rather than a criminal? In the delayed exposition which Marwood supplies in Act IV concerning her own past, she certainly appears in this light when we learn how, as a young widow of impeccable moral principles, she had voluntarily released Mellefont from his promise of marriage—just as Sara has been asked to do—until he could devise a way of securing a legacy without fulfilling the attached condition that he marry someone else; only later, we are told, did she succumb to his sexual advances. If we accept this account of her past as true—and her recent behaviour gives us little incentive to do so—she does indeed seem no more culpable than Sara. Nevertheless, she is the same person who, in Act II, had threatened to torture her daughter Arabella to death and attempted to kill Mellefont with a dagger, who practises systematic deception, who triumphantly (her own expression) declares 'vengeance and rage have made me a murderess', and who does not hesitate to take her daughter hostage in order to avoid arrest for her crime. She is, in short, the moral antithesis of Sara, and the similarity between the two is purely a similarity of situation, inasmuch as both of them were seduced by the same individual. But if this is so, why does Lessing not invite the same moral indulgence for Marwood as he does for Sara and Mellefont?

One reason, of course, is that Marwood is modelled on the ancient Medea, who inhabits a different moral universe from Sara and her literary prototype Clarissa. If Marwood's story of her past is true, it can at most arouse momentary sympathy for her, but it can neither explain nor excuse those volcanic passions which endanger and finally destroy those who oppose her will. Her villainy is in the mould of Seneca and the baroque tragedians who followed him:[69] it proceeds from her failure or inability to control her passions as Stoic morality prescribes, whereas Sara's and Mellefont's surrender to their (albeit less destructive) passions is judged by different and more indulgent criteria. Marwood is consequently untypical of eighteenth-century villains, who are usually characterized not by emotional excess, but by calculating self-interest and urbane cynicism in the manner of Richardson's Lovelace, Goethe's Mephistopheles, Laclos' Valmont, and Marinelli in Lessing's own later *Emilia Galotti*—and in any case, very few of them are female. Whichever way one looks at the problem of Sara's guilt and Marwood's moral responsibility, loose ends remain: Sara is too innocent to fit easily into a traditional tragic framework, and Marwood's anarchic wickedness is difficult to reconcile with that moral optimism which, despite the catastrophe, underlies the play as a whole. The question which must now be asked is whether, given that Lessing was writing a new

[69] See Alt (1994) 198; also Brown (1977) 146–7.

kind of tragedy, these inconsistencies are an inherent feature of the *bürgerliches Trauerspiel* as he understood it, or merely the result of imperfectly integrated literary borrowings.

The public at which *Miss Sara Sampson* was directed was one conditioned by the sentimental comedies of Gellert and his French counterparts—and, of course, by the novels of Richardson. In all of these works, there is a pronounced moral element, but its appeal is rather to the emotions of the audience and readers than to their rational judgement. The sensibility of the literary characters, their capacity for natural feeling, serves, it will be remembered, as an index of their inherent goodness, just as their lack of such feelings is a sign of moral atrophy or corruption. It follows from this premise that the depiction of such feelings—or passions, as they are regularly called at this time—in such a way that they can be sympathetically shared by the audience or reader is a primary aim of the morally edifying writer.

The difficulty with this view is that the connection between natural feelings and correct moral judgement is neither constant nor necessary. In fact, one of the earliest and most influential exponents of the view that the arts should depict and arouse the passions, namely Jean-Baptiste Du Bos in his *Réflexions critiques sur la poésie et sur la peinture* of 1719, sees no necessary connection at all between the arousal of passion and the promotion of morality; for in his opinion, the chief aim of art is to please, and the depiction or arousal of powerful feelings of any kind is inherently pleasurable, even if the feeling concerned—such as pity or anger—contains an unpleasant or indeed inhumane element.[70] One of those whom Du Bos' argument did not satisfy was Moses Mendelssohn, and in his letters *On the Sentiments* (*Über die Empfindungen*), published in the late summer of 1755, he contends that, among those 'mixed' emotions which contain an unpleasant element, that of pity or compassion (*Mitleid*) is by far the most attractive to the artist, and to the tragedian in particular.[71] It is aroused above all by the spectacle of an innocent person suffering, and it has a positive moral content inasmuch as it embodies love or admiration for the moral perfection of the pitied individual. The terms which Mendelssohn uses to describe such pity—as an 'ecstasy' (*Wollust*) or 'heavenly feeling'—clearly indicate that his theory is no less influenced by literary sensibility, and particularly by Lessing's recently published *Miss Sara Sampson*, which he explicitly cites and praises,[72] than by the Wolffian rationalism on which his philosophy is for the most part based.

For the characters of literature themselves, the reliance on natural feelings as a moral guide is, however, fraught with danger and potentially a source of confusion.[73] Sara, for example, is convinced from beginning to end that her love for Mellefont is inherently virtuous, yet her conscience and the dictates of conventional morality tell her that it is immoral unless it is approved by her father and sanctioned by a religious ceremony. She also judges Mellefont positively, and

[70] See Bender (1984) 60–3. [71] JA I, 107–11. [72] JA I, 94–5.
[73] Cf. Michelsen (1990d) 203–16; Alt (1994) 207–8.

Marwood negatively, for their equal participation in the same irregular relationship.[74] Such moral confusions are transmitted, furthermore, to the audience and readers whose pity or sympathy (the German word *Mitleid* does duty for both) is elicited. Mendelssohn was plainly aware of this problem which Lessing's tragedy raised, and in his treatise of 1755, he offers a radical solution by postulating different ethical standards for art and real life:[75]

> The stage has its own distinct ethics. In life, nothing is ethically good unless it is grounded in our perfection; on the stage, on the other hand, everything is ethically good which is grounded in powerful passion. The purpose of drama is to arouse passions. For this reason, suicide is theatrically good.

Mellefont's suicide, which arouses our pity (and that of Sir William), is cited as an example; and by implication, Sara's emotionally inspired but morally confused judgements are theatrically no less laudable in so far as they arouse an equally sympathetic reaction.

This claim of the passions on our moral sympathy—a claim inherent in literary sensibility—inevitably led to conflict with the defenders of conventional morality, including the Church. (One need only think of the storm of protest from such quarters over Goethe's *Sorrows of Werther* as a supposed apology for adulterous passion and for suicide.) *Miss Sara Sampson* invites divergent responses from our moral sympathy and rational judgement—for example in the scene in which Sara at first refuses, and finally agrees, to read her father's letter of forgiveness. To the rational judgement, she may appear to be cultivating her feelings of remorse to the point of perversity, prolonging her self-torment by casuistical subtleties to the neglect of her anxiously waiting father. But in terms of its emotional effect, this scene serves to display Sara's natural virtue and moral suffering from as many angles as possible, thereby eliciting the maximum amount of sympathy.[76] Similarly, while Marwood's extreme wickedness may seem out of keeping with eighteenth-century (and present-day) moral theory, it serves very well as a foil to enhance our appreciation of Sara's virtue. Or again, while Sara's death may owe more to fortuitous circumstance than to any tragic guilt on her part, its real function is to allow her virtue and suffering to surpass the level even of her earlier remorse, thereby generating a climax of sympathy comparable to that with which readers throughout Europe responded to the death of Clarissa. Atoning for Marwood's failure as a mother by assuming responsibility for her daughter, and forgiving her assassin even as she dies in agony from the latter's poison, Sara undergoes an apotheosis which has little to do with the solution of moral problems, but everything to do with Richardsonian sensibility. For such sensibility is less effectively communicated through the tragic pattern of guilt and atonement than through the episodic revelation of basically unchanging characteristics, and the only development which this allows is one of degree rather than of kind. Henry Mackenzie, in his novel of sensibility *The Man of Feeling* (1771), took the logical step of dispensing altogether with a plot by

[74] See Ter-Nedden 102. [75] JA I, 94. [76] See van Ingen 49–50.

means of the fiction that only a fragmentary (i.e. episodic) record of his hero's life had survived. Richardson and Goethe (in *The Sorrows of Werther*) opted instead for the naturally episodic letter form, concluding—like Lessing—with a grand emotional climax. The emotional response which *Miss Sara Sampson* requires of its audience likewise remains essentially the same throughout, and the references to tears and lamentation which are usually associated with the final stages of a tragedy are in this case present from the first scene onwards.[77] (They are, indeed, more numerous in the first half of the play, which contains over thirty of them, than in the second.)[78] The situation in the final scenes serves merely to intensify a response which, just as in the sentimental comedy, has been cultivated from the start.

One feature of the final scenes which should be mentioned are the religious references which, though present throughout the work, become particularly prominent towards the end. This has led some commentators to look for a religious sense in the play, likening it, for example, to a martyr tragedy,[79] or at least discerning in it that kind of providential pattern or theodicy which Lessing himself would later associate with tragedy in his *Hamburg Dramaturgy*.[80] The first to suggest that the play contains a religious message was the Göttingen theologian Michaelis, who stated in his review that it was simply a vehicle for the Christian doctrine 'that he who has cause to seek forgiveness should himself forgive' (that is, for the fifth supplication of the Lord's Prayer).[81] This interpretation has been amplified by modern critics, who have argued that the stages in Sara's spiritual development—her sinful passion and disobedience to her father, her suffering and repentance, her forgiveness by her father, her acceptance thereof, her own forgiveness of her enemy, and her final redemption and transfiguration—correspond to the stations in the process of salvation as defined by Lutheran theology.[82]

The textual evidence is, however, less clear-cut than this scheme might suggest. The dying Sara declares 'I am dying, and I forgive the hand through which God seeks me out'. The word *heimsucht*, translated here as 'seeks me out', denotes a divine visitation of a punitive kind, and it would consequently seem that Sara regards her death as a punishment for her sin—or alternatively, as she adds shortly afterwards, as a deliverance from further temptation. Yet as already noted, she at no point abjures the very passion which led her into sin and temptation in the first place: on the contrary, she reaffirms it in the same speech. As for her salvation or experience of divine grace, the main evidence for this is her father's remark as she dies: 'No longer my earthly daughter, but already half an angel—what can a sorrowing father's blessing do for a spirit on whom all the blessings of heaven descend?' But neither Sara's own words nor Sir William's pious assumption give any hint of that grace which, through faith in Christ, overcomes sinful human nature.[83] Sara's virtue, in Pelagian fashion, is a product of her natural feelings, whose promptings

[77] See Barner (1983); also L. to Mendelssohn, 18 December 1756.
[78] See Ziolkowski 271. [79] See, for example, van Ingen 63.
[80] LM X, 120–1; cf. vom Hofe *passim*. [81] Braun I, 59–60.
[82] Bornkamm 391–3; cf. van Ingen 52; vom Hofe 390–1; R. C. Zimmermann (1986) 258–9.
[83] Cf. Fick (2010) 158–9.

she follows to the last. By the same token, she is in no sense a martyr, because she does not die for her faith or for any sacred cause; she dies as the passive and involuntary victim of a jealous rival's revenge. And although there are some token indications—such as Arabella's adoption by Sir William—that a benevolent providence is ultimately in control, these do not amount to a theodicy of the kind which Lessing would later recommend for tragedy in the *Hamburg Dramaturgy*.[84]

This is not to deny that the play is full of religious images and terminology. But they are employed in a secular and naturalistic sense, and the supernatural element inherent, for example, in the Lutheran theology of justification and grace is conspicuously absent. Many of the religious expressions are plainly figurative, as when Mellefont describes the dying Sara as a 'saint'. Such use of religious language to reinforce and intensify secular emotions (as when applied by young men to attractive women) is a common feature of literary sensibility in Germany, from Klopstock's love poetry to Goethe's *Werther*. The sanctification of erotic passion, whereby the natural is equated with the divine, accompanies the rise of romantic love in the mid-eighteenth century. Its expression in *Miss Sara Sampson* is still relatively restrained, but the erotic allure of the repentant fallen woman—a recurrent figure in the literature of sensibility from Nicholas Rowe's *The Fair Penitent* (1703) to Rousseau's *La Nouvelle Héloïse* and Gretchen in Goethe's *Faust*[85]—is no small part of Sara's attractiveness, which the religious epithets do nothing to diminish.

To conclude on the relation of Lessing's play to traditional kinds of tragedy: the primary aim of the work is not to communicate any moral or religious lesson, but to arouse sympathetic emotions. This is wholly consistent with Lessing's statements in his essay on Seneca, written only a few months before the play, that tragedy has no need to communicate a moral lesson, and that its chief function is to arouse the passions—except that the kind of passion aroused by this particular tragedy is determined not so much by classical precedents as by the conventions of literary sensibility. The actions of the characters, their woes, their failings and their virtues, are presented to us not for moral judgement but in order to afford us a lachrymose pleasure in which both pity and admiration are involved. This aesthetic end takes priority over moral and religious considerations, so that actions which contribute to the former do not always yield a coherent or unambiguous sense in relation to the latter. In this respect, Lessing's version of the *bürgerliches Trauerspiel* differs, at least in emphasis, from the works of some other practitioners such as Lillo, who attach greater importance to fear and admonition than to the arousal of pity, sometimes adding cautionary subtitles to underline the moral purpose of their work. The priority which Lessing accords to pity in *Miss Sara Sampson* would decisively influence his own theory of tragedy when he came to formulate it two years later.

As a *bürgerliches Trauerspiel*, *Miss Sara Sampson* deals not with kings and heroes of the past, but with the domestic life of ordinary citizens in the present. It accord-

[84] Cf. Steinmetz (1972) 21. [85] Cf. Petriconi *passim*.

ingly reflects some of the changes and tensions in the European society of its time, especially those affecting the family, and much of the literature concerned with this play has been devoted to such issues.[86] The main institution depicted is the closed patriarchal family, currently under pressure from the affective individualism of the younger generation to allow greater personal freedom, particularly in the choice of marriage partner. This generational conflict becomes most acute in the father-daughter relationship, which is the subject of numerous domestic tragedies; for the daughter's moral identity, like that of her mother, is based on unquestioning obedience to her father—at least until she has found a husband, and new moral authority, of her own. Her disobedience incurs the risk of social disgrace and loss of marriage prospects on her part, and loss of face and possible support in old age on that of her father. Besides, in the era of sensibility, the seduction and penitence of an erring daughter has far greater emotional potential than the clash of a refractory son with a paternal despot. One authority accordingly notes that, in thirty-seven out of forty-four domestic tragedies studied, the main figure is a daughter.[87] Mothers, on the other hand, whose influence in such situations is typically minimal, are often dispensed with altogether (we are informed in Lessing's play that Sara's mother died in childbirth). This omission also serves to underline the patriarch's absolute authority, as well as his vulnerability in the event of a serious challenge from his offspring.

In *Miss Sara Sampson*, this challenge comes when Sara allows herself to be seduced by Mellefont and his promises of marriage and elopes with him after her father has condemned the liaison. But the hour of the self-assertive woman has not yet come—not, at least, in German drama—and her defiance quickly turns to regret. Though she feels this regret not over her lover but over her own act of disobedience, the feeling seems to have been brought on by Mellefont's prevarication over the promised marriage; for she has forfeited her original moral identity without gaining a new one, and the voice of her conscience, of the patriarchal ethos which she has infringed, becomes an obsessive presence.[88] Mellefont, of course, has transgressed the same ethos by seducing Sara and neglecting his promise of marriage, but his conscience, though uneasy, is much less imperious—not only because he enjoys greater licence as a male, but also, perhaps, because he lost both his parents, and the voice of parental authority, in his early years.[89] He has, furthermore, lived the life of a libertine, having squandered his patrimony, 'visited immoral women', and kept company with 'gamblers and vagabonds'.[90] His plan to take Sara to France,[91] the homeland of libertinism, confirms that his apparent reform is far from complete, and it is easy to understand why Sir William considered him an unsuitable match for his daughter. The 'wretched inn' which they now inhabit symbolizes the social limbo in which they now find themselves: as in the later *Minna von Barnhelm*, the inn is the home of displaced persons who have lost their identity.

[86] See, for example, Seeba (1977); Kittler *passim*; Sasse (1988); Vogg *passim*.
[87] Vogg 62. [88] See Mauser (1975) 11–12. [89] LM II, 316.
[90] LM II, 271. [91] LM II, 277.

Mellefont's role, like that of Sara, is nevertheless essentially passive. But whereas Sara is passive because she is a daughter and a woman, Mellefont is inherently weak-willed, pulled to and fro by the conflicting influences of the two kinds of society—traditional and libertine—in which he moves. He is neither as confident, nor as dangerous, as the thoroughgoing libertine such as Richardson's Lovelace. The true embodiment of libertinism in this play is Marwood, who is both resolute and ruthless.

As already mentioned, the play contains two distinct actions, and neither is initiated by Sara or Mellefont. Both, in a sense, are initiated by Marwood, who has informed Sir William of his missing daughter's whereabouts. But Sir William acts independently thereafter, taking immediate steps to forgive and rehabilitate his daughter. The second action is initiated by Marwood, who mounts a sustained effort to recall Mellefont to his libertine existence and destroy his relationship with Sara. Sir William and Marwood are, then, the true antagonists in the play, which can be understood as a duel between these two figures and the principles which they represent, fought over the souls of those whom they claim as their own. Both figures are rather larger than life: Sir William, who speaks the first and last lines of the play, is twice described by Mellefont as 'a godlike [*göttlichen*] man',[92] and his life-sustaining role is confirmed when he agrees to adopt Arabella in place of the daughter he has lost. And Marwood, who, with her deadly potion and triumphant departure, retains something of Medea's daemonic aura, is likened to a 'serpent'[93] and, in contrast to Sara ('on whom all the blessings of heaven descend'), is consigned by Mellefont to the infernal powers:[94]

> May all of hell beset her path! Let heaven hurl consuming fire down upon her, and may the earth give way beneath her to devour this greatest monster among women!

These references transcend the tensions of eighteenth-century society and take us into the realm of myth. We know that Lessing had long been familiar with the Faust legend, and that he had almost certainly seen the popular stage version as performed, for example, by Franz Schuch's company in Berlin on 14 June 1754.[95] His correspondence, at any rate, confirms that he was planning a Faust drama of his own—remarkably, in the form of a *bürgerliches Trauerspiel*[96]—in the latter half of 1755, and it may well be that the idea of a cosmic contest between good and evil was already in his mind when he wrote *Miss Sara Sampson* a few months earlier.

Even without this mythological framework, Sir William remains an idealized figure. Before the drama begins, he has undergone a transformation from stern patriarch to loving father, respectful of his daughter's wishes, a change which reflects a similar, though not yet complete, development in the eighteenth-century European family.[97] That this development is, in Sir William's case, already complete and irrevocable is underlined by an extraordinary scene just before Mellefont's suicide. Sir William listens with tolerance and compassion as the remorse-stricken young

[92] LM II, 311. [93] LM II, 285. [94] LM II, 342–3. [95] See LM I, 282; G II, 774.
[96] See Mendelssohn to L., 19 November 1755 and L. to Breitenbauch, 12 December 1755.
[97] Cf. Neumann 23–8; Ter-Nedden 53–5.

man does his utmost, by recalling in lurid terms how he seduced his innocent daughter and led her to her destruction, to provoke Sir William into pronouncing that anathema which Mellefont feels he deserves. When this attempt fails and Mellefont kills himself instead, Sir William embraces him as his son, thereby replacing the father he had lost in his infancy. (In this, the least autobiographical of Lessing's dramas, we may glimpse here an enactment of that paternal tolerance which the author had sought in vain from his father during his own rebellious youth.) Thus, the family of which Sir William is head extends beyond ties of blood and legal attachment to include both his daughter's seducer and the child of his daughter's assassin. And when he emancipates his servant Waitwell to share his declining years as a friend and equal, it extends further still to transcend boundaries of social class. It thereby becomes an image of that ideal human community which will feature in Lessing's late works, and as such—like the liberal views on choice of partner and on suicide which are also expressed in this drama—it is less a reflection of mid-eighteenth-century German society as he knew it than of his hopes for a utopian future.

In comparison with earlier German tragedies, *Miss Sara Sampson* nevertheless marks a major shift towards realism. It inherits this tendency from its close relative, the sentimental comedy, which Lessing had commended in 1754 as closer to real life than the satirical comedy which preceded it.[98] But whereas prose, even colloquial prose, had long been accepted in comedy, verse remained the norm in tragedy (as in Lessing's own *Samuel Henzi*). Lessing consequently had to create a new medium of tragic prose, natural-sounding yet dignified, with little in the way of precedent to assist him. The nearest thing to a model was the sentimental comedy, but its bland and simpering sentiments gave little guidance on how to express the stronger passions associated with tragedy. In French classical tragedy, the passions are communicated in a formal and rhetorical manner, which can give the impression that the characters are not so much expressing their feelings as supplying a commentary on them—even referring to themselves at times in the third person.[99] The characters in *Miss Sara Sampson* likewise tend to stand back from their feelings, reflecting on them and describing them with a precision which is hard to reconcile with the strong emotions and acute suffering which they profess to feel;[100] this may to some extent be a legacy of classicism. But it is also influenced by the conventions of literary sensibility, which require a more prolonged and calculated display of pathetic emotion that the situations in question would generate in real life. In Richardson's epistolary novels, the characters accordingly ruminate over and analyse their feelings at length, and Lessing's dialogue, with a long-windedness and literary flavour sometimes out of keeping with dramatic figures speaking in the heat of passion, certainly owes something to this precedent. Mendelssohn also found some of the speeches too philosophical for theatrical performance:[101] he probably had in mind such passages as Mellefont's disquisition on psycho-somatic

[98] LM VI, 51. [99] Cf. LM V, 119 (*Samuel Henzi*).
[100] See, for example, LM II, 274, 318, 345. [101] Mendelssohn to L., 11 August 1757.

disorders (IV,1), Waitwell's discourse on the pleasures of forgiveness (III,3), and Sara's casuistical exercises (III,3) and reflections on moral stringency (IV,8). He may not have realized that the responsibility for this was largely his own, for the passages in question recall his own informal philosophical writings such as the *Philosophical Dialogues*, which Lessing was seeing through the press just as he began work on *Miss Sara Sampson*.[102]

Although the critical response to the play was generally favourable, the point was repeatedly made that some of the speeches are too long, learned and untheatrical.[103] While Lessing conceded that this criticism was justified in some instances, he defended his overall strategy with the help of two distinct arguments. Firstly, in a tacit admission that some of the dialogue is more literary than theatrical, he said that he had no intention of deleting the philosophical passages 'at least until there cease to be more readers of tragedies than spectators'.[104] This was a valid point, for at a time when the German-speaking theatre was still underdeveloped, such dramas continued to reach more people through the printed word than through live performance. But Lessing's second argument is more substantial, because it takes into account the need not just for good literary drama but also for effective theatre: for he also maintains that he had deliberately introduced that feature of the play which attracted most criticism—namely the characters' lengthy commentaries on their own emotions—in order to help the actors to enter into their roles and perform them with the appropriate kind of expression. This at first sight paradoxical contention, which he clarifies in a letter to Mendelssohn,[105] calls for further examination.

Until around 1750, tragic performance in the French and French-influenced theatre was orotund and declamatory: formal recitation—or incantation—of the text was primary, and gestures and movements served merely to emphasize and punctuate the meaning. In England, the neo-classical style of acting was little different, and a critical observer commented on the art of James Quin, its leading exponent, 'His utterance is a continual sing-song, like the chanting of vespers; and his action resembles that of heaving ballast in the hold of a ship.'[106] Towards the middle of the century, a reaction set in. With David Garrick in England and several theorists, including Diderot, in France, a new ideal of 'natural'—that is, more realistic—acting arose. This development affected the German theatre from the late 1740s, but did not fully supplant the older, declamatory style until the 1770s, above all in the work of Friedrich Ludwig Schröder.[107] Lessing, however, supported it from the start, and translated relevant works by two French theorists, namely *L'Art du théâtre* (1750) by Antoine-François Riccoboni[108] and extracts from *Le Comédien* (1747) by Rémond de Sainte-Albine,[109] publishing them in his *Contributions* (1750) and *Theatrical Library* (1754) respectively. Both of these theorists

[102] See Altmann (1973) 38–9.
[103] See, for example, GEL: *Miss Sara Sampson*, ed. Eibl, 247; E. Schmidt I, 673.
[104] To Mendelssohn, 18 August 1757. [105] To Mendelssohn, 14 September 1757.
[106] McIntyre 2 and 63. [107] See Ziolkowski 264.
[108] See pp. 58 and 104 above; reprinted in B I, 884–934. [109] LM VI, 120–52.

taught that the recitation of the text, and the entire deportment of the actor, should be as natural as possible, and Lessing planned to reinforce this message with a work of his own entitled *The Actor* (*Der Schauspieler*), on which he began work in 1754. Only sketches for this work survive,[110] dealing mainly with gesture, movement, and deportment, but the principles they embody were very much in his mind when he wrote *Miss Sara Sampson*. It was his intention that the same ideal of naturalness, of realism, at which he aimed (with mixed success) in writing the text should distinguish the stage performance.

In the age-old debate concerning the physical expression of emotion (or *eloquentia corporis*), a central issue was whether, or to what extent, the actor should actually experience the emotions required by the role performed.[111] Sainte-Albine favoured complete identification by the actor with his role, so much so that only those who had experienced the relevant passions in real life should perform them on stage.[112] Riccoboni, however, argued that complete identification with a role was both impossible and undesirable, given the constantly changing emotions involved and the numerous constraints imposed by the theatre.[113] Instead, careful observation of the physical manifestations of different emotions, reinforced by constant practice in reproducing them, should enable the actor to achieve a fully convincing performance. (This was also the method employed and advocated by Garrick.)[114] Lessing is very much in agreement with Riccoboni, although he also believes that observation and practice will eventually enable the actor to enter into the required emotions (as recommended by Sainte-Albine), with the consequent advantage that the actor's performance will then spontaneously include further, and genuinely natural, manifestations of the emotions in question.[115]

This, then, is the main reason why the characters describe their own, and each other's, emotions at such length in *Miss Sara Sampson*. Through the power of suggestion, the words of the text enable the actor to experience more fully, and hence display spontaneously, the relevant emotion. As Lessing puts it, 'the more they [the words] analyse it [the emotion], the more diverse the angles from which they portray it, the more imperceptibly the actor will himself enter into it'.[116] The frequent references in the dialogue to the gestures, expressions, and physical states of the characters are plainly intended to amplify this effect, but they also provide the actors with much information on how to perform their role, just as stage directions (which were generally laconic and minimal in Lessing's day) would do in the following centuries. A classic example is Sara's reaction as Marwood, disguised as 'Lady Solmes', reveals her true personality: 'You terrify me, my lady; how can your features change so suddenly? You flush, rage blazes from your staring eyes, and you gnash your teeth—'. Inevitably, such supplementary material inflates the text considerably; but it also serves an important practical function. It is not just an adaptation of Richardson's epistolary style to drama, but an integral part of Lessing's

[110] LM XIV, 179–89. [111] On this see Košenina 127–34.
[112] See LM IV, 131–3. [113] B I, 904–6. [114] See McIntyre 3 and 70.
[115] Cf. Ziolkowski 265–9; Golawski-Braungart (1995) 187–93; also Berthold (2008b).
[116] To Mendelssohn, 14 September 1757.

programme of realism in the writing and performance of tragedy, designed to encourage the actors to abandon the old declamatory style and make fuller use of their bodies and facial expressions. Its unfortunate side effect, noticed already by early critics, is that the programme itself intrudes into the text to such an extent as to undermine the realism which it seeks to promote.[117]

Miss Sara Sampson was first performed on 10 July 1755 by Konrad Ackermann's company in Frankfurt an der Oder.[118] Ackermann, a pioneer of the new realism, had recently performed in Berlin, and Lessing almost certainly saw his production of Voltaire's *Oedipe* at the Town Hall in May of that year. He selected Ackermann in preference to Schuch's less polished ensemble to perform the new tragedy, although this meant following him to the provinces in order to do so. He travelled to Frankfurt with Ramler on 9 July, and assisted the actors at the dress rehearsal the following morning. Ackermann himself played Mellefont, his wife played Marwood, and his stepson, the young Friedrich Ludwig Schröder, played Arabella. The performance lasted three and a half hours, and Lessing received a formal ovation at the end.

All accounts of the early performances testify to the overwhelming emotional effect. The Frankfurt audience 'sat as still as statues, and wept' throughout. Nicolai, who saw it in the following year, reported: 'I wept frequently until the beginning of the fifth act, but was finally […] so affected that I could weep no longer.'[119] Christian Adolf Klotz, who was likewise overcome when he saw it in Hanover, observed how another spectator, struggling with his emotions, burst into convulsive laughter.[120] The nine-year-old Iffland, later to become a leading exponent of sentimental drama, was stamped for life when his father sent him to a performance for his moral edification.[121] Today, these reactions are difficult to comprehend. It must be remembered that literary sensibility, then in full flood, had hitherto been confined to the lyric, novel, epic (Klopstock's *Messiah*), and sentimental comedy, and had only recently been combined with the more distressing material of tragedy.[122] But above all, the protracted death of the heroine on stage, with prose dialogue and a hitherto unprecedented degree of realism, involved the audience so completely as to generate collective hysteria.

Productions by the leading theatre companies—Koch, Schönemann, and Döbbelin (not to mention Schuch)—followed in many German cities. A translated version was performed successfully in France,[123] and Diderot planned to include it, with Lillo's *London Merchant* and Moore's *The Gamester*, in a volume of domestic tragedies to follow up his own *drame bourgeois* of 1757, *Le Fils naturel*;[124] English versions were published later in the century in London and Philadelphia. Reviews and criticisms, apart from some adverse comments on the overloaded dialogue, were favourable (though understandably more restrained than the reactions to live

[117] Cf. Schröder (1972) 182.
[118] See D 87–8; Rudloff-Hille (1982) 36.
[119] To L., 3 November 1756.
[120] E. Schmidt I, 278.
[121] See GEL: *Miss Sara Sampson*. Erläuterungen und Dokumente, ed. Richel, 51–2.
[122] See Barner (1983) 90.
[123] See Braun I, 163 and II, 37; Oehlke I, 436.
[124] See Heitner (1953) *passim*.

performances).[125] A single sour note was struck by Johann Jakob Dusch, who seems mistakenly to have held Lessing responsible for an adverse review of his own poems in Nicolai's *Bibliothek der schönen Wissenschaften* and now revenged himself with carping criticisms;[126] Lessing later repaid this attack with interest in his *Letters on Literature*.

Lessing's wager that he could 'reduce old women to tears' was more successful than he can possibly have foreseen, and he probably reacted to the orgies of weeping with a mixture of pride and embarrassment. He did for a time continue to measure the success of a tragedy by the quantity of compassionate tears it elicited, but he was ultimately out of tune with the excessive lachrymosity with which *Miss Sara Sampson* had been received:[127] literary sensibility would, at any rate, play only a minor role in his subsequent work. The fashion to which the play responded began to wane after 1770, and with it, the popularity of the play itself; thereafter, performances grew less frequent, and comments—not least those of Lessing—became more critical.[128] There have, of course, been more recent productions, but radical changes in taste since the 1750s make this a risky undertaking: when the work was performed in 1965 at the Landestheater in Darmstadt, for example, the final scene, in which the doctors arrive too late to save the dying Sara, was greeted with roars of laughter.[129] The play achieved its greatest influence in the first two decades of its existence—above all in the spate of sentimental tragedies, often with closely similar characters and plot, which were published during that time[130]—and the figures of Mellefont and Marwood served as prototypes for equivalent characters in dramas by Goethe, Schiller, and others later in the century.

Like *Samuel Henzi*, *Miss Sara Sampson* is an experimental work. It combines elements of classical tragedy with a new realism in which tearful sympathy with the misfortunes of ordinary people replaces awestruck wonderment at the fall of the mighty. Lessing employs every device of literary sensibility, then at the height of its popularity, to arouse the strongest kind of emotion which drama could hope to elicit in an age whose optimism was basically out of tune with tragedy. It is an ingenious construction, calculatingly produced by a writer who, unlike Richardson, Rousseau, or Sterne, was himself of a basically unsentimental disposition. As with his earlier *Damon*, there is little of the real Lessing in this work: one looks in vain for that leavening of wit and irony, that characteristic irreverence, which is present in almost all his other writings. But like all of his major plays, *Miss Sara Sampson* marks a new departure, in this case one of great historical importance. For all its flaws—its prolixity, its learned allusions, its often stilted dialogue, its overwhelming sentiment—it set serious German drama on an entirely new course. Classicistic tragedy, which had hitherto been the norm, soon became the exception

[125] See GEL: *Miss Sara Sampson*, ed. Eibl, 216–48; also GEL: *Miss Sara Sampson*. Erläuterungen und Dokumente, ed. Richel, 42–52.
[126] Braun I, 69–86. [127] See LM VII, 68; Barner (1983) 91–4.
[128] See D 338–40; Steinmetz (ed.) (1969) 24.
[129] GEL: *Miss Sara Sampson*. Erläuterungen und Dokumente, ed. Richel, 60.
[130] Cf. Guthke (2006) 77–9.

on the German stage—at least until Goethe and Schiller revived it, in more impressive form, towards the end of the century; but theirs was no longer an art for the popular stage, where sentimental dramas of family life continued to prevail. The next event of comparable significance in German tragedy was Lessing's own *Emilia Galotti* of 1772.

After the decline of baroque tragedy in the later seventeenth century, few tragedies were written in Germany—at least in the Protestant heartlands—until the time of Gottsched.[131] For this, changing philosophical assumptions are in part responsible. The early *Aufklärung*, schooled as it was in the metaphysical optimism of Leibniz and Wolff, considered the kind of events depicted in tragedy as untypical of the harmonious universe, as regrettable anomalies occasioned by human folly, and one of the main functions of tragedy was to show, by rational means, how such folly could best be avoided. This moralistic approach, appropriate enough in such forms as the fable or didactic poetry, could only trivialize tragedy, which is essentially concerned with extreme situations and powerful passions. Something other than rational morality was needed to reinvest it with genuine substance. Lessing and other exponents of the new domestic tragedy believed they had found this substance in sensibility.

Just as Lessing's theories of comedy were formulated after, rather than before, he wrote his first comedies, so also do his first serious attempts to construct a theory of tragedy come after the completion of *Miss Sara Sampson*. In his earliest comments after that date, it is already evident that his own play will form the basis of that theory. In the spring of 1756, he agreed to provide the preface for a volume of tragedies by James Thomson which a group of enthusiasts in Stralsund had translated into German.[132] After praising Thomson for his insight into human passions, he continues:

> I would infinitely prefer to have written *The London Merchant* as opposed to *The Dying Cato*, even if the latter has all the mechanical correctness on which its claim to serve as a model for the Germans was founded. And why? Because more tears were shed at a single performance of the former, even by the least sensitive individuals, than could possibly be shed at any number of performances of the latter, even by those of the greatest sensibility. And these tears of pity, of sentient humanity, are the sole purpose of tragedy, if it has any purpose at all.

If this was intended as a compliment to Thomson, it is a strangely back-handed one. For what it really implies is that Lessing would rather have written *Miss Sara Sampson* than any of Thomson's tragedies—but for obvious reasons, he cannot say so. He did, of course, share and sympathize with Thomson's aspiration to rework ancient tragic themes, and he had even begun, some five years earlier, to translate the latter's *Agamemnon* and *Tancred and Sigismunda*.[133] Besides, Thomson was British, and consequently a useful weapon to deploy against Gottsched and his French models—especially since Thomson's neo-classical regularity could be more easily

[131] See George 134. [132] LM VII, 66–71. [133] LM XXII, 47–69.

reconciled with the Roman, and increasingly often Greek, tragedies which Lessing liked to hold up as models for his contemporaries. (To this end, he even argues, on less than persuasive grounds, that the regularity of Thomson's dramas is more Greek than French in character.) What this amounts to is that, while he continues to defend heroic tragedy, he finds it increasingly difficult to do so. For on the one hand, he is no longer comfortable with either of its most familiar manifestations—namely those of Gottsched and of French classicism—and consequently looks to a British model instead (although it is hard to believe that he still found Thomson's monotonous declamations inspiring); and on the other, his own ideal of tragedy is now the *bürgerliches Trauerspiel*, whose affinities with heroic tragedy are tenuous.

It was Nicolai who prompted Lessing to formulate his theory of tragedy more systematically. In his *Letters Concerning the Present State of Belles-Lettres in Germany* (1755), Nicolai had deplored the dearth of good German tragedies, and, practical man as he was, he went on to announce a competition for the best tragedy, offering a prize of fifty talers.[134] On 31 August 1756, he sent Lessing, who was now in Leipzig, a summary of his own *Treatise on Tragedy* (*Abhandlung vom Trauerspiel*), written for the guidance of intending competitors and published in the following year.[135] Lessing had already indicated that he might have some ideas to contribute on the subject, and ever since his departure from Berlin in the previous autumn, Mendelssohn had been trying to engage him in learned discussion by correspondence.[136] Nicolai's letter was enough to inaugurate a debate between the three friends, which continued until May 1757. But unlike Nicolai, Lessing did not enter the debate with a ready-made theory. He elaborates his ideas piecemeal as he goes along—so much so that he twice has to ask his correspondents to return his letters to remind him of what he had previously said.[137] But he soon begins to refer to his reflections as a 'system', and they are indeed capable of systematic formulation.[138]

Nicolai probably thought that his *Treatise on Tragedy* was in tune with Lessing's views on the subject, for it is essentially an expanded version of what Lessing had said some two years earlier in his essay on Seneca. He had declared that the chief aim of tragedy is to arouse the passions, and not, as Gottsched had maintained, to impart a morally edifying lesson; in other respects, he had defended the three unities and those other conventions of heroic tragedy which Seneca had observed. Like so many works on tragedy, Nicolai's *Treatise* begins by invoking Aristotle's theory of catharsis. But it does so only in order to reject it. In Nicolai's opinion, Aristotle's contention that tragedy effects a 'purgation' or 'purification' (*Reinigung*, the standard German translation of the Greek 'catharsis', can mean either) of the passions is inappropriate and unhelpful, and he holds it responsible for the current wave of moralizing tragedies in Germany.[139] He is referring, of course, to Gottsched's

[134] Nicolai, Sämtliche Werke III, 122 and 168. [135] Ibid. III, 169–94.
[136] B XI/1, 84. All subsequent references to the correspondence of L., Mendelssohn and Nicolai are to this volume, not to the identical letters in Vol. III.
[137] B XI/1, 122 and 170–1. [138] B XI/1, 134, 146, 151.
[139] B XI/1, 105; cf. Nicolai, Sämtliche Werke III, 169–70.

interpretation of Aristotle, according to which tragedy identifies and warns against the errors into which passion—or lack of reason—plunges its heroes. Instead, he supports Du Bos' theory that the function of art is to arouse the passions, which—at least in art—are inherently pleasurable, and concludes: 'the best tragedy is that which arouses the passions most powerfully, not that which is likely to purify [*reinigen*] them'. The term 'passion' (German *Leidenschaft*) was by this time often applied not only to strong and even painful emotions (as in the Latin *passio*), but to emotions of every kind (as in Descartes' *Traité des passions*), so that Nicolai can add to the pity and fear which Aristotle associates with tragedy the feeling of 'admiration' (*Bewunderung*) for the tragic hero. (This emotion, particularly appropriate to heroic tragedy, was deduced by Renaissance and baroque theorists from Aristotle's statement that 'the marvellous'—i.e. that which is marvelled at or admired—should also be represented in tragedy.)[140] He then proceeds to classify the chief varieties of tragedy according to which passion, or combination of passions, they arouse: pity and fear predominate, for example, in the domestic tragedy, whereas admiration predominates in heroic tragedy.[141] After endorsing the three unities and other formal conventions of classical tragedy, Nicolai makes a final point, in which his desire to avoid a moralistic interpretation is again obvious. The tragic hero must have a fault (Aristotle's *hamartia*), but this fault need not be a vice or moral failing: it is merely 'an action or disposition which becomes a fault simply because it has unfortunate consequences for the hero'.[142]

These views no longer reflected Lessing's thinking on tragedy, as was already clear from the preface to Thomson's tragedies which he wrote after his departure from Berlin. For as he declares in his reply to Nicolai, pity is the only distinctively tragic emotion, and he proceeds to build his entire theory of tragedy upon it. He continues:[143]

> The purpose of tragedy is as follows: it should enlarge *our capacity for feeling pity*. It should not merely teach us to feel pity for this or that unfortunate individual, but should make us so responsive that the unfortunate individual, at all times and places and in every shape, must move us and gain our sympathy. […] *The most compassionate human being is the best human being*, the most inclined to all social virtues and every kind of magnanimity. Thus, whoever makes us feel pity makes us better and more virtuous, and the tragedy which does the former also does the latter—or rather, by doing the former it is able to do the latter.

With the help of this simple argument, Lessing manages to explain a great deal—ultimately, perhaps too much. By stressing the distinctive moral content of pity, he justifies the unique status which he has claimed for it. He also salvages the moral function of art, so highly prized by the Enlightenment, while at the same time upholding the aesthetic autonomy of the works concerned by showing that, in the case of pity, the message is not extraneous to, but inherent in the medium. And he

[140] Aristotle, Poetics, Ch. 24; Golawski-Braungart (1999) 401 and 409.
[141] B XI/1, 105–6; Nicolai, Sämtliche Werke III, 179.
[142] B XI/1, 107; Nicolai, Sämtliche Werke III, 185–7.
[143] B XI/1,118–20.

plausibly suggests that the effect of tragic pity lasts longer than that of the other tragic emotions, because it exerts a permanently humanizing influence on the spectator.[144]

This still leaves the problem of the other emotions associated with tragedy. Lessing points out that most of them, such as anger, love, or lust for revenge, are felt only by the dramatic characters, whereas pity alone is felt by the spectator.[145] And as for fear (or 'terror', as Lessing at this point calls it) and admiration, they are not so much 'passions' in their own right as stages in the emergence and waning of pity—terror at the hero's sudden misfortune, replaced at once by pity and then succeeded by admiration for the hero's fortitude. But since, as he points out in a subsequent letter,[146] pity should be aroused *throughout* the tragedy (he plainly has tragedies of sensibility in mind), and not just at the end, the feeling of admiration is as transitory as that of terror, simply allowing the spectator a moment in which to recover before the next wave of pity is elicited. He further reduces the importance of admiration by arguing that it is merely one half of tragic pity, which consists both of pain at the hero's misfortune and admiration for his virtues (or 'perfections', as Lessing calls them in the Wolffian terminology favoured by Mendelssohn).[147] With this ingenious argument, Lessing presents all three tragic emotions as stages in a single psychological process, of which pity is the centre and culmination.

Lessing's definition of pity as a 'mixed' emotion,[148] a compound of pleasure and displeasure, is borrowed, of course, from Moses Mendelssohn, who had already described it as such in his letters *On the Sentiments* of the previous year.[149] And although both he and Mendelssohn regard it as an emotion, the fact that the pleasure and displeasure it contains are aroused by an awareness of the merits (or 'perfections') and misfortunes of the tragic hero implies for both of them that it embodies a cognitive as well as an affective element—as, indeed, do all emotions in the Wolffian scheme which underlies their definition. This cognitive element allows Lessing further to refine his theory of pity by distinguishing different degrees, or stages, within the feeling of pity itself, providing a neat parallel with the three stages of terror, pity, and admiration which he had already distinguished within the larger process of tragic emotions. Using the example of a real-life encounter with a beggar, Lessing says that our initial reaction is one of sympathetic emotion (*Rührung*) at his obvious plight. Tears (*Tränen*) of pity result, however, only when we learn that his misfortunes and merits are both considerable. If we learn, however, that he subsequently despaired, murdered his family, and committed suicide, the excess of misfortune (and absence of 'perfection') produces a painful feeling of oppression (*Beklemmung*) which stifles our tears. Once again, pity appears as the mean between two extremes. (With typical ingenuity—and once more confirming that his theory is based on his own practice—Lessing explains

[144] Cf. Wölfel 119. [145] B XI/1, 118; cf. ibid. 168. [146] B XI/1, 146.
[147] B XI/1, 145. [148] B XI/1, 121; cf. 123–4. [149] JA I, 110.

Nicolai's inability to weep during the final act of *Miss Sara Sampson* as a result of *Beklemmung*.)[150]

The problem with this particular argument is that it comes perilously close to the position of Gottsched, whereby our responses to tragedy are essentially dependent on rational moral judgements concerning the vices and virtues of the tragic protagonists. But in this case, as both Lessing and Mendelssohn are aware, we are dealing primarily with feelings, whose cognitive content, in the Wolffian context of their discussion, is 'obscure' and potentially erroneous unless it is confirmed by rational judgement, which can alone decide whether or not the feelings are warranted by the objective properties of whatever gave rise to them. As Mendelssohn puts it in a philosophical work of 1756, 'whoever increases someone's sensibility has not thereby made him virtuous, unless he simultaneously improves his power of judgement';[151] he therefore locates the moral effect of tragedy in admiration rather than in pity, and regards Lessing's theory of tragic pity as fundamentally flawed.[152] For Lessing, however, this objection is beside the point. The natural feelings can, and regularly do, lead to incorrect moral judgements, as they do on several occasions in *Miss Sara Sampson*. But in the case of pity, the moral effect is purely subjective, and it makes no difference whether it is directed towards a worthy or an unworthy object, whether it is guided by rational insight or founded on a misapprehension: in either case, its humanizing power is undiminished: 'Pity […] improves us directly; it improves us without our having to contribute anything to it; it improves the intelligent man as well as the blockhead.'[153] In short, all that matters is that one's heart is in the right place. This is the crux of Lessing's theory, and essential to its proper understanding: the cognitive element in pity is not necessary, but contingent, and the theory as a whole is based not on a cognitive, but an affective system of ethics.[154] Although he does not say so, this is in sharp contrast to the theory of comedy which he also outlines in his reply to Nicolai's first letter.[155] For while comedy likewise arouses an emotional reaction (of amusement and laughter), the cognitive element in it is obviously essential, for the capacity which it develops 'to perceive readily all varieties of the ridiculous' in order that we may avoid them in our own behaviour must incorporate a correct objective judgement, otherwise the behaviour based on it will be morally unsound. In this case, Lessing really has reverted to Gottsched's equivalent theory.

Lessing's theory of pity is plainly akin to that implemented in his own *Miss Sara Sampson*. The pity in question can be felt even—indeed especially—by the simple person (the 'blockhead' of the 1756 correspondence), in whom the voice of natural virtue is still uncorrupted (as Mellefont's servant Norton reminds his libertine master).[156] The view that natural feelings are the source of virtue can be found in Lessing's works as early as 1751,[157] and as earlier noted, it may well have been influenced by Rousseau's first *Discourse*, which was published in that year. But the cognate

[150] B XI/1, 134–5. [151] JA I, 154. [152] B XI/1, 125–6. [153] B XI/1, 133.
[154] See Nisbet (1993) 12. [155] B XI/1, 120. [156] LM II, 320.
[157] LM V, 69 (cf. IV, 334 n. 1); XIV, 157.

theory of pity in the correspondence of 1756 is not, as has been argued,[158] derived from Rousseau's second *Discourse* of 1755. For unlike Lessing's pity, Rousseau's pity (at least in this particular work) is not a mixed feeling and does not include a cognitive element, but is purely instinctive and felt even by animals; it is also associated primarily with the state of nature, whereas Lessing's pity is a quintessentially social emotion, conducive to 'all social virtues'.[159] If one does seek a precedent for Lessing's theory, it is to be found not in Rousseau but in Michael Conrad Curtius' commentary to his edition of Aristotle's *Poetics*, favourably reviewed by Lessing in 1753 and cited by him in the correspondence.[160] As numerous commentators have noticed,[161] the germ of Lessing's theory is contained in the following words of Curtius:[162]

> Through the excitation of the passions, the humane impulses are implanted, awoken, and sustained. When the misfortune of a stranger on stage moves us strongly, pity and compassion become a capacity of the soul, and the philanthropist in the boxes or pit in whom the events depicted on stage have aroused the feeling of humanity will also prove to be a philanthropist in the actions of his life.

Similar views are expressed by other proponents of sensibility such as Diderot, who writes in *Le Fils naturel* of 1757: 'un peuple qui vient s'attendrir tous les jours sur la vertu malheureuse, ne peut être ni méchant ni farouche.'[163] But neither Curtius nor Diderot develops this idea so fully and impressively as Lessing, and in Curtius' case, the remark quoted above occurs in an account of tragedy which in other respects is strongly marked by rationalism.

The remaining features of Lessing's correspondence with his friends can be dealt with more briefly. As already mentioned, both Nicolai and Mendelssohn include admiration among the emotions aroused by tragedy, and Mendelssohn even regards it as primary. He does so on the grounds that it embodies a cognitive awareness of the merits (or 'perfections') of the person admired. As such, it is not merely—as Lessing claimed—an ingredient of pity, but an independent emotion: it is indeed the 'mother of virtue', because it inspires those who feel it to emulate the qualities of the person they admire.[164]

To this, Lessing replies that admiration, as a response to tragedy, is often directed at heroic virtues such as fortitude, which are themselves associated with a deficiency or suppression of natural feelings (he is plainly thinking of the heroes of baroque and Cornelian tragedy).[165] Such heroic insensitivity is, however, inimical to the arousal of pity, which Lessing continues to regard as the primary tragic emotion, and he therefore echoes Aristotle's view that admiration is ultimately more appropriate to epic than to tragic poetry.[166] Mendelssohn, on the other hand,

[158] Schings (1980) 38–43.
[159] B XI/1, 120; see also Schenkel 221; Michelsen (1990c) 132; Golawski-Braungart (1999) 424.
[160] LM V, 194–5; B XI/1, 178.
[161] See, for example, Wölfel 115–16; Alt (1994) 101–7.
[162] Curtius (1753) 390.
[163] Diderot (1975–) X, 65: 'A people which allows itself to be moved every day by virtue in misfortune can be neither evil nor barbarous.'
[164] B XI/1, 126.
[165] B XI/1, 130–2 and 147.
[166] B XI/1, 144–5; cf. ibid. 122.

regards pity as a 'mixed' emotion which contains both pleasure and displeasure, the latter of which, aroused by the pitied person's misfortune, is morally indifferent; and he agrees with Wolff that pity is a secondary phenomenon, ultimately derived from love, which is akin to admiration and inspired by an awareness of the loved object's perfections.[167] Thus, although he admits that admiration may on occasion diminish our feelings of pity, he considers this loss insignificant, since pity is of a lower cognitive order—and hence of less moral value—than admiration.[168] Lessing's final comment on this issue is that admiration is in fact less valuable than pity, for admiration can at most inspire us to emulate a particular deed, whereas pity promotes an enduringly humane disposition.[169] In short, he remains attached to his affective theory of tragic response, which is based on his own practice in *Miss Sara Sampson* and chiefly applicable to the new tragedy of sentiment, and minimizes the role of admiration, which he associates with the Stoic ethos of heroic tragedy.

The concepts and terminology of this debate are obviously derived from Aristotle's *Poetics*, which all the participants recognize as the ultimate authority on tragedy. But it is no less obvious—at least to the present-day reader—that the views expressed in it have little in common with Aristotle's theory of tragedy. The Aristotelian concepts with which the three friends, and Lessing in particular, have most difficulty are those of catharsis (including the function of pity and fear within it) and the tragic guilt or flaw of the hero. As already mentioned, Nicolai rejected the concept of catharsis from the start as responsible, in his eyes, for the moralizing interpretation of tragedy which he and Lessing (though less so Mendelssohn) are concerned to refute. And although Lessing does not himself reject the concept of catharsis, he is plainly dissatisfied with it, because he regards pity alone, and not fear, as the operative tragic emotion and in any case maintains that Aristotle's understanding of pity is erroneous[170]—presumably because it lacks the explicitly caritative and humanitarian overtones which the term had acquired in the Christian era ever since it was equated with the Latin *misericordia*. Another obstacle to a proper understanding of catharsis was that stress on admiration which had already led Corneille to doubt whether the concept served any useful purpose (although he continued to maintain that the cathartic process can help the spectator to avoid harmful passions).[171] But given Lessing's enduring respect for Aristotle, which would soon be reinforced by intensive studies of Sophocles and the art and culture of Greece, he continued to grapple with the problem until he found a way, in the *Hamburg Dramaturgy*, of reconciling the concept of catharsis with his own theory of tragedy as a training in compassionate sentiment.

Lessing has little use for the concept of tragic fear either, partly because—as noted above—he regards pity as uniquely important. In discussing its relation to pity, he at first translates Aristotle's *phobos* not as 'fear' (*Furcht*) at all, but as 'terror'

[167] Cf. JA II, 86; also ibid. 389. [168] B XI/1, 125–6.
[169] B XI/1, 149–50. [170] B XI/1, 151and 179.
[171] Cf. Golawski-Braungart (1999) 411–12 and 414.

(*Schrecken*), which, it will be recalled, he subordinates to pity by presenting it as a sudden and fleeting reaction which is quickly replaced by pity itself. He revises this view later in the correspondence, however, and argues that the proper translation of *phobos* is indeed *Furcht* (which had in fact been used to render Corneille's term for tragic fear, namely *crainte*, throughout the translation of the latter's *Trois discours sur le poème dramatique* which Lessing and Mylius had included in their *Contributions* of 1750).[172] In so doing, he implicitly acknowledges that fear is an emotion in its own right, and not just a passing stage in the emergence of pity. He now even admits that the fear inspired by tragedy may lead the spectator to avoid the excesses of passion which led to the hero's misfortune—just as in Corneille's and Gottsched's theory.[173] The reason for this surprising change of tack is that Lessing is here referring only to a possible effect of tragedy, not to a necessary one, in which pity alone would be involved. There is nevertheless an element of uncertainty here, and he probably realized that he had not yet adequately accounted for an emotion which Aristotle had considered essential to tragedy. As in the case of catharsis, he would return to this question some ten years later in the *Hamburg Dramaturgy*.

Finally, Aristotle's concept of *hamartia* or the tragic fault is equally problematic for Lessing, and he plainly had little use for it in *Miss Sara Sampson*. Nicolai had associated it with the moralistic theory of tragedy which he opposed, and he accordingly interpreted *hamartia* in a morally neutral sense as signifying any 'action or disposition which becomes a fault simply because it has unfortunate consequences for the hero'. Lessing adopts a similar course, maintaining that the function of such a fault is not so much moral as structural, in that it provides a link between the hero's character and his subsequent misfortune.[174] But if we stop to consider the crimes and atrocities which are commonplace in both ancient and Renaissance tragedy, we cannot avoid the impression that both theorists, in discarding moralistic interpretations, are at the same time brushing aside an essential feature of tragedy itself.

Based on his own *Miss Sara Sampson* and designed to fit and encourage the production of similar tragedies of sentiment, Lessing's theory is seriously inadequate when applied to other kinds of tragedy, including some of those which, by the time of the correspondence or shortly afterwards, he himself valued most highly. It would be absurd to maintain, for example, that the main emotional reaction evoked by Seneca's *Thyestes* or Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* is tearful compassion. But while Lessing seeks to minimize such negative factors as fear and guilt, he does so not because he is exclusively attached to sentimental tragedy, but because he finds it difficult, in the context of tragic theory, to reconcile them with that philosophical optimism to which he and his age were fundamentally committed. Yet even if we disregard such ideological difficulties, his theory of tragedy as a school of pity has serious internal deficiencies. The 'blockhead' who learns, through the experience of tragic pity, to

[172] B XI/1, 178–9; cf. Golawski-Braungart (1999) 407–9.
[173] B XI/1, 181. [174] B XI/1, 151–2.

exercise compassion may well perform compassionate actions in everyday life, but unless he is also aware of their objective significance, there is no guarantee that such actions will, in a given situation, be either appropriate or constructive. Nor does Lessing address the possibility that the exercise of pity may become excessive and self-indulgent, as it certainly did among many adherents of the culture of sensibility. He did, in fact, address some of these problems in later years, and it must be remembered that his correspondence on tragedy does not constitute a finished treatise and was not intended for publication. His theory of tragedy must ultimately be judged in the form in which he published it in the *Hamburg Dramaturgy* of 1769.

The correspondence of 1756–57 is, in any case, concerned not just with the theory of tragedy, but with wider issues as well. It develops further that interest in the senses, in psychology, in subjective consciousness which, already present in Baumgarten's aesthetics, was further stimulated by literary sensibility and debated on a theoretical level by other writers with whose works Lessing and his friends were familiar, including Shaftesbury, Burke, and Du Bos. In Lessing's theory of tragic pity, emotion itself becomes an agent of Enlightenment: the cultivation of tragic pity reinforces the lessons of rational morality and thereby harmonizes feeling with thought. Like Nicolai, Lessing by this time agreed with Du Bos that the exercise of the 'passions' is inherently pleasurable, even if their object—as in the case of tragedy—is in itself displeasing. For Mendelssohn's benefit, he reformulated this doctrine in terms reminiscent of Leibniz and Baumgarten, maintaining that all emotions, whether pleasant or unpleasant, are agreeable inasmuch as they enlarge our consciousness of our own reality.[175] Mendelssohn was convinced by this argument,[176] and himself affirmed a few years later:[177]

> We are destined in this life not only to improve the powers of the will and the understanding. On the contrary, we must also educate our feelings through sensuous cognition and the obscure drives [*Triebe*] of the soul through sensuous pleasure in order to attain a higher perfection.

From here, it is but a short step to Schiller's *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man*.[178]

As for Lessing himself, another consequence of the correspondence was to commit him firmly to that affective theory of ethics which, inherited from literary sensibility, was already implicit in *Miss Sara Sampson*. Human beings are naturally endowed with generous and compassionate feelings, which tragedy seeks to cultivate and consolidate, because 'the most compassionate human being is the best human being': the feelings, in short, rather than reason, are the primary source of morality. This view of ethics is plainly at variance, however, with the cognitive ethics of Wolff and German rationalism, which bases itself on the 'clear and distinct' data of reason alone, not the 'obscure and confused' data of the feelings. Lessing nevertheless continues, in subsequent years, to subscribe to Wolffian ethics in contexts other than that of the theory of tragedy. Inconsistencies of this kind are,

[175] B XI/1, 166–7. [176] B XI/1, 172.
[177] JA I, 393 (1761); cf. ibid. I, 389. [178] Cf. Alt (1994) 190.

of course, common enough in that eclectic tradition of philosophy to which, as noted in an earlier chapter, Lessing himself and many of his contemporaries were committed. It is unclear to what extent he was aware, in the 1750s, of the logical difficulties with which such eclecticism was fraught, although he was certainly aware of them by 1769, when he published the *Hamburg Dramaturgy*. It remains to be seen, in a later chapter, how he dealt with them after that date.

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Leipzig and Berlin 1755–1759: Travels; Translations and Journalism; Kleist, Gleim, and the Seven Years War; *Philotas*

Around the middle of October 1755, Lessing left Berlin for Leipzig—as usual, without notifying his friends in advance. His precise reasons for leaving can only be guessed at. He was certainly tired of the editorial routine with the BPZ and he had plainly felt restless for some time: already in April, he had thought of applying for a post at the new university of Moscow[1] and he seriously considered, but eventually declined, an offer arranged by Sulzer to accompany a young man from Switzerland as tutor and travel guide on a tour of Europe.[2] The main attraction of Leipzig, however, was undoubtedly the theatre. Johann Heinrich Koch, whom Lessing had known in his student years as a member of Caroline Neuber's troupe, now ran his own theatre company there, and its actors included Johann Gottfried Brückner, with whom Lessing had associated in Berlin. Drama and theatre are accordingly prominent from the start in his second Leipzig period. Within a few weeks of his arrival, he was adapting Goldoni's *L'Erede Fortunata* for inclusion in a projected volume of six comedies to be published at Easter 1756.[3] Two sheets of this play were indeed printed, with the title *The Fortunate Heiress* (*Die glückliche Erbin*) before Lessing fell out with his publisher Reich and abandoned the project.[4] In April 1756 he assisted Koch's actors at rehearsals of his own *Miss Sara Sampson*, which his old friend Weisse had abridged for performance in Leipzig.[5] His interest in tragedy was further stimulated by Nicolai's tragedy competition, which gave rise to the famous correspondence on tragedy discussed in the previous chapter; plans for new tragedies of his own followed, among them an early version of the later *Emilia Galotti*,[6] as well as *Philotas*, which he published in 1759.

All of these dramatic activities have an extempore quality: they are not the product of sustained effort or of a long-term publishing plan like that which culminated in the *Writings* of 1753–55. Lessing's second Leipzig period is marked throughout by restlessness and uncertainty over the future, and the first signs of those illnesses which would beset his later years are already apparent, as in that 'extraordinary constriction of the chest' of which he complains early in 1757.[7] He

[1] See L. to J. G. Lessing, 11 April 1755. [2] L. to Mendelssohn, 8 December 1755.
[3] Ibid. [4] See LM III, 332–47; D 100 and 132; also Polledri *passim*. [5] D 100.
[6] LM III, 359–60. [7] To Mendelssohn, 2 February 1757; cf. D 123.

felt the need for a complete change and for a regular source of income, both of which seemed to present themselves in an offer of several years' paid travel abroad which he accepted soon after his arrival in Leipzig.

The offer came from Christian Gottfried Winckler, son of a prosperous merchant family, who had inherited the family fortune and one of the most imposing houses in Leipzig, the so-called 'Feuerkugel' on the central marketplace.[8] Lessing had been recommended to Winckler by Weisse (or possibly by Reich), and he took up the offer with enthusiasm since his role would not be that of a tutor but of a travelling companion, for Winckler was only a few years younger than himself; Winckler was also happy to leave the planning of the trip in Lessing's hands.[9] Contrary to his usual informal practice, Lessing took the advice of a friend with legal experience, and sought and obtained a written contract from Winckler, providing for four years of travel with an annual salary of 200 talers plus free board and travel expenses.[10]

Lessing's diary of the journey is unfortunately lost, but Karl Lessing, who was able to consult it, notes that it recorded visits to various art collections as well as purchases by Winckler, on Lessing's advice, of numerous engravings.[11] It is likely that Lessing consulted his old teacher J. F. Christ in planning the journey, given that Christ specialized in preparing well-to-do students for tours of Italy and the classical art collections.[12] Soon after the agreement was signed, Lessing spent several weeks in Dresden—with a brief visit to his family in Kamenz—during which he met his future friend and correspondent Christian Gottlob Heyne, who held the post of librarian to Count Brühl which Lessing had tried unsuccessfully to obtain in 1752.[13] His main purpose in visiting Dresden was almost certainly to study the Saxon ruler's art collections and antiquities in order to prepare himself for the tour with Winckler; this preoccupation is reflected in a cluster of more or less gratuitous references to landscapes and classical sculptures in the preface to Thomson's tragedies which he wrote during or immediately after this visit.[14] It is, at any rate, from around this time that his interest in the visual arts, which culminated in his *Laocoön* some ten years later, properly begins. Shorter visits to Altenburg with Weisse, whose family came from that town, and to Gera, south of Leipzig, followed in late March and early April;[15] it is possible that the well-known portrait of Lessing by a member of the Tischbein family was painted during this trip, for Johann Valentin Tischbein is known to have worked in Gera at around that time.[16]

Early in April, Lessing moved into Winckler's 'Feuerkugel' and drafted an itinerary, the initial stages of which were finalized only shortly before the two set off on 10 May.[17] It had been agreed from the outset to proceed to Holland and thence to

[8] See KGL 106; also Rudloff-Hille (1991) 11.
[9] See L. to Mendelssohn, 8 December 1755.
[10] KGL 107; according to Danzel/Guhrauer I, 326, L. was to receive 300 talers per year.
[11] KGL 110. [12] Danzel/Guhrauer I, 325. [13] Cf. L. to Heyne, 28 July 1764.
[14] LM VII, 67–9. [15] Cf. L. to J. G. Lessing, 9 April 1756; Rudloff-Hille (1982) 38.
[16] Rudloff-Hille, loc. cit.; also Rudloff-Hille (1991) 10–12.
[17] See L. to J. G. Lessing, 9 April 1756; L. to Mendelssohn, 28 April 1756.

Fig. 15. Lessing, painting attributed to Johann Valentin (or Johann Heinrich) Tischbein, c. 1756.

England, and France and Italy were to be visited at a later date.[18] The first major stop, it was finally decided, would not be Berlin but Halberstadt, where they were warmly received by Gleim, who held a lucrative church sinecure and had already assumed that role of friend and benefactor of German poets which he occupied for over half a century. They next proceeded, as Lessing later informed his father,[19] to Brunswick, Hildesheim, Hanover, Celle, Lüneburg, Hamburg, Bremen, Oldenburg, and Gröningen, with a detour to Franeker before continuing across the Zuyder See to Amsterdam.

The striking feature of this itinerary is that it precisely duplicates that circuitous route which Mylius had taken to Holland three years earlier, even including a detour to Franeker where Samuel König, the Swiss exile who had ignited the Berlin Academy quarrel in 1752 and played host to Mylius in Holland before the latter's departure for England, had his residence. This is surely no coincidence. There is evidence that Lessing had access to Mylius' posthumous papers, probably including his travel diary, which remained in the hands of their old friend Kästner until he released it for selective publication thirty years later.[20] Lessing undoubtedly resumed contact with Kästner when he returned to Leipzig in 1755, and Mylius' recent expedition and untimely death must have been their main topic of conversation. It would therefore seem that a major, but unstated, object of Lessing's planned journey to England was to discover more about Mylius' fateful trip, and to make his peace with the spirit of one who, for good and ill, had presided over his early manhood.

[18] See L. to Breitenbauch, 12 December 1755; L.to Nicolai, 28 April 1756; L. to J. G. Lindner, 30 December 1759.

[19] On 3 August 1756.

[20] Cf. LM V, 451 and Mylius, Tagebuch, Part 5 (1786) 86–95.

Some details of Lessing's journey are known, among them visits to two places of major consequence in his later career. He and Winckler inspected the ducal library at Wolfenbüttel,[21] and they spent some six weeks in Hamburg, where Lessing formed two significant friendships. At Weisse's request, he showed some of the latter's unpublished plays, with a view to possible performance, to the already celebrated Konrad Ekhof,[22] whom he later regarded as the greatest German actor of the age. He also paid two visits to Klopstock, of whose decisive importance for German literature he had never—despite occasionally irreverent remarks—entertained the slightest doubt.[23]

When the two travellers arrived at Amsterdam on 29 July, they planned to explore Holland at leisure before taking ship to England around the beginning of October.[24] They spent over a month in the United Provinces before news reached them, early in September, that Frederick the Great had invaded Saxony on 29 August. Winckler, anxious over the fate of his property, insisted on returning at once to Leipzig, which they reached around the end of the month. Winckler's worst fears were realized: the Prussian commander in Leipzig, General Friedrich von Hausen, had made the 'Feuerkugel' his headquarters, and Winckler's return served only to expose him both to the additional expense of entertaining his uninvited guests and to the threat of extortion and internment which faced wealthy citizens in the event of the Leipzig authorities failing to deliver the punitive contributions levied by Frederick's agents. Among the victims of this crisis was Lessing's old teacher Christ, currently Rector of the university, whose frail health collapsed under the strain of the invasion. Winckler provisionally agreed with Lessing to resume the interrupted journey in the spring of 1757.

Never one to shun controversy, Lessing promptly began to fraternize with the Prussian officers, some of whom—including the poet Ewald von Kleist, who arrived at the beginning of March—he had known personally in Berlin.[25] His relations with Winckler, already strained after disagreements on their journey, now deteriorated sharply; and when the landlady of the establishment in which they both dined complained that Lessing's Prussian friends were driving her local customers away, Winckler summarily ejected him from his house and declared their agreement null and void.[26] Although Lessing by this time wished only to return to Berlin, the action for compensation which he now set in train against Winckler detained him in Leipzig, particularly after Winckler went into hiding for fear of being seized as a guarantor of contributions to the Prussian treasury.[27] The law faculty of the university, to which the case was initially referred, pronounced against Lessing. Nevertheless, not all Saxons were prepared to countenance injustice, even in times of emergency. Karl Wilhelm Müller, a lawyer and town councillor and later mayor of Leipzig, whose own literary interests had brought him together with Lessing and Kleist,[28] appealed on Lessing's behalf to the Saxon

[21] Cf. L. to C. F. Voss, 30 October 1769. [22] See D 101 and 105–6; A (2005) 99.
[23] D 104. [24] L. to J. G. Lessing, 3 August 1756. [25] See A (2005) 78.
[26] KGL 110–11. [27] See L. to Nicolai, 26 June 1757.
[28] Cf. the review of Müller's poems in BPZ of 24 April 1755 (LM VII, 24).

authorities in Dresden, and although the case dragged on for over seven years, Lessing was finally awarded 600 talers on 13 October 1764 (half of which sum, however, was swallowed up by legal costs).

Lessing was beset by financial difficulties from the beginning of his second Leipzig period, his sole source of regular income having dried up when he resigned as review editor of the BPZ on leaving Berlin. As in other hard times in the past, he turned to translation to support himself, although on this occasion, he had an additional motive for so doing. Most of his earlier translations had been from French, with a lesser amount from Latin, Spanish, and English. With the prospect of a trip to England, he now turned mainly to English texts, no doubt partly in order to improve his working knowledge of that language. He must have worked intensively on these projects from soon after he left Berlin, because his first two assignments, amounting in all to over 1,600 printed octavo pages, were published at Easter 1756, despite the fact that the first months of that year were largely taken up with travel. The works concerned were Francis Hutcheson's two-volume *Introduction to Moral Philosophy* (Glasgow, 1755; translated as *Sittenlehre der Vernunft*) and William Law, *A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life* (London, 1729; translated as *Eine ernsthafte Ermunterung zu einem frommen und heiligen Leben*).[29] The translation of Law's immensely popular treatise can only have been undertaken for financial reasons, for Law's evangelical zeal—he was also the author of a pamphlet entitled *The Absolute Unlawfulness of the Stage-entertainment Fully Demonstrated* (1726)—can have held little attraction for Lessing. Karl Lessing's story that he began translating Law's treatise to please their pious sister, then abandoned it for Weisse to finish, may apply to another translation which he had failed to complete in 1754, but not to Law's work, which he translated and was paid for in full.[30] Hutcheson's work, with its affective theory of morality, was certainly more congenial, even if Lessing was inclined, in philosophical contexts, to favour Wolff's cognitive ethics in preference to the 'moral sense' theories of British empiricism.

The third English translation of this period was of Samuel Richardson's *Aesop's Fables, with Instructive Morals* (London, 1740; translated as *Sittenlehre für die Jugend in den auserlesensten Aesopischen Fabeln*). Although Lessing, in the absence of translator's copyright, derived little benefit from it, this production was immensely successful, going through six editions by 1806. Richardson's European celebrity as a novelist no doubt helped, while Lessing's inclusion of the term *Sittenlehre* ('ethical principles') in the title, in parallel to that of the Hutcheson translation, will have recommended the work to the enlightened public; the explicit reference in the German title to young readers (*für die Jugend*), reinforced by a series of engravings to all 240 fables, must have further increased the sales of this attractive volume.[31] Since it was published at Easter 1757,[32] Lessing must have translated it after his return from Holland, at a time when he still cherished hopes

[29] Cf. LM VII, 64–5 and 72. On Hutcheson, doubts have recently been raised, on stylistic grounds, whether the translation really is by Lessing: see Martinec (2008a).

[30] KGL 116; cf. LM V, 373 n. 1 and LM VII, 72; also Vail (1936) 41–2.

[31] See Bibliography 'L's Translations': Richardson, ed. Pape.

[32] LM VII, 73.

of resuming the journey to England in the spring of that year. Of his three translations from the English in 1756–57, that of the fables had the closest affinity to his own work, reawakening his interest in the fable and preparing the way for his treatises of 1759 on that subject. A further translation from the English followed in 1758—the long extract from Dryden's *Essay of Dramatick Poesie* which appeared in the final volume of the *Theatrical Library*.[33]

Lessing was now an experienced translator, and his translations display a high order of accuracy, elegance, and ingenuity in solving difficult problems. His errors are few, and the most frequent ones are typographical rather than semantic; they are typically errors of haste, as in the Hutcheson translation, which shows signs of rushed or deficient proof-reading.[34] Lessing's command of English was by this time outstanding. His strategy of avoiding mechanical literalness in favour of free and idiomatic renderings, which nevertheless remain true to the underlying sense, is evident throughout: where necessary, he recasts the original as a native German speaker might have formulated it, producing, as one commentator puts it, 'brilliant circumlocutions and complete penetration of the spirit of the original'.[35]

The period from around 1730 to 1830 was a golden age of German translation, enriching German culture immeasurably in two distinct ways. It developed the resources of the language—especially the literary language—enormously through creative emulation of foreign terminology, imagery, verse forms and new poetic genres; and it helped to ensure that the ideas and discoveries of the European Enlightenment were quickly made available to the German-speaking public. Lessing was at the forefront of these developments, and he is among the first major German writers to make a serious business of translation.[36] The decade of 1750–1760 marks the high point of his career as a translator, from his renderings of works by Plautus, Voltaire, and Huarte to those of Hutcheson, Dryden, and—at the close of the decade—Diderot. Like his friend Nicolai, he regularly scanned English journals such as the *Monthly Review* for notices of recent publications suitable for German translation.[37] With no effective copyright provisions, the first translation to reach the market usually enjoyed the largest sale, with the result that important works were often translated and published more quickly than they are today: Lessing's translation of Hutcheson, published within a year of the English original, is a case in point. He was also quick to recognize the importance of Burke's *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, first published in April 1757, and he began to translate it around the end of the year.[38] On hearing the (correct) report that an enlarged second edition was in preparation, however, he stopped work, and the project was soon overtaken by other commitments.[39] Other translators were doubtless deterred by the announcement in the Leipzig Fair catalogue that a translation by Lessing was pending, with the result that no translation appeared until 1773. Lessing's unfinished translation is lost,

[33] LM VI, 249–94. [34] Cf. Vail (1936) 26–33, 53, 62. [35] Ibid. 40; cf. B V/1, 570.
[36] Cf. Barner (2000) 37–8; also Berthold (ed.) (2008a) on L's translations in general.
[37] Cf. LM VI, 405 and XV, 49, 60, 194, 312.
[38] See Burke (1958) xxii; also L. to Mendelssohn, 21 January 1758. [39] KGL 143.

and only a series of critical reflections on the *Enquiry*, which he discussed in correspondence with Mendelssohn, survives.[40] Applying predominantly Wolffian criteria, the two friends found Burke's empirically based observations, though interesting and suggestive in detail, lacking in theoretical coherence; Burke's subsequent influence on Lessing, most conspicuous in his reflections on language in *Laocoön*, is accordingly confined to particular insights: Lessing has little use for his sensationist aesthetics as a whole.[41]

In addition to these translation projects, Lessing resumed his earlier journalistic work in Leipzig, but on a much more limited scale than before. The incentive to do so came when Nicolai founded the first of his major periodicals, the *Library of Belles-Lettres and Liberal Arts* (*Bibliothek der schönen Wissenschaften und der freyen Künste*) in 1757. Initial plans to publish the journal in Berlin fell through, and Lessing was asked to find a publisher in Leipzig, which was in any case the main distribution centre of the book trade. He duly did so, and subsequently supervised the publication of the first three volumes in 1757 and 1758.[42]

This important journal, written largely by Nicolai himself but with substantial input from Mendelssohn, contains reviews, essays, and translations relating to literature and the arts in general, with a substantial number of pieces on aesthetics and the visual arts; Winckelmann, whose famous *Thoughts on the Imitation of Greek Works of Painting and Sculpture* (*Gedanken über die Nachahmung der griechischen Werke in der Malerei und Bildhauerkunst*) was favourably reviewed by Nicolai in the first volume,[43] later contributed to the journal himself. Its chief significance as far as Lessing is concerned is that it prepared the way for the *Letters on Literature* which he and his Berlin friends launched in 1759, for among the handful of items which he himself contributed,[44] two reviews in particular strike the same uncompromising polemical tone as their counterparts in the later journal. A verse epic by Gottsched's sycophantic disciple Schönaich, with whom Lessing had already clashed in the BPZ, is dismissed with the damning verdict: 'Readers will not expect us to quote an extract from this work, for anyone condemned to read more than two lines of it must be guilty of a serious crime.'[45] The other review is much more substantial and calls for further comment.

Christian Gottfried Lieberkühn, a Prussian army chaplain in Prince Heinrich's regiment, was the author of two anonymous martial songs (*Kriegslieder*), 'by a Prussian officer', which Nicolai had sent to Lessing for inclusion in the first volume of the new journal. On his own initiative, Lessing included two further *Kriegslieder* by his friend Gleim, adding that these poems, by 'a common soldier', were far superior to those of the 'Prussian officer'.[46] There is no indication that he knew who the latter was; a volume of Lieberkühn's poetry had in fact been favourably reviewed in the BPZ two years before under Lessing's editorship.[47] But as Nicolai

[40] LM XIV, 220–5.
[41] Cf. L. to Mendelssohn, 18 February 1758 and Mendelssohn to L., 27 February 1758; also Howard (1906–07) *passim*.
[42] See LM VII, 76, n. 1; also B IV, 851–4.
[43] See Nicolai, Sämtliche Werke III, 235–42.
[44] LM VII, 76–113.
[45] LM VII, 103; cf. V, 422–44 and VII, 5, 32, 34–5.
[46] LM VII, 81.
[47] LM VII, 19–20.

informed him soon afterwards, Lieberkühn had immediately written to protest in the strongest terms that he, an officer, had been ranked as poetically inferior to a common soldier.[48] This was the kind of challenge—coming as it did from a self-important clergyman—which Lessing found it impossible to resist, especially when, in the same year, Lieberkühn published his own edition of the idylls of Theocritus, Bion, and Moschus in German hexameters. These were purportedly translated 'from the Greek', but they in fact relied heavily on an existing Latin translation and contained numerous philological gaffes. Lessing's predictable response followed in the second volume of Nicolai's journal, demolishing Lieberkühn's scholarly and poetic pretensions no less comprehensively, though with less personal animus, than the *Vademecum* of 1754 had demolished Lange's translation of Horace.[49] A personal motive played some part on this occasion too: Lieberkühn's protest to Nicolai had belittled the work of Gleim, with whom Lessing was now on cordial terms and whose poetry would be praised at some length in another review, jointly composed by Lessing and Mendelssohn, in the next volume of the same journal.[50] The partisan politics of the later *Letters on Literature* were already taking shape.

In the two and a half years Lessing spent in Leipzig, he renewed several older friendships, particularly with Weisse, who, now working as a tax inspector, was also beginning to make his name as a literary figure by publishing poetry and dramas of his own; he also established cordial relations with Gellert.[51] New acquaintances included the young Joachim Wilhelm von Brawe, still a student but already a promising dramatist until his untimely death in the following year, who had come to Lessing's attention through Nicolai's tragedy competition.[52] Lessing, Weisse, Brawe, and Müller held regular literary gatherings at the bedside of Ewald von Kleist, who fell ill shortly after his transfer to Leipzig and spent several weeks convalescing. Brawe was currently much impressed by the philosophy lectures of Christian August Crusius, who defended the freedom of the will and his own supra-rational Christian faith against the rationalism of Wolff and Leibniz, which he considered presumptuous and ultimately deterministic. As Weisse recalls in his autobiography, Lessing, who had reflected on the time-honoured controversy over freedom and necessity ever since his studies of La Mettrie and his discussions with Prémontval in Berlin, enjoyed debating these issues with the hapless Brawe, regularly out-manoeuvring him with his superior knowledge and skill in disputation, until Weisse and other friends intervened to turn the conversation to less contentious subjects.[53] This episode is significant in the light of Lessing's similar exchanges with Jacobi in 1780, for it shows that the deterministic arguments which he deployed on that occasion were not part of a late conversion to Spinozism, as Jacobi maintained, but a long-standing element in his dialectical repertoire.

All of these personal and local events are overshadowed, however, by the larger developments which overtook Germany—and Europe—with the outbreak of the

[48] Nicolai to L., 7 September 1757. [49] LM VII, 84–103.
[50] LM VII, 103–13. [51] Cf. L. to Ramler, 11 December 1755.
[52] Cf. Nicolai, Sämtliche Werke IV, 552–3. [53] See D 110–12.

Fig. 16. Frederick the Great, painting by Anton Graff.

Seven Years War in 1756. The cultural impact on Germany of the war itself, and of its most prominent personality, Frederick the Great, was momentous, and Lessing was able to experience it more directly, and sooner, than most of his contemporaries by virtue of the friendships he formed in the later 1750s with his fellow-poets Kleist and Gleim. It was through his dealings with these two men, both ardent Prussian patriots, that he was obliged for the first time to confront the phenomena of patriotism and emergent nationalism as live and pressing issues, and to examine their relation to the cosmopolitan ideals of the Enlightenment to which he had long been attached.

Kleist, now a major in the army group of Prince Heinrich of Prussia, was a scion of the Prussian military aristocracy (his mother was a Manteuffel).[54] He had studied law at Königsberg, spoke several languages, and retained from his schooldays an enduring love of the Greek and Roman classics. A natural leader and committed soldier, he trained in the Danish army before Frederick recalled him to Prussia in 1740. He saw active service in the Second Silesian War of 1744–5, but after this exhilarating experience, he found the subsequent years of garrison duties in Potsdam depressing. He sought relief from his self-confessed tendency to melancholy, intensified by frustrated hopes of marriage, in rural walks and in literary company, to which he had been introduced in 1743 by Gleim, at that time civilian secretary to Prince Wilhelm of Brandenburg-Schwedt, a senior commander in the Prussian army.

[54] On Kleist's life and works see Kleist I, xi–lxxi.

Kleist welcomed his return to active service in 1756, although this was soon cut short by his posting in March 1757 to Hausen's regiment in Leipzig, where he faced the uncongenial task of converting the defeated Saxon troops into Prussian soldiers. No sooner had he recovered from the prolonged illness which followed than he was put in charge of the military hospital set up in Leipzig after Frederick's victory over the French at Rossbach in November 1757, and subsequently also of the French and Austrian prisoners. He spent just over a year in Leipzig, punctuated by a brief military engagement in October 1757 and a foraging expedition some months later. His repeated requests for transfer to active service were finally answered in May 1758, when he rejoined the field army of Prince Heinrich.

Lessing quickly became attached to Kleist, who was fourteen years his senior. Kleist's self-effacing character, his rigorous self-discipline, his indifference to pain and danger, his gift for friendship within a small congenial circle, his compassion and scrupulous honesty in dealing with prisoners, the wounded, and the populace of occupied Saxony—not to mention his poetic abilities—were qualities guaranteed to win Lessing's admiration. Lessing's feelings were warmly reciprocated. When Kleist recovered from his illness, he told Gleim: 'If it were not for Lessing, I would have no pleasure at all in Leipzig with my heavy workload'; and when Lessing left Leipzig for Berlin in May 1758, he declared: 'In the year I have spent in Leipzig, I have grown so accustomed to him and like him so much that I feel as if he had died, or rather, as if I were half dead myself.'[55] Kleist was well aware of Lessing's own indifferent health and financial difficulties, which he did his best to alleviate, despite Lessing's refusals of help:[56] seconded by Gleim, he tried repeatedly but unsuccessfully to place Lessing in a secure salaried office—for instance, in the royal library in Berlin, as secretary to the British ambassador Sir Andrew Mitchell, or as tutor to Prince August Ferdinand of Prussia.[57]

Lessing had known and admired Kleist's poetry long before he met the man himself. Kleist's best known work, *The Spring* (*Der Frühling*) of 1749, an extended depiction of the spring countryside inspired by Virgil's *Georgics* and Thomson's *Seasons*, made innovative use of the German hexameter, and his shorter verse covered a wide range of forms including Anacreontic songs, love poems, epigrams, idylls, elegies, and odes, in which melancholy sentiments and bucolic settings are conspicuous. Military life rarely intrudes in his poetry, except in the shape of laborious duties from which rural peace and arcadian pleasures offer welcome relief.[58] The more remarkable by contrast is his 'Ode to the Prussian Army', written during his illness and convalescence in Leipzig.[59] Its austere patriotism and unquestioning loyalty to the Prussian monarch, its stern military ethos, tempered by a plea for clemency towards the unoffending civilian populace, and its sombre prophecy—in this case no idle fantasy—of the author's death in battle lend it a raw veracity with few parallels in previous German poetry. The idiom of this soldier's poem is classical: Roman patriotism, alluded to in the text, serves as the prototype of Prussian

[55] Kleist II, 396 and 489. [56] See D 120–1, 123, 133–4.
[57] D 113, 115, 120; Danzel/Guhrauer II, 684.
[58] See, for example, Kleist I, 48–50 and 57–8. [59] Kleist I, 100–1; cf. II, 402.

patriotism. The poem derives its dignity from the author's professional attitude, which needs no political commentary to define his unquestioning allegiance.

Lessing recognized and appreciated this new poetic mode, and, aware of Kleist's lack of confidence as a poet, encouraged his efforts; just as he had done with Mendelssohn, he saw to it that his productions were completed and published. The best of these is the short blank-verse epic *Cissides and Paches*, which is again without parallel in Kleist's earlier work.[60] It is a crisp and vivid narrative of Macedonian heroism against overwhelming military odds, and a celebration of its eponymous heroes' solidarity in life and death. Like the earlier ode, it culminates in an invocation of the Prussian king, and a statement of the author's readiness to die for his country.

Kleist's innate depressive tendency—his brother became insane in early adulthood—acquired a new, positive significance as a result of the war. His death-wish is clearly apparent in the two poems just mentioned, and it is often expressed in his letters. Early in 1757, for example, he tells Gleim '[the prospect of] death makes me happy. In my miserable existence, I often long for death, as a sailor does for the harbour after storm and tempest.'[61] Soon afterwards, his heroic ideal found concrete expression in the person of Count Schwerin, the Prussian Field Marshal who, at the age of seventy-two, died leading a charge against the Austrian batteries at the Battle of Prague in May of that year.[62] Gleim, now Kleist's oldest friend and executor, expressed growing anxiety over the latter's state of mind, an anxiety shared by Lessing, whose prose outline of an ode addressed to Kleist urges him, if he must die a heroic death, at least to postpone it until old age as Schwerin had done.[63] Kleist, of course, had no intention of so doing; he died in the manner he had wished, from multiple wounds received in leading a desperate charge against the victorious Russians at the battle of Kunersdorf in August 1759. Stripped of his clothes and equipment by marauding Cossacks and left to die in a swamp, he was eventually rescued and taken to nearby Frankfurt an der Oder, then under Russian occupation. Serene and relaxed, he seemed briefly to recover, but succumbed to his wounds twelve days after the battle. Lessing gives vent to his grief with rare immediacy in a frantic exchange of letters with Gleim; but characteristically, it is quickly transformed into anger, even if he is at first unsure at whom to direct it. Particularly hard to bear was the news that Kleist had died in the care of Nicolai's brother, that same professor of philosophy whose inept mediation had precipitated Lessing's clash with Lange in 1753; Lessing now denounced the professor's attempts to organize a published tribute to Kleist as the work of a heartless pedant,[64] despite the fact that Nicolai, with Russian co-operation, had managed to arrange a fitting funeral and furnished the information which enabled his brother in Berlin to publish a circumstantial account of Kleist's heroic action and last days.[65]

Throughout the period of his friendship with Kleist, Lessing found himself politically and ideologically in a difficult position, especially while he remained in

[60] Kleist I, 251–66. [61] Kleist II, 368; cf. II, 423. [62] See Kleist II, 406.
[63] LM I, 151–2; cf. L. to Gleim, 14 June 1757. [64] To Gleim, 6 September 1759.
[65] Nicolai, Sämtliche Werke VI, 7–17.

Leipzig. As a native of Saxony and adoptive Prussian of six years' standing, he felt a measure of loyalty to both states, and his position was further complicated by the latent tension between the patriotic claims of each of these territories—and indeed of Germany as a whole—and his well developed belief in cosmopolitan values. These conflicts came to a head in his relations with Gleim, whose Prussian patriotism was more strident and triumphalistic that that of Kleist.

Gleim was ten years older than Lessing, and had already made his name as a poet, chiefly in the Anacreontic mode, while Lessing was still a schoolboy.[66] Though his effusive sentimentality contrasted sharply with Lessing's own cautious reserve, Gleim's great personal warmth and openness, together with his friendships with Ramler and other members of Lessing's circle, enabled him to establish cordial relations with Lessing from their first meeting early in 1755.[67] Their friendship was consolidated when Gleim entertained Lessing and Winckler on their way to Holland in the following year, but even more so when Gleim visited the convalescent Kleist, for whom Lessing was actively caring, in the spring of 1757.[68] As Kleist's closest friend and a willing supporter of his efforts to assist the impecunious Lessing, Gleim was assured of the latter's gratitude and respect. All this—but above all, Lessing's strong attachment to Kleist—helps to account for the at first sight surprising enthusiasm with which Lessing greeted Gleim's *Martial Poems* (*Kriegslieder*), with their militant Prussian patriotism, which Gleim began to publish in pamphlet form in 1757, purportedly as the work of a simple grenadier in Frederick's army. Although Gleim's authorship was soon common knowledge, he, Lessing, and Kleist humorously maintained the fiction of the untutored grenadier-poet even after Lessing had reissued two of the poems (as earlier noted) in Nicolai's *Bibliothek der schönen Wissenschaften* in response to Lieberkühn's songs of a 'Prussian officer'. Lessing followed up this publication with two fulsome reviews in the BPZ—his last contributions to that journal—of poems by the 'grenadier' commemorating several of Frederick's victories;[69] the poems are full of Prussian chauvinism, which is at one point put into the mouth of the Almighty, who commands Hell to swallow up Frederick's fallen enemies. By this time, Lessing and Kleist had also formed the plan to publish, with Gleim's agreement, a complete edition of the *Kriegslieder*, together with commissioned musical settings;[70] after Lessing had completed the editorial process, the volume was published in Berlin in August 1758 as *Prussian Martial Songs in the Campaigns of 1756 and 1757, by a Grenadier* (*Preussische Kriegslieder in den Feldzügen von 1756 und 1757, von einem Grenadier*).

To understand Lessing's positive reception of the *Kriegslieder*, it is necessary to consider their genesis and literary significance.[71] Gleim's immediate incentive for writing them seems to have come from Lessing himself, for when he challenged Lessing to write an ode in praise of the Prussian monarch, Lessing sent him in reply the prose outline of an ode in which he returned the challenge to Gleim as

[66] On Gleim's life and works see Körte; also Guthke (2005d).
[67] D 81.
[68] Cf. Rohrwasser 161, n. 102.
[69] LM VII, 121–4.
[70] See L. to Gleim, 12 December 1757 and 6 February 1758.
[71] See Schönert *passim*.

someone better qualified, by national allegiance, to celebrate the Prussian king.[72] Gleim took up this challenge, for the first of the *Kriegslieder* appeared in the following month (June 1757). His poetic inspiration, however, came not from Lessing, but from Kleist, who had sent him his newly written 'Ode to the Prussian Army' in May, shortly before Lessing returned Gleim's poetic challenge.[73] Besides, ever since the outbreak of hostilities, Kleist had supplied Gleim with regular and circumstantial reports of the military actions, some of them eye-witness accounts, with the explicit suggestion that Gleim might in due course write a history of the current war.[74] Instead, Gleim now began to write his *Kriegslieder*, in which he simultaneously responded to Lessing's challenge (for Frederick is the hero of all the poems), followed Kleist's initiative as a martial poet, and incorporated material from Kleist's reports, sometimes almost verbatim,[75] in his celebrations of Frederick's victories. Gleim's own experience in the campaigns of 1744–45 as a civilian witness lent the poems an added flavour of authenticity.

It is clear that Lessing's enthusiasm for the *Kriegslieder* was primarily literary rather than political, for his preface to the collected edition deals exclusively with their poetic merits. He concludes that the untutored author (of whose identity he was fully aware) has invented 'a unique variety of ode', distinct from such precedents as Horace and Pindar.[76] What Lessing has noticed is the affinity of Gleim's poems, in their simple language and use of the ballad form (the so-called 'Chevy Chase' stanza, known in Germany through Addison's tribute to the ballad of that name),[77] with the folk poetry of northern Europe, which would enjoy a renaissance in Germany some ten years later. They share with that older vernacular tradition a graphic realism which, after the advances of realism in the novel and drama, was only now beginning to penetrate the contemporary German lyric. Lessing also detects in them an affinity with the poetry of the Celtic bards and Nordic skalds, and with the German heroic poetry of the Middle Ages, which he promptly began to study in Bodmer's and Breitinger's pioneering edition of the *Nibelungenlied* (1757) and in a much earlier edition of the *Book of Heroes* (*Heldenbuch*), on which he began to prepare a commentary.[78]

These poetic and philological preoccupations are not without political significance, but that significance is German rather than Prussian, and cultural rather than military. What Lessing values most about Gleim is his contribution to a revival of national German literature on the basis of Germanic rather than French traditions. This interest is of a piece with the sudden proliferation in the middle decades of the century of works on Arminius (or Hermann) as the first German

[72] See Gleim to L., 27 April 1757 and L. to Gleim, 12 May 1757 (on the date of this letter see LM XVII, 102, n. 3).

[73] Cf. Kleist II, 402.

[74] Kleist II, 343 and 357.

[75] See, for example, his 'Siegeslied nach der Schlacht bei Lobowitz' in Brüggemann 99–103 and Kleist to Gleim, 3 October 1756 in Kleist II, 340–4.

[76] LM VII, 117.

[77] Spectator No. 70 and 74 (21 and 25 May 1711) in Addison/Steele I, 215–19 and 228–32

[78] LM VII, 118–19; cf. L. to Gleim, 6 February 1758, L. to Mendelssohn, 2 April 1758 and LM XIV, 205–19.

national hero in his victory over the Roman legions in AD 9,[79] and with the neo-bardic poetry of Klopstock, Gerstenberg, and others in the 1760s. All of these works were written in conscious defence of native German traditions in opposition to French courtly culture, although some of them, like Gleim's poems, also have a military aggressiveness completely alien to Lessing. In a purely literary sense, however, he could readily endorse Gleim's anti-French sentiments, saying of the poetry of Kleist and the 'grenadier': 'With a company of poets like this, I will chase the whole of French wit to the devil!'[80] But this cultural patriotism, which would again come to the fore in the *Letters on Literature* of the following year, should not be mistaken for xenophobia: Lessing would shortly translate and edit the dramas and dramatic criticism of Diderot as a welcome endorsement of the new domestic realism in English, French, and German drama.[81]

Despite his genuine enthusiasm for Kleist's and Gleim's martial poetry, there were limits to Lessing's willingness to endorse and applaud Gleim's strident Prussianism and cult of Frederick the Great. The first sign of reservations comes in that prose outline of an ode to Gleim in which, as noted above, he tactfully rejected Gleim's challenge to write an ode in praise of the Prussian king. The outline continues:[82]

> I shall meanwhile, with Aesopic restraint and as a friend of the animals, teach a calmer wisdom.—
>
> A tale of the bloody tiger which, while the careless shepherd jested with Chloris and the echo, slaughtered and dispersed the hapless flock.

It is plain from Gleim's original challenge—he had asked Lessing to shift his allegiance from the Saxon Frederick to the Prussian one—that the 'bloody tiger' represents Frederick the Great, and the 'careless shepherd' Frederick Augustus II, Elector of Saxony and King of Poland, with whom Lessing had evidently expressed some sympathy.[83] That monarch, who early in his reign had made over most of his powers to Count Brühl in order to dedicate himself to leisure and the arts, offered little resistance to the Prussian invaders before fleeing to Poland, leaving Saxony at the mercy of the Prussian Frederick. Lessing, whose own European tour was terminated by the Prussian invasion, had little reason to welcome it, even if it did renew his contact with some of his friends from Potsdam. Besides, however much he sought to whitewash his aggression, Frederick had violated Saxony's declared neutrality, and he proceeded ruthlessly to milk the Saxon economy to the extent of over five million talers per year throughout the occupation; his attempts to incorporate Saxon troops into the Prussian army also caused large numbers to desert to the Saxon army in exile.[84] Lessing could not protest too loudly at this to his Prussian friends and benefactors: he still hoped, after all, to make a career in the Prussian service. Though it is only a prose draft, his ode to Gleim must have cost him

[79] See Fink (1983) 44. [80] To Gleim, 3 March 1758; cf. Rohrwasser 148 and 152.
[81] See Blanning (2002) 233–353 and Fink (1983) 47–8. [82] L. to Gleim, 12 May 1757.
[83] Cf. Gleim to L., 27 April 1757 and Kleist II, 404 and 406.
[84] Cf. Schieder 121, 180, 187, 220.

considerable effort, for three manuscript versions survive.[85] It is a considerable feat of diplomacy, first enumerating at length all those virtues of the Prussian monarch which it invites Gleim to praise, before concluding with the fable of the Prussian tiger and the Saxon flock.

Lessing's patience finally gave way some eighteen months later when, in the last of his *Kriegslieder* (on Frederick's defeat of the Russians at Zorndorf), Gleim's grenadier hurled imprecations at a Saxon prince for serving in the Russian army which bombarded the Prussian fortress town of Küstrin, as well as at the Russian empress.[86] In his famous response to Gleim, Lessing writes:[87]

> The *patriot* drowns out the poet too much—a military patriot, moreover, who falls back on accusations which are anything but proven! It is true that the patriot is perhaps not entirely extinct in me either, although the title of a zealous patriot is, to my way of thinking, the last thing I should covet—a patriot, that is, who would teach me to forget that I ought to be a citizen of the world.

On this occasion, even Kleist and Ramler, though Prussian patriots themselves, agreed that Gleim had overstepped the mark, and Gleim modified the offending passages.[88] The incident served, at least, to prompt Lessing, who had by now returned to the Prussian capital, to clarify his views on patriotism. Irritated, as he told Gleim, by 'a thousand extravagant utterances I have to listen to every day', he declared 'I have absolutely no conception of love of one's fatherland, [...] and it seems to me at most a heroic weakness which I am very glad to dispense with.'[89]

Gleim's armchair grenadier was by this time running out of inspiration, just as Frederick was running out of victories. The ode on Zorndorf to which Lessing had taken exception is a much more literary piece than its predecessors: it abandons the simple ballad form for the classical allusions and blank verse of Kleist's *Cissides and Paches*, but without Kleist's economy, swift narrative pace, and graphic descriptions of conflict.[90] Unlike Gleim's *Kriegslieder*, Kleist's martial poems still read well today—partly, perhaps, because their ethos is one of individual self-sacrifice, whereas Gleim's tunes of glory soon lost their poetic novelty and the euphoric appeal they exercised over Prussian readers in the early stages of the Seven Years War. For Lessing and Gleim, the turning point came with the Prussian defeat at Kunersdorf and the subsequent death of Kleist. Their shared mourning sustained their correspondence for a while, as did Gleim's unsolicited offer to turn Lessing's short prose tragedy *Philotas* into blank verse. After the publication of the versified *Philotas* in April 1760, their correspondence ceased abruptly for over five years, and in their sporadic contacts thereafter, they never regained their former intimacy. It was their shared attachment to Kleist which had held them together.

Throughout Lessing's friendship with Kleist and Gleim, the figure of Frederick the Great became a more immediate presence to him than ever before. This is therefore an appropriate point at which to consider his changing views of the

[85] See LM I, 150, n. 2.
[86] Cf. L. to Gleim, 14 February 1759; also B I, 825.
[87] To Gleim, 16 December 1758.
[88] Cf. D 148 and 152; Gleim to L., 23 January 1759.
[89] To Gleim, 14 February 1759.
[90] Reprinted in Brüggemann 128–36.

Prussian monarch during the decade following his move to Berlin in 1749. As earlier noted, Lessing wrote a series of odes in his first years in Berlin, many of them concerned with or addressed to Frederick and published in the BPZ, as an editorial duty on Lessing's part, every New Year's Day and again on the king's birthday a few weeks later.[91] All of the odes are poetically weak, as Lessing himself conceded,[92] and full of borrowings from Horace and Klopstock. They are laborious versifications of prose drafts, for Lessing had no aptitude for the inspirational lyric; eulogies of other individuals, however exalted, were in any case wholly at variance with his nature. By far the most interesting of his early odes is the unpublished draft 'To Maecenas' ('An Mäcen')—written, perhaps, to work off his resentment at having to write odes to order in praise of Frederick.[93] Here, he contrasts the penurious life of the aspiring, patronless writer with that of the aloof ruler who surrounds himself with sycophants to amuse him in his leisure hours, and of an unidentified voluptuary who commissions verses only from hypocritical flatterers. The date of this draft is disputed,[94] but since the first two lines of the planned versification form a rhyming Alexandrine couplet—as in the didactic poems of around 1750—and since uncomplimentary comments on Frederick's private circle and protests at lack of patronage for aspiring German writers are recurrent motifs in Lessing's writings of the early 1750s, 'To Maecenas' almost certainly dates from that period.[95] (This was also the time of *Samuel Henzi*, with its anti-monarchical sentiments.) Although Lessing's resentment at Frederick's indifference to German literature and native talent is still apparent in the *Letters on Literature* of 1759,[96] we know that he had meanwhile defended Frederick and Prussia against their Saxon detractors in Leipzig,[97] and the applause with which he publicly greeted Kleist's and Gleim's martial poetry suggests that he was himself not unaffected by the growing cult of Frederick, and by the boost which Frederick's achievements in the European arena had given to German national self-confidence: it would indeed have been difficult to react otherwise when all his closest friends shared these sentiments, and when even the underprivileged Jew Mendelssohn wrote sermons of thanksgiving and translated Hebrew songs of praise in Frederick's honour.[98]

All the evidence suggests that Lessing's attitude towards Frederick remained ambivalent throughout the 1750s, although he probably felt more positively towards him during his second period in Leipzig than at any other time in his life. Around that time, as he famously admitted in later years, he was considered an arch-Prussian in Leipzig, and an arch-Saxon in Berlin,[99] and statements can be found in his writings to support both interpretations. As a result, the nationalistic literary historians of the nineteenth century were able to present him as a Prussian patriot and devotee of the Prussian king, whereas socialists and communists

[91] LM I, 134–54. [92] LM V, 35. [93] LM I, 149–50.
[94] Gaede 560 gives it as 1759, Gerd Hillen 'at the earliest 1755' (in G II, 610), and E. Schmidt I, 215 speaks of an 'early origin'.
[95] Cf. LM IV, 15–16, 232, 404, 423–7 and LM V, 394.
[96] For example in LM VIII, 122 (Letter 48). [97] KGL 110–11.
[98] Mendelssohn to L., 25 November 1757; see also B XI/1, 803–4.
[99] To Nicolai, 25 May 1777.

depicted him as hostile to nationalism and absolutism of every description. The consensus today is that he was neither:[100] he admired Frederick as an enlightened monarch and source of inspiration to German national culture, but deplored his military aggression and indifference to German literature.

On the issue of territorial and political allegiance, Lessing was certainly justified in his claim, in 1757, to be 'one of the most impartial people in the world'.[101] There is no reason to suppose that he had abandoned the broadly republican sentiments of *Samuel Henzi* and his belief that sound politics must be based on universal moral principles, as in the Swiss republican ideal which Henzi represented. He also clung firmly to that belief in cosmopolitan values which he saw as essential to the international republic of letters—he is among the first German writers to use the term *Kosmopolit* and its German synonym *Weltbürger*[102]—and of which he explicitly reminded Gleim when the latter's chauvinism seemed to throw international solidarity to the winds.

By 1760, however, both Swiss and German writers were starting to advocate a new variety of patriotism, based neither on territory nor on republican virtue, but on the personality of the monarch. In his treatise *On National Pride* (*Von dem Nationalstolze*) of 1758, the Swiss theorist Johann Georg Zimmermann, a pupil of Haller, had presented republican virtues—as found, for example, in Switzerland—as the only true source of national pride. But in the second, revised edition of 1760, he identifies a second and equally legitimate source in the shape of the ideal monarch as philosopher, servant of the state, and charismatic leader, illustrating it with an exhaustive description which fits Frederick the Great in every particular. Zimmermann was a Swiss with republican sympathies. But classical republicanism and its associated brand of patriotism were not, it will be remembered, incompatible with monarchy, so long as the monarch governed in the interest of the people as a whole. Frederick, in his stated capacity as first servant of the state, was among the first continental monarchs to project himself successfully in this role, and the measure of his success is the remarkable degree of enthusiasm he aroused in the early stages of the Seven Years War among the German-speaking public, and not only in Prussia (Zimmermann is a case in point).

In 1761, Thomas Abbt, professor of philosophy at Frankfurt an der Oder, published his essay *On Death for the Fatherland* (*Vom Tode fürs Vaterland*), a more explicit and uncompromising affirmation of the heroic ideal and of Prussian patriotism in particular, declaring bluntly 'the Fatherland has a right to your life'.[103] True patriotism, he maintains, stems not so much from rational deliberation as from passion and enthusiasm. (The emergent cult of genius is already in evidence here, and Shaftesbury is prominently cited.)[104] Frederick, who had by now attained semi-mythical status, is of course the focus of Abbt's adulation, but Kleist, Schwerin, and the battlefields of Zorndorf and Kunersdorf are all invoked in support of his

[100] Cf. Höhle 54 and 58; Torbruegge 306; Rohrwasser 153–4.
[101] To Nicolai and Mendelssohn, 29 March 1757.
[102] See LM I, 318; cf. Barner (1986) 616–19 and Barner (2000) 40.
[103] Abbt, Vermischte Werke II, 10. [104] Ibid. II, 71 and 91–3.

call to arms, to which numerous Prussian students responded.[105] In their different ways, Zimmermann and Abbt codified and elaborated that brand of Prussian patriotism with which Lessing was already familiar from the poetry and conversation of Kleist and Gleim. He was consequently able to formulate his own literary response to it before either of the works in question appeared, and he did so in the tragedy *Philotas*, written in the latter half of 1758.

Philotas is one of a number of projects for tragedies in the classical tradition which Lessing conceived in the later 1750s. Apart from his planned reworking of the Virginia theme, which came to fruition many years later as *Emilia Galotti*, it is the only one he completed: the rest remained outlines, scenarios, or fragments. His preoccupation with classical tragedy goes back to his essay of 1754 on Seneca. It was subsequently reinforced by a growing interest in Sophocles, and further stimulated by the neo-classical productions of others such as Johann Friedrich von Cronegk, who was awarded the prize in Nicolai's tragedy competition for his *Codrus*, a heroic tragedy in the French manner; Lessing considered writing an improved drama of his own on the Codrus story, in which the theme of patriotic self-sacrifice is central.[106] *Rome Delivered*, planned in 1756 or 1757, takes the republican topos of *Samuel Henzi* back to its classical sources in the shape of Lucius Junius Brutus' successful revolt against Tarquinius Superbus,[107] while *The Horoscope*, of the same period, transposes the Oedipus myth to fifteenth-century Poland.[108]

In relation to *Philotas*, however, the most significant of these plans and fragments is *Kleonnis* of early 1758, just over two scenes of which were completed.[109] Since no scenario survives, the remaining course of the invented plot can only be conjectured, but it appears that the eponymous hero, a youthful warrior permitted by his anxious father, King Euphaes, to do battle for the first time with his country's enemies, was to die at the hands of his estranged brother, a soldier in the enemy ranks.[110] This fragment is noteworthy in two respects. On the one hand, it represents the first occasion on which Lessing uses blank verse in drama—and splendidly vigorous blank verse it is too. But secondly, it has close affinities with *Philotas*, to which Lessing turned his attention later in the same year: the youthful hero and his patriotic death, the anxious father, and the conflict between patriotic duty and family allegiance all recur in the later tragedy. Most remarkable, however, is the clear indication in the first scene that this was to be no heroic tragedy in the baroque mode: in stark contrast to the stoic morality of Corneille, Kleonnis' father rates his paternal attachment to his son more highly than patriotic valour.[111] In *Philotas*, however, the perspective switches from father to son, and the conflict between natural feelings and patriotic duty is resolved in the opposite direction, for Philotas puts his country's interest, as he sees it, above all other considerations. This might well be taken—as it frequently has been—to indicate a return on Lessing's

[105] Ibid. II, 42–4, 50, 53, 58–9; cf. Brüggemann 47.
[106] Cf. L. to Mendelssohn, 22 October 1757 and 18 February 1758.
[107] LM III, 357–9.
[108] LM III, 371–9. The date of this fragment is disputed: G II, 773 and E. Schmidt I, 344 give it as 1758–59, Enders 209 argues less convincingly for the late 1770s.
[109] LM III, 360–71; see also B IV, 811.
[110] Cf. E. Schmidt I, 333–5.
[111] LM III, 365 and 370; cf. Riedel (1979) 70 and Fink (1998) 58.

part to the heroic ethos of Cornelian tragedy and glorification of patriotic self-sacrifice against the background of the Seven Years War. The correctness or otherwise of this interpretation has been the central theme of *Philotas* criticism ever since the play first appeared.

This remarkable little work, subtitled *A Tragedy* (*Ein Trauerspiel*) and published in Berlin at Easter 1759, has only four characters: all of them are male, and all are soldiers.[112] The single act consists of eight short scenes, three of them monologues by the hero. The unities are rigorously observed, and there are no secondary plots. The main action is easily summarized. Philotas, the only son of an embattled king, has persuaded his reluctant father to let him join battle with the enemy only a week after donning the toga of manhood—that is, soon after his sixteenth birthday. In his impetuous charge at the enemy, he is disarmed and taken prisoner, and his opening monologue gives vent to his despair at having disgraced his father and failed the test of military heroism. Tormented by the thought that his father will have to forfeit his hard-won conquests in order to secure his ransom, Philotas is suddenly informed that Polytimet, the son of his captor King Aridäus, has likewise been captured by the other side. The sympathetic Aridäus reassures Philotas that the way is now open for a peaceful exchange of prisoners, a restoration of the military balance, and a possible resolution of the conflict. But Philotas refuses to abandon his belligerent stance, and secretly devises a means of restoring the advantage to his father: he acquires a sword by a subterfuge, and promptly uses it to kill himself. Dismayed at this latest turn in the never-ending cycle of violence, Aridäus resolves to ransom his son and then abdicate as ruler.

With its invented plot and unusual brevity, the play has no overall model, although it was subject to a number of literary influences. The motif of the exchange of prisoners recalls Plautus' *Captivi*, and Philotas' wild swordplay with imaginary enemies just before his suicide may echo the madness of Sophocles' Ajax or the hero of Seneca's *Hercules furens*.[113] As an experiment in tragic minimalism, the play is foreshadowed by Ewald von Kleist's brief (and much inferior) tragedy *Seneca* of 1758, whose completion Lessing had encouraged, and by Klopstock's laconic Biblical tragedy of 1757, *The Death of Adam* (*Der Tod Adams*). Both of these plays are likewise written in prose. The high social status of the characters, and the heroic aspirations, grandiose gestures and rhetorical declamations of Lessing's hero all underline the play's affinities with Cornelian tragedy and its French and German derivatives.

Three questions must be addressed in order to determine the work's literary status and ideological import. Is it a heroic tragedy, or a critique of heroic tragedy? What is its relation to Lessing's own non-heroic theory of tragedy as defined in his correspondence of 1756–57 with Mendelssohn and Nicolai? And what is the play's relation to the topical issue of patriotism and self-sacrifice in the Prussian context?

[112] LM II, 353–76.

[113] Cf. B IV, 808; Ter-Nedden 115–53; Barner (1973) 54–6.

On the first of these questions, there has been general agreement for several decades that *Philotas* is a critique of heroic tragedy.[114] But it is a complex and ambivalent critique, for reasons which require further commentary. Philotas is not a stoic hero; but something akin to stoic heroism is the ideal which he has set himself from an early age. He himself defines it in traditional terms as 'the ruling fire of honour, the honour of shedding one's blood for the fatherland'.[115] But the word 'fire' indicates its crucial difference from stoic heroism: Philotas is driven not by rational moral principles, but—like the true patriot in Thomas Abbt's *On Death for the Fatherland*—by a passion and inspiration of irrational origin: he is not a philosopher, but a fanatic. Conversely, he equates his failure to realize his ideal on his first experience of battle with shame and dishonour, and is thereby driven to the equally extreme reaction of suicide, by which means he intends to restore the honour he thinks he has lost. His primary motive is accordingly neither the salvation of his country (for his death deprives it of the heir to the throne) nor regard for his father (for he has reason to believe that his father loves him more than he does his kingdom):[116] he is driven by an egocentric compulsion to perform a deed of heroic sacrifice for which there is no objective justification. Perhaps the only quality he shares with the stoic hero is his readiness to do violence to his natural feelings—assuming, that is, that he genuinely feels that regard for his father which he frequently professes: but he does so under the influence of even stronger feelings of a rather less natural kind.

Two factors are repeatedly mentioned which undermine Philotas' claims to heroic status: his immaturity, and his complete lack of rational insight. His youth and proximity to childhood are repeatedly emphasized. His excessive reactions to being disarmed and taken prisoner are described by the seasoned warrior Strato as 'the errors of a youth', and Aridäus describes him as 'an extraordinary mixture of child and hero';[117] both observers are well aware that his extremes of self-reproach and loud belligerence are the posturings of a confused adolescent. This has led some commentators to describe the play as a 'tragedy of puberty'[118]—an appropriate enough term provided that it does not claim to exhaust the work's significance or to discern in it a timeless relevance without regard to the historical context. Lessing does indeed draw a full and convincing portrait of Philotas as a disturbed adolescent. His ambivalent relationship with his father—as loving parent on the one hand, and as stern, unforgiving authority on the other—plumbs psychological depths with which Lessing was all too conversant from his relations with his own father, and which positively invite psychoanalytical interpretation.[119] For all his aspirations to maturity and independence, Philotas has signally failed to emancipate himself from his father: his soliloquies consist largely of dialogue with his absent parent, who is ever present to him as a tyrannical and censorious super-ego, as the 'inner judge' (*innere Richter*) who demolishes every possible excuse for his failure to live up to his self-imposed heroic ideal.[120] With no maternal presence to

[114] See esp. Wiedemann (1967a). [115] LM II, 356. [116] LM II, 358.
[117] LM II, 358 and 374. [118] Leewe 38; H. J. Schneider 12.
[119] See, for example, Neumann 31–6; H. J. Schneider 19–30; Ehrlich-Haefeli 233–6.
[120] LM II, 361; cf. Ehrlich-Haefeli 239.

soften these denunciations, Philotas' repressed aggression turns against himself—and also, one is inclined to suspect, implicitly against his father, who is in fact rather the victim than the beneficiary of his son's needless self-destruction. But one should beware of too much psychologizing here. The main function of *Philotas* is not to furnish a case-study in adolescent psychology. It does indeed provide precisely that, but only as a means of discrediting the kind of heroism associated, among other things, with baroque and Cornelian tragedy.[121]

To underline the irrationality of Philotas' motivation, Lessing puts into his mouth a whole series of illogical, sophistical, and patently absurd arguments. When Aridäus reminds him that the present war was started by Philotas' father, Philotas replies that he will continue to believe in the justice of his father's cause 'even if you could incontrovertibly demonstrate the opposite to me'.[122] In the best Greek tradition, he has been educated by a philosopher, and in a travesty of Wolff's doctrines concerning perfection and teleology, he argues that his own ability to fulfil his inherent purpose—which in his view consists in dying for the state—proves that he is a perfect man. He likewise maintains that a ten-year-old child is as qualified to decide on issues of life and death as someone aged thirty or more, and he invests his own suicidal impulse with a religious aura, likening it to divine inspiration.[123] His wild lunges at invisible foes after he has obtained a sword—a pointed allusion to the madness of Ajax and Hercules—casts further doubt on his rationality. And finally, his declaration that innocence and guilt are decided not by discussion, but by victory or defeat in battle—in other words, that might is right—is hardly designed to persuade a mid-eighteenth-century audience that his actions are governed by rational principles.[124] In short, since the kind of heroism that Philotas embodies is clearly not the product of mature deliberation, it forfeits any claim to exemplary status, and there are good grounds for regarding the play as a critique, indeed as a parody, of heroic tragedy.[125]

To this extent at least, *Philotas* is compatible with Lessing's theory of tragedy, which was expressly designed to disqualify the emotion of admiration, associated primarily with heroic tragedy, as an appropriate tragic response. The second requirement of Lessing's theory was, of course, that we should be able to identify ourselves and feel pity or sympathy (*Mitleid*) with the tragic hero. Immaturity or irrationality of the kind which Philotas displays certainly merits some degree of sympathy for human weaknesses, due in his case mainly to lack of experience: indeed, all of the other three characters do show sympathy, in their various ways, with the captive prince's predicament, his courage, and his dedication to his country's cause. Besides, the remarkably full picture of his internal conflict afforded by his long soliloquies enables us to enter into his state of mind and sympathize with his feelings of shame and loss, and it has rightly been pointed out that this emphasis on feelings with which the audience can sympathize is a characteristic rather of sensibility and the domestic tragedy than of stoicism and heroic pathos.[126] But

[121] Cf. Fink (1998) 63. [122] LM II, 371. [123] LM II, 367.
[124] LM II, 371. [125] Cf. H. J. Schneider 11.
[126] See Fick (2010) 189; cf. Ehrlich-Haefeli 224.

these feelings of sympathy, even of pity, are evoked above all by Philotas' predicament *before* his suicide, to which pity, for several reasons, is no longer our primary reaction. In the first place, his suicide appears wholly unnecessary, for a peaceful and honourable solution to his problems has been offered to him; his rejection of this solution invites criticism and disapproval, with a corresponding loss of sympathy. (He is in this respect akin to those Christian heroes whose active desire for martyrdom Lessing would later condemn, in the *Hamburg Dramaturgy*, as untragic.)[127] Secondly, he views the prospect of suicide with euphoric delight, and describes his own death as a triumph, thereby making it difficult, if not impossible, to pity him.[128] And finally, there are others more deserving of our pity at the end of the play than Philotas, particularly the noble Aridäus, whose hopes of reconciliation and harmony are dashed, and not least Philotas' absent father, whom no ransom payment can compensate for the loss of his only son and heir.

There is, however, a further element in this play which is hard to reconcile with Lessing's theory of tragedy, namely its pronounced comic elements.[129] These are most pronounced in the fifth scene, by far the longest in the play, in which Philotas exchanges soldierly banter with his compatriot and fellow-prisoner Parmenio, a battle-scarred veteran who, when asked to enumerate his many wounds, replies that it would be quicker to list those parts of his body which have remained unscathed, and who wards off any praise by jesting 'what do we have bones for, if not to make notches in the enemy's swords?'[130] This is the liveliest scene in the play, and its implicit satire on heroism provides welcome relief from Philotas' overwrought pathos. Not surprisingly, two of the early reviewers found it highly entertaining, although one of them was uncertain of its appropriateness in a tragedy.[131] Yet even in Philotas' sophistical attempts to justify his planned suicide, the play teeters on the edge of comedy, and it is only by firmly rejecting the Plautine solution of an exchange of prisoners that he transforms potential comedy into tragedy—thereby underlining the play's lack of tragic inevitability. The cumulative effect of all these comic elements is, of course, to reinforce the critique of heroic tragedy and heroic values.

This critique of heroic tragedy is, however, only an incidental aspect of the work rather than its main purpose. This is confirmed by the fact that Philotas lacks such essential attributes of the stoic hero as emotional restraint, mature rationality, and dispassionate acceptance of the vicissitudes of fortune. What he represents is a new kind of patriotism, quite distinct from that of Corneille's Horace, Gottsched's Cato, and indeed Lessing's own Samuel Henzi, namely that emotionally charged, unreflecting dedication to king and state which arose in Prussia in the early years of the Seven Years War. It is with this patriotism, and the more extreme reactions to it, that *Philotas* is primarily concerned, and its critique of it applies to heroic tragedy only in so far as glorification of heroism is common to both. This was not the first time Lessing had used literary means to address contemporary issues: several of the early comedies, especially *The Jews*, had done precisely that, as had

[127] LM IX, 187. [128] LM II, 363 and 376; cf. Bormann 38.
[129] See Norton *passim*. [130] LM II, 364. [131] B IV, 798 and 801.

Samuel Henzi. More significant in the present context is that he had already resorted to literary means in order to distance himself both from Gleim's cult of Frederick (in the prose draft of his 'Ode to Gleim') and from Kleist's urge to die in battle (in the prose draft of his 'Ode to Kleist' following the death of Schwerin). In *Philotas*, he employed the more congenial literary medium of drama to amplify these criticisms.

Philotas was not written in Leipzig, but after Lessing returned to Berlin in May 1758. In Berlin, he was exposed to the new patriotic fervour in more concentrated form than he had been in Leipzig, for it was shared by most of his friends, including Nicolai, Mendelssohn, and Ramler.[132] But this was just the stimulus he needed to express more fully the unease he already felt in relation to Gleim and Kleist; for the play is addressed specifically to those two friends in whom he had first encountered, in their strongest form, the patriotic sentiments with which he takes issue in the play.

Gleim's patriotism, like that of Philotas (and unlike that of Henzi and classical republicanism) displays a degree of enthusiasm—in Shaftesbury's sense of the term—which is characteristic of the age of sensibility. The dangers of auto-intoxication inherent in such emotionalism are admirably illustrated in Lessing's youthful hero. And just as Gleim regularly invests his conviction of the rightness of Prussia's cause with a religious sanction, even attributing his own xenophobic sentiments to the Almighty, so does Philotas claim that his suicidal intention is divinely inspired; the effect of this is to place the judgements in question above rational scrutiny. Gleim's cult of Frederick also comes in for oblique criticism. Like the Seven Years War in 1759, the war in *Philotas* has dragged on for 'three long and arduous years',[133] and there are several similarities between Frederick and the hero of the play. Like Philotas, Frederick took the view (in 1757) that, if ever he should be captured by the enemy, he should on no account be ransomed;[134] he even carried poison with him to take in such an eventuality. More tellingly, Aridäus foresees a grim future for Philotas' subjects when he inherits his father's throne: 'You will heap laurels and misery upon your people.' Most seriously of all, however, Gleim's dogmatic patriotism signifies that all enemies of Prussia are by definition wicked: the corollary to the absolute rectitude of his own cause is the demonization of the Other. Lessing's response, in the play, is to present Philotas' enemies, in the persons of Aridäus and Strato, as eminently reasonable people who possess the one essential quality which Philotas lacks, namely humanity. As Aridäus puts it, 'what is a hero without love of humanity?'[135]

The relevance of *Philotas* to Kleist is less obvious, for Kleist was no raw adolescent like Lessing's hero, but an experienced soldier aged forty-four at the time of the play's publication. What the two do have in common is, of course, their death-wish, the tendency to regard patriotic self-sacrifice as an end in itself, irrespective of the real exigencies of the moment: as Philotas puts it, 'it must be a great and admirable spectacle to see a young man stretched out on the ground with a sword

[132] Cf. Bohnen (1986) 23–9. [133] LM II, 358.
[134] See B IV, 805–6. [135] LM II, 372.

in his breast!'[136] Lessing knew that Kleist, in moments of melancholy, positively longed for death in battle. And even on the question of age, there is an affinity to Philotas, for as Lessing's 'Ode to Kleist' indicates, he believed that Kleist was far too young to seek death in this way, contrasting him with the elderly Schwerin, who could afford to sacrifice himself since his life was essentially over; like Kleist, the suicidal Philotas is also credited with a 'raging melancholy'.[137] In short, in addition to rebutting Gleim's unreasoning patriotic fervour, *Philotas* embodies a coded plea to Kleist not to throw away his life unnecessarily. And when the news of Kleist's death reached Lessing a few months after the play was published, his immediate reaction was to exclaim that Kleist had done precisely that.[138]

In keeping with the work's didactic tendency, Lessing not only criticizes the values he opposes but also indicates what he proposes to put in their place. Philotas' narcissism and total rejection of dialogue are contrasted with the open humanity of the other characters. All three are fathers of sons around Philotas' age, and their attitude is the opposite of that stern authoritarianism which Philotas—perhaps erroneously—attributes to his own father. Aridäus considers benevolent paternalism an essential quality of kingship, and Parmenio believes it is a ruler's place to persuade and convince his subjects rather than simply to issue commands. Philotas' contention that victory in war is the sole arbiter of national destiny, and that a blind fortune is indifferent to individual merit,[139] is negated by Aridäus' (and Lessing's) belief that a wise providence is ultimately in control of human affairs. And again like Lessing (and other exponents of literary sensibility), Aridäus basically prefers the virtues of private life to the tainted world of politics: he plans, like Tellheim, Odoardo, and other characters in Lessing's later dramas, to retire as soon as possible into the obscurity of private life.

The first persons to receive copies of the anonymously published play were, of course, Gleim and Kleist.[140] As soon as he received it, Gleim began to turn the play into blank verse, sending Lessing a specimen for his approval; unsure of the play's authorship, he proposed, with unwitting irony, to publish his versification as the work of the 'grenadier'.[141] With Lessing's co-operation, it appeared in the following year as *Philotas. A Tragedy. Versified by the Author of the Prussian Martial Songs*.[142]

To describe this work as a versification of Lessing's play was, however, a misnomer. Gleim in fact reduced its length by over a half, and made far-reaching changes which transformed the play's character. He admitted to Kleist that he had undertaken the work 'with a critical intention', and after initially suspecting that Lessing was the author, he had pressed on with his revision only after convincing himself that it was the work of Mendelssohn or Nicolai.[143] What Gleim objected to, of course, was the dubious nature of Philotas' patriotic heroism, and he proceeded to eliminate everything in Lessing's text which contributed to this impression. Philotas becomes a much more consistent, mature, and rational character; his

[136] LM II, 370; cf. Homer, *The Iliad*, XXII, 71–3 (cited in B IV, 807).
[137] LM II, 375.
[138] To Gleim, 6 September 1759.
[139] LM II, 371 and 367; cf. Wiedemann (1967a) 390.
[140] Cf. L. to Gleim, 18 March 1759 and B I, 829.
[141] Gleim to L., 25 March 1759.
[142] Text in GEL: *Philotas*, ed. Grosse, 43–61.
[143] See Kleist III, 314–16.

self-sacrifice appears to him as the only means of ending the war peacefully; his wild swordplay is eliminated; his self-obsessed fanaticism becomes a single-minded dedication to king and country; and his death becomes a patriotic triumph, acclaimed as such even by his enemies. The word *Vaterland*, which Lessing hardly uses, recurs like a refrain throughout the text. In short, all critical and satirical elements are excised—the long fifth scene, with its pronounced comic elements, is drastically abridged—and the play becomes an unambiguous glorification of Prussian military heroism.

Lessing's response was guarded, and he confined his comments, as he had done in his introduction to Gleim's *Kriegslieder*, to poetic matters, welcoming the 'noble tragic language' of the verse but criticizing its at times overheated rhetoric. The double meaning in his letter of thanks—'you have made it your own, and the anonymous author of the prose version can claim little or nothing of it'[144]—is a masterly piece of diplomacy. Some time afterwards, Gleim discovered that Lessing was indeed the author and, uneasily aware of the liberties he had taken, he sent Lessing and Ramler a cask of Rhenish wine, with the compliments of the 'grenadier'.[145] As for Kleist, he was predictably more impressed by Gleim's version, which moved him to tears, than by the original, telling Gleim 'You have made the character of Philotas much nobler through his love of the fatherland.'

Not only Gleim but the Swiss critic Bodmer was sufficiently disturbed by *Philotas* to produce a rival version, this time a straight parody which retained the prose of the original.[146] Its eponymous hero is Polytimet, the son of Aridäus, whose capture by Philotas' father's troops is mentioned in Lessing's play. In a precise reversal of Philotas' behaviour, Polytimet's reaction to his capture is priggishly right-minded and accommodating; Philotas' father also appears, and denounces his son's extravagant conduct on hearing of his suicide. Bodmer's parody, like his review of Lessing's play in a Zurich journal,[147] is the work of a moralizing rationalist who completely misses the work's satirical intent and condemns its supposed apotheosis of a foolish hero as a threat to virtue, mitigated only by the patent absurdity of the hero's rantings, which should ensure that no reader will take the work seriously. Bodmer's misreading of the play is accordingly the obverse of Gleim's: for the Prussian patriot Gleim, Lessing has too little sympathy with the hero's genuine heroism, and for the Swiss moralist, he has too much sympathy with the hero's false heroism. Later generations, for whom Lessing's works became part of the German national canon, would delete the negative components of both these judgements and conclude that Lessing is fully in sympathy with Philotas as an exemplary hero.

Gleim's and Bodmer's divergent reactions give a foretaste of the disagreements and misunderstandings which punctuate the play's later reception. Apart from the two rival versions, *Philotas* at first attracted little attention. In addition to Bodmer's negative review, two full and favourable notices were published, but even they

[144] L. to Gleim, 31 March and 12 May 1759.
[145] To L., 20 July 1759; cf. Riedel (1979) 78.
[146] Text in GEL: *Philotas*, ed. Grosse, 63–79.
[147] B IV, 803.

found the less conventional features of Lessing's tragedy difficult to assess.[148] The play was not performed until 1774,[149] by which time the *Sturm und Drang* generation found much to admire in Lessing's obstreperous hero,[150] but it never became part of the German theatrical repertoire. Throughout the age of nationalism, patriotic interpretations in the spirit of Gleim predominated, challenged by the equally one-sided pacifistic interpretations of left-wing critics from Franz Mehring (1893) onwards.[151] Only since Conrad Wiedemann's essay of 1967 has there been widespread agreement that the play is critical of misplaced heroism, and of heroic tragedy in particular. But even now, the full extent of the play's ambiguity, indeed inconsistency, is rarely appreciated.[152]

The root of the problem is that *Philotas* does contain evidence to support each of the main lines of interpretation followed in the past, but only at the cost of ignoring other, conflicting evidence. The final scene in particular is full of discordant elements. Aware, perhaps, that he has undermined Philotas' claims to heroic stature all too successfully, Lessing attempts to lend him some tragic dignity at the end, as when Aridäus comments on the dying prince 'There he goes with our booty [i.e. the conquered territories with which Aridäus will have to ransom his son], the greater victor!' This is a strange comment, from the main spokesman of conciliation and humanity, on an act expressly designed to thwart his efforts and strengthen the enemy's military position. Even more puzzling is Philotas' assertion that his death will serve the cause of peace. 'I am dying; and pacified countries will soon enjoy the fruit of my death', he declares, and he subsequently looks forward, in a new conciliatory spirit, to a happy reunion with his erstwhile enemies in Elysium. This looks like a final attempt by Lessing to elicit pity for a hero who has all but forfeited our sympathy as a result of his critical portrayal in earlier scenes. All these adjustments, it seems, are belated concessions to a tragic model which the preceding action has effectively invalidated: one can feel little pity or admiration for a hero whose death appears pointless and unnecessary. This impression is compounded by Aridäus' despairing remark, addressed to the audience at the end of the play, 'Don't you people realize that one can have enough of this?'

Not for the first or the last time—*The Jews* and *Emilia Galotti* are analogous cases—Lessing employs an existing dramatic form to address problems which cannot ultimately be accommodated within it. In *Philotas*, of course, this is part of his intention: his misguided hero demolishes, as it were, the form of the heroic tragedy from within. If parody or satire were the only aim, this might still result in a coherent drama, akin to satirical comedy but with a tragic twist. But Philotas is more than an object of satire. Lessing takes him seriously enough to provide a full picture of his complex psychology, and tries to engage as much sympathy for him as his perverse and destructive behaviour will allow, thereby suggesting that at least

[148] B IV, 796–802.
[149] Fick (2010) 178; according to U. Schulz 193, perhaps already in 1772.
[150] Cf. Herder SWS II, 318–19 (1768).
[151] On the work's reception see Riedel (1979) 71–2; Liewerscheidt 290–2; Bormann 36–7; Fick (2010) 190–1.
[152] Fick (2010) 78–191 is particularly insightful in this respect.

some of the conventions of tragedy are still in place. But the threat which Philotas' behaviour constitutes is too serious, too real, and too widespread to be overcome in a traditional tragic catharsis. At a time when the religious fanaticism of an earlier age seemed virtually defeated in Europe, a new, political variety of fanaticism had made its appearance, and it is with this that Lessing tries to come to terms in his play. His ambivalence towards the hero who embodies it reflects his own ambivalence towards the phenomenon itself as he had encountered it in close friends whom he did not cease to value and respect, and in a country whose culture he rightly saw as a progressive force in Germany. But this was not his last word on the Seven Years War and its impact on the German consciousness. He would return to some of the relevant problems, after the end of the conflict, in his comedy *Minna von Barnhelm*.

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8

Berlin 1758–1760: *Letters on Literature;* Logau Edition; *Fables* and Essays on the Fable; Translations of Diderot; *Sophocles*

Taking leave of Kleist and of Leipzig, Lessing departed for Berlin on 4 May 1758 in the company of his old friend and publisher Voss.[1] On his arrival, he rented rooms in the Heiliger-Geist-Strasse, parallel to the Spandauer Strasse where he had formerly lived, but closer to the river. The house belonged to an elderly spinster who was so taken by him that she included him in her will, a situation from which Lessing, who had no wish for litigation with her previous heirs, good-humouredly extracted himself on the grounds that he did not accept legacies of less than 100,000 talers.[2]

His third Berlin period, from May 1758 to November 1760, was the happiest of his four extended stays in the city. Released from the tensions of occupied Leipzig, he was warmly received by his old circle of friends; Gleim, who visited Berlin just after Lessing's return, records the carefree conviviality of boating parties on the Spree and walks in the Tiergarten with Lessing and various writers and musicians of his acquaintance.[3] Many of the latter were members of the Monday Club, or of the new Friday Club which Lessing had also joined. For more informal conversation, there were regular meetings with Mendelssohn, Nicolai, and Ramler, either in Resewitz's coffeehouse or in the so-called Baumannshöhle, a wine cellar in the elegant Brüderstrasse close to the royal palace on the Spree island. (In that age before telecommunications, Lessing and Ramler, whose lodgings in the Spandauer Strasse were visible from Lessing's in the neighbouring street, would arrange a meeting in the Baumannshöhle by suspending a red ribbon from their windows.)[4] But the many literary projects into which Lessing now threw himself also required peaceful working conditions. Not for the first time—as when he withdrew to Potsdam to write *Miss Sara Sampson*—he found a quiet retreat (or 'hermitage', as he called it) by renting a room with a garden in another part of the city in 1759.[5]

For all his easy sociability, Lessing's literary aggressiveness reached new heights during this period, especially in the *Letters on Literature* of 1759 and 1760. Not even his closest friends remained unscathed: there are frequent thrusts even at Mendelssohn and Nicolai (as in the famous opening lines of the seventeenth

[1] D 133–4. [2] See L. to Ramler, 30 May 1762. [3] D 137–8.
[4] D 154. [5] See L. to Gleim, 28 July 1759; D 161 and 164–5.

letter), and Ramler and Sulzer were both offended by his rough treatment, in his treatises on the fable, of works or individuals dear to their hearts. Ramler in particular noticed the discrepancy between Lessing's social and literary personalities, commenting to Gleim:[6]

> I know that Lessing likes to state his opinions, and to give himself room and breathing space by putting others down. This nature of his cannot be altered. In his writings, he finds it impossible to be that mild, accommodating, and jovial companion that he certainly is in real life.

The gap between his inner and outer lives, always considerable, was again growing wider, and the renewed tensions and frustrations of his inner life found an outlet in literary belligerence. It was, after all, at this time that he wrote *Philotas* in an attempt to distance himself from the Prussian chauvinism of Gleim and most of his Berlin associates. Kleist's death in 1759 and the second brief occupation of Berlin, in October 1760, by Prussia's enemies during Frederick's prolonged absences on campaign—on both occasions, the invaders were bought off by the citizenry[7]—also ensured that the war was never far from his mind. It impinged once more on his personal life when, on renewing contact with his family in 1759, he learned of the rebellion of his youngest brother, the eighteen-year-old Erdmann, who decamped against his father's wishes to join the Saxon army in exile as a common soldier, only to die in wretched circumstances a few months later in Warsaw.[8] Such factors as these, along with his own failure to find secure employment, help to explain the embattled quality of much of Lessing's writing during this period.

After the relatively unproductive years in Leipzig, his literary output in his third Berlin period bears comparison, in volume and variety, with that of the early 1750s. Apart from *Philotas* and the fourth issue of the *Theatrical Library*, his main writings during this time are his contributions to the *Letters on Literature*, his edition of the seventeenth-century epigrammatist Logau, his collected prose fables and treatises on the fable, his translation of works by Diderot, and his scholarly study of Sophocles. These works will now be considered in that order.

The *Letters on Literature*—or to give them their full title, the *Letters Concerning Recent Literature* (*Briefe, die neueste Literatur betreffend*)—owed their inception to Nicolai. After two years as an independent writer, he was obliged in September 1758 to take control of the family business on the death of his elder brother. One of his first decisions was to dispose of the *Bibliothek der schönen Wissenschaften*, since he no longer had leisure to write the contributions on which that journal had largely depended.[9] He was doubtless also reluctant, now that he had his own publishing house, to extend his contract with the journal's Leipzig publisher. Lessing's friend Weisse was cajoled into taking over as editor, and Nicolai felt free to launch a new enterprise.

[6] D 163. [7] Ribbe I, 398–9.
[8] See L. to J. G. Lessing, 12 June 1759; also J. G. Lessing to L., 29 September 1760.
[9] See Nicolai's report (1782) in GEL: *Briefe, die neueste Literatur betreffend*, ed. Bender, 376.

The new journal was planned late in 1758. But although, after Lessing's death, Nicolai would claim a major share in its planning,[10] his statement to Herder in 1768 that the basic idea was Lessing's is probably more accurate, for it is closer to the events in question.[11] The two friends at any rate agreed on the following guidelines: the work would take the form of letters, supposedly to a convalescent Prussian officer, informing him of developments in German literature since the beginning of the war and continuing until the war ended; the style would be informal, reflecting the literary conversations of the Berlin associates; the bulk of the copy would be supplied by Lessing, while Mendelssohn would deal with philosophical items and Nicolai would fill gaps and stand in for the others where necessary; and all contributions would be anonymous.

The journal was published in weekly instalments, appearing each Thursday from 4 January 1759 onwards and continuing, with occasional gaps, until 4 July 1765. Each issue consisted of sixteen pages in small octavo, the whole amounting to twenty-four parts with 333 numbered letters; the entire work was reissued by Nicolai in collected form, with several reprints, over the following decade. The letters vary greatly in length, often with one or more continuations, so that estimates of the precise share of each contributor vary considerably.[12] It is fair to say that Lessing, who withdrew abruptly on completion of the first six parts in the summer of 1760, contributed around one fifth of the whole; Mendelssohn, who deputized for him until Thomas Abbt was brought in as a successor, contributed around a third; and Abbt and Nicolai each contributed slightly more than Lessing. A few outsiders made up the total. The style and tone of the work were set by Lessing, and its considerable public impact was due above all to his contributions. As for the journal's coverage, the term 'literature' in its title was interpreted in the widest possible sense, encompassing such diverse subjects as poetry, aesthetics, grammar, philology, philosophy, science, theology, and history. Most of Lessing's contributions deal with topics in which he had long been interested, such as literary translations, poetry, drama, literary schools and tendencies, and religious and moral issues.

Lessing's aims and motives are nowhere explicitly defined, but they can be inferred from the tactics he adopted. There is an initial indication, made much of by nationalistic commentators in later times, that the journal is a patriotic enterprise, a kind of cultural counterpart to the Seven Years War, designed to identify or encourage literary achievements to match those of Prussian arms; but the tone is pessimistic from the start. Readers are informed at once that there is nothing remotely comparable in the sphere of German letters to the glorious deeds of Frederick and his armies.[13] It is also clear that this is not a review journal in the usual sense. Certain themes and individuals are addressed, and often attacked, with such persistence and regularity as to leave no doubt that Lessing at least is pursuing literary policies, and indeed politics, of a very specific kind.[14]

[10] Ibid. 372–4; Danzel/Guhrauer I, 373–4. [11] B IV, 1084.
[12] See the Introduction to Mendelssohn, JA V/1, xix–xxii.
[13] LM VIII, 3–5. [14] Further details in B IV, 1071–6.

One surprising target is identified at an early stage, namely the *Bibliothek der schönen Wissenschaften*, the predecessor of the *Letters on Literature*, whose main contributors had been Nicolai and Mendelssohn. The *Bibliothek* is explicitly censured by Lessing in the sixteenth letter for its lack of critical rigour,[15] and he proceeds in subsequent letters to question and revise the judgements of Nicolai and Mendelssohn on works by major writers such as Gottsched, Klopstock, and Wieland. On Gottsched and Wieland in particular, Lessing's tone is sharper, and his criticisms more radical, than those of his predecessors: he plainly crosses the division between criticism and polemics. The hapless Weisse, on whom the *Bibliothek* had just been offloaded, was dismayed to find his journal berated by its Berlin successor for the moderate approach to which he still adhered—and his own drama *Eduard III* described as unworthy of detailed analysis.[16] He wrote in disillusionment of his erstwhile friends: 'They are usually prepared to be helpful only when one is of use to them. Everyone is complaining of the malicious way in which they attack all authors almost without discrimination.'[17]

Lessing had clearly envisaged the enterprise in polemical terms from the start. This was confirmed in 1969 by Hans Werner Seiffert's discovery that the series of ciphers with which Lessing signed his contributions, namely (in order of first appearance) O, Fll, L, E, G, and A, are an anagram of the Latin *flagello* ('I scourge')[18]—especially since its initial and concluding elements, O and the curious Fll, appear in the first issue, leaving only the A and Lessing's initials GEL to be added later. Around half of Lessing's contributions consist of increasingly extended polemics.[19]

His polemics follow a clear pattern. They are almost invariably concerned with discrediting existing literary authorities and their productions, especially Gottsched and his Leipzig school, Bodmer's Zurich school and its protégé Wieland, and the Copenhagen circle (a remnant of the 'Bremer Beiträger' of the 1740s) around Johann Andreas Cramer, including the educationalist Basedow and, more peripherally, Klopstock. In Gottsched's case, Lessing was, as before, provoked less by his literary achievements than by the conservative view of literary culture which he now represented; and even if his power was now effectively broken, he retained his usefulness as a representative of all that the progressive forces in German literature had put behind them. In the case of Bodmer and Wieland, Lessing took exception to their equation of Christian piety with literary merit, and in Wieland's case, to a kind of Christian aestheticism which he suspected of being hollow. As for Cramer and his journal *The Nordic Guardian* (*Der nordische Aufseher*), he considered their moralizing tone and claim to direct the consciences of their readers inappropriate to the present age. All of this suggests an impatience, in large measure justified, with entrenched and outmoded attitudes which unduly restricted the autonomy of the creative writer and of literature itself.

Although a broader strategy is plainly at work here, Lessing does seem to devote a disproportionate effort to condemning bad translations, feeble poems, flawed

[15] LM VIII, 39–40. [16] LM VIII, 221. [17] D 164.
[18] Seiffert 76–7. [19] Cf. Mendelssohn, JA V/1, lvi.

dramas, and sanctimonious journalism. The intensity of his commitment, and his high degree of impatience and aggression, scarcely seem warranted by the mediocrity of the works in question, or even by the vanity and pretensions of their authors. Yet his tone and tactics are often reminiscent of his earlier polemics against individuals who had directly offended him, such as Lange and Lieberkühn. This is no coincidence. Since the pioneering work of Hans Werner Seiffert, it has been evident that all of Lessing's sharpest polemics in the *Letters on Literature* are directed at individuals who had attacked or offended him in the recent past. In short, his work is largely motivated by personal interest, as distinct from a disinterested desire to reinvigorate German literature, and he must have viewed the project from the start as an opportunity to settle accumulated scores.[20]

Only the main examples need be mentioned here. Johann Jakob Dusch, it will be remembered, had struck a discordant note in the chorus of praise for *Miss Sara Sampson*, publishing a long and carping review of the play. He was now repaid by sustained attacks on his multifarious writings, from his indifferent translations of Pope and Virgil to his own long-winded and derivative idylls.[21] As for Gottsched, Lessing's old resentment boiled over when, during the Prussian occupation of Leipzig, the Prussian monarch received Gottsched in person to hear his views on literary matters, presenting him with a gold snuffbox; needless to say, Gottsched gave this event maximum publicity. Consistently ignored by the king and still without secure employment, Lessing commented: 'Now is the right moment to launch new and more bloody satires against him than ever before.'[22] Bodmer, too, was high on Lessing's list for his recent parody of *Philotas*, and his attack on Lessing's *Fables* of 1759 prompted him to respond even after he had virtually withdrawn from the *Letters on Literature*.[23] But Lessing's campaign against the Swiss and their current favourite Wieland was initiated above all by two reviews in the Zurich journal *Freymüthige Nachrichten*, probably by Bodmer but erroneously attributed by Lessing to Wieland. These reviews defended Dusch against the Berlin critics, condemned as salacious the Anacreontic poetry of Uz, whom Wieland had recently railed against for the same reason, dismissed Lessing's criticisms of Klopstock's poetry as hair-splitting, and denounced *Miss Sara Sampson* and Lessing's own poems as morally offensive.[24] This, of course, was more than Lessing could tolerate. A public renewal of the very accusations he had endured in his youth from his father demanded a forceful response. This alone can explain, though hardly condone, the uncharacteristic innuendo concerning Wieland's private morality which Lessing includes (despite his subsequent insistence that the personality of an author is no business of the critic) in his opening assault on Wieland's latest publications.[25] All of these factors should help to counteract the tendency, prevalent in

[20] See also Seiffert 71–7; Guthke (1975b) 367, n. 48; B IV, 1072–6.

[21] LM VIII, 5–8, 93–111, 201–15; on Dusch, see also Danzel/Guhrauer I, 377–80; Flory (1973); Grimm (1993) 261–5.

[22] L. to Kleist, 14 March 1758; cf. also B XI/1, 815.

[23] LM VIII, 267–77.

[24] See also Seiffert 77–9.

[25] LM VIII, 15 and 237; cf. Guthke (1983b) 120.

Lessing studies until recent times, to regard his contributions to the *Letters on Literature* as a public-spirited exercise aimed solely at advancing the cause of German letters.

This is not to deny that he was at the same time intent, in a kind of ground-clearing exercise, on reducing the authority of the dominant literary schools. The two objectives, personal and political, did not so much contradict as reinforce one another. But if their effects were predominantly negative—especially in relation to existing literary authorities—they had another, more positive function in relation to the public: they served to encourage independent critical judgement, and to promote distrust of all entrenched orthodoxies. In later years, Lessing would employ a similar strategy, and to similar ends, in his polemics against orthodox religion.

In pursuit of these aims, he renewed and perfected the methods he had developed in his earlier journalistic and polemical writings. The device of a fictitious correspondence, already deployed in the *Writings* of 1753, enhances the impression of spontaneity which makes the *Letters on Literature* so readable, at the same time giving Lessing freedom to change his topics and tactics at will. It also lends itself to that use of informal dialogue which enlivens so much of his criticism, addressing and involving not only his imaginary correspondent but also the reader, and even developing at times into sustained interrogation of the criticized adversary.[26] Especially striking is the use of satire, familiar from the earlier polemics against Lange and Lieberkühn but now consistently employed to ridicule the opponent and entertain the reader.[27] Exaggeration and distortion are, of course, the stuff of satire, and they are present both in humorous form, as in the burlesque of Gottsched in the seventeenth letter, and in that of of vituperative denunciation, as the apparently reasonable and impartial critic finally loses patience with the plethora of absurdities—in fact carefully selected for maximum effect—in the work of the hapless poet or translator. The many protests of Lessing's victims were eminently understandable; but if the satire is good enough, the public will invariably give strict veracity second place to artistic accomplishment.

The contents of Lessing's *Letters on Literature* are too diverse to be discussed in full here, but a few episodes do merit closer examination on account of their rhetorical brilliance, literary consequences, or significance for Lessing's subsequent career. Foremost among these is the celebrated seventeenth letter.[28]

'Nobody', say the authors of the Bibliothek [der schönen Wissenschaften], 'will deny that the German stage has Professor Gottsched to thank for a great part of its improvement. I am this nobody; I deny it outright.'

The humour and irony of these famous lines are fully apparent only to those who realize both that the contradicted statement was made by Lessing's close friend Nicolai, the publisher of the very journal in which he is here contradicted, and that Lessing himself had praised Gottsched's 'undeniable services to the German theatre' equally warmly some ten years earlier;[29] the echo, in the final sentence, of the

[26] For example, Dusch in LM VIII, 207–15.
[27] Cf. Grimm (1993) and B IV, 1073–6.
[28] LM VIII, 41–4.
[29] LM IV, 55.

wily Ulysses' reply to Polyphemus concerning his own identity adds a further literary resonance. This has not prevented the seventeenth letter, whose mischievous tone is set by these lines, from being taken more seriously for almost two centuries than almost anything else in Lessing's non-dramatic writings, for a time achieving, as one commentator puts it, 'a kind of status akin to Luther's ninety-five theses'.[30]

The letter certainly did not owe its celebrity to fairness of critical judgement. But fairness was the least of Lessing's concerns in his many comments on Gottsched throughout the *Letters on Literature*. The *Essential Inventory of German Dramatic Poetry* (*Nötiger Vorrat zur Geschichte der deutschen dramatischen Dichtkunst*, 1757), a major bibliography of German drama and a research tool of enduring value, is deprecated for trifling omissions such as the feeble dramas of Mylius, whom Lessing invokes simply as a means of taunting the professor with the defection of one of his disciples.[31] Gottsched's *Elements of German Linguistic Art* (*Grundlegung einer deutschen Sprachkunst*, 1748), a useful and frequently reprinted manual of German grammar, is criticized not so much for its intrinsic shortcomings as because of Gottsched's alleged misconduct in dedicating an abridged edition of the work to schoolmasters at large in order to promote the work's sales, an expedient which Lessing denounces as 'the barefaced ruse of a learned charlatan'.[32]

The seventeenth letter, however, marks the climax of the campaign against Gottsched. It contains a comprehensive denunciation of Gottsched's reforms of the German theatre as misguided, bungling, and abortive. After conceding that the popular theatre, before Gottsched's intervention, was indeed vulgar and sub-literary, Lessing continues:

Fig. 17. Johann Christoph Gottsched, painting by Leonhard Schorer, 1744.

[30] Paulin (2003) 87. [31] LM VIII, 40–1. [32] LM VIII, 178.

> And how did he set to work? He understood a little French and began to translate; he encouraged all who could make a rhyme and understand 'Oui Monsieur' to translate in turn; he put his own [*The Dying*] *Cato* together, in the words of a Swiss critic, 'with scissors and paste'; [...] he pronounced his curse on extemporisation; he had the harlequin solemnly expelled from the theatre, which was itself the greatest harlequinade ever performed; and in short, he did not so much seek to improve our old theatre as to create a new one. And what kind of a new one? A Frenchified one – without considering whether this Frenchified theatre was appropriate to the German mentality or not.

Lessing's counter-recommendations follow in equally peremptory style: Gottsched should have realized that the older German plays he condemned were closer to English taste than to French; that Shakespeare, with his natural genius, would have been a far better model than Corneille and Racine; that he is 'in essentials' closer than Corneille to ancient tragedy; and that the older popular plays of Germany, such as *Doctor Faust*, are akin to Shakespeare in spirit, as demonstrated by a surviving scene now included (written, in fact, by Lessing himself), in which Faust interrogates seven devils to discover which is the fastest.

Even in 1759, it must have been plain to intelligent readers that these breathtaking claims were for the most part unfounded. That the translator and editor of Fontenelle, Helvétius, and Bayle knew more than 'a little French' was self-evident; Gottsched was not besotted with French culture, but recommended French literature only as a temporary model on the way to an autonomous German literature; not only Gottsched, but Lessing himself by now believed that the harlequin had no place in respectable German drama; Lessing's own dramas retained a greater affinity to French than to English formal conventions, and when the next generation of German dramatists did begin to model themselves on Shakespeare, Lessing was on the whole unimpressed; the 'essential' closeness of Shakespeare to ancient tragedy remains an unsubstantiated assertion; and while the popular Faust plays of Germany were indeed akin to the theatre of Shakespeare's England (inasmuch as they were in part descended from Marlowe's *Dr Faustus*), the devils of Lessing's Faust scene, whose effect depends entirely on rational wit, arouse none of the supernatural frisson of Shakespeare's ghosts and witches. The Faust scene—part of the planned Faust drama on which Lessing was now sporadically working—was included chiefly to annoy Gottsched, who had cited the Faust theme in his *Critical Ars Poetica* (*Critische Dichtkunst*) as a prime example of the vulgar entertainments he proposed to outlaw.[33]

Given Shakespeare's immense importance for German literature in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Lessing's call to his compatriots to model their dramas on Shakespeare was long regarded as an epoch-making event. We now know that the liberal strand of Shakespeare reception which Lessing's comments reflect, and which excused Shakespeare's frequent violation of the rules of French neo-classical drama, was already well established in Germany—albeit somewhat later than in England—by the time Lessing wrote,[34] and that many of its representatives, such as Dryden, Addison, and Pope, had been translated into

[33] See B IV, 824. [34] See Guthke (1993b) and (2010) *passim*.

German by that time. Lessing himself was only beginning to familiarize himself with Shakespeare's dramas, and what prompted him to take the subject up at this moment was probably his work on the final issue of the *Theatrical Library*, which must have gone to press (it appeared at Easter 1759) at around the time when the seventeenth letter was written. It included Nicolai's short history of the English theatre, with its fulsome praise of Shakespeare, and that section of Dryden's *Essay of Dramatick Poesie* which contained most of the already familiar topoi of Shakespeare's natural genius, his disregard for the constraints of French classical poetics, the sublimity and complexity of his plays, and his power to move the heart, all of which feature in Lessing's brief account.

Lessing's commendation of Shakespeare is not, then, a practical proposition for the reform of German literature. Like his more differentiated praise of Shakespeare in the *Hamburg Dramaturgy*, its function is primarily negative, as a gesture of defiance towards the literary conservatism of Gottsched, for whom Shakespeare, like the German popular theatre, represented the antithesis of classical propriety in drama.[35]

Why, then, was the seventeenth *Letters on Literature* for so long regarded as a milestone in German history, even as a manifesto for the German literary revival? It was, of course, admired from the start for its rhetorical bravura and effective satire of a figure who was now widely identified with reactionary tendencies. Few were now prepared to defend Gottsched's unjustly maligned reputation. The one significant reply, the witty and well-informed *Letters Concerning the Introduction of English Taste in Tragedy* (*Briefe, die Einführung des englischen Geschmacks in Trauerspielen betreffend*, 1760) was almost certainly the work of his wife Luise, herself an admirer of Shakespeare who had produced impressive blank-verse translations of extracts from his dramas before Lessing had even heard of him. It attracted little attention, and has been largely ignored ever since.[36] For history was on Lessing's side—not because he had anything original to say about Shakespeare, or because he played any significant part in the Shakespeare revival which followed in Germany soon afterwards. He simply came up, at a decisive moment in literary history, with a memorable and concentrated statement of key themes and concepts which had a great future ahead of them. The magic names of Shakespeare, Faust, and the natural genius, together with Lessing's defence of Germanic traditions against French artifice at a time of burgeoning patriotism, caught the mood of the moment, or would very soon do so. But in Shakespeare's case, the decisive impetus came not from Lessing, but from another of his victims, the unfortunate Wieland, whose translations of twenty-two of Shakespeare's plays (1762–66) began the rapid process of Shakespeare's naturalization as an honorific German dramatist.[37]

By far the most gifted writers criticized by Lessing in the *Letters on Literature* are Wieland and Klopstock, the one a promising young writer who was still finding his way, and the other a nationally esteemed poet. Lessing's treatment of these two

[35] See on this B IV, 1077.
[36] See Paulin (1998) 111–12 and 117; Michelsen (1990c) 134.
[37] Cf. Paulin (2003) 99–122 and 134–5; Michelsen (1990g) 307.

figures merits close attention, for it provides an indication of how far he was able and willing to recognize real literary merit when he encountered it.

Despite his savage response, as earlier mentioned, to Wieland's sanctimonious judgements on Anacreontic poetry, Lessing introduces Wieland as 'incontestably one of our leading belletrists' (*unserer schönsten Geister*).[38] The compliment is a double-edged one, suggesting literary ability but also the superficiality of a *bel esprit*. Lessing is well informed on Wieland's career to date. He mentions his earliest works, the neo-Lucretian poem *On the Nature of Things* (*Die Natur der Dinge*) and the *Moral Letters* (*Moralische Briefe*), poetic epistles in the manner of Horace and Hagedorn, only to underline their glaring contrast with his subsequent productions, which are full of moral prudery and sentimental religiosity; Lessing suggests that a change in Wieland's circumstances—he knows very well that this involved Bodmer's influence—may have thrown him off course.

What Lessing detects in Wieland are signs of insincerity and confusion of purpose. Wieland had indeed undergone a personal crisis after an unhappy love affair in 1753, and in the following years, he sublimated his emotions in a mystical, Platonizing form of Christianity. At the same time, his literary allegiance shifted from pagan antiquity and the modern Anacreontic poets to the ecstatic religiosity of Klopstock, a tendency encouraged by Bodmer, who saw in Wieland a possible successor to Klopstock when the latter failed to live up to Bodmer's ideal of the seraphic poet. As Lessing sees it, the insincerity of Wieland's conversion is apparent in his recent writings, in which he fails to distinguish between moral, religious, poetic, and educational objectives, with adverse consequences for both his poetry and his thought. Thus his moralizing attitude, like that of Bodmer, implicitly denies the autonomy of poetry, leading on the one hand to his ill-judged denunciation of Uz, and on the other, to a series of over-idealized characters in his recent tragedy *Lady Jane Gray, or the Triumph of Religion* (*Lady Johanna Gray, oder der Triumph der Religion*). These moral paragons, whom Lessing describes as 'morally good but poetically evil',[39] generate the very kind of tragedy, designed to evoke admiration rather than pity, which Lessing had recently castigated in his correspondence with Mendelssohn and Nicolai. As for Wieland's religion, as in his *Sentiments of the Christian* (*Empfindungen des Christen*), it is based on 'sweet enthusiasm' of a self-indulgent kind, which owes more to Shaftesbury and secular sensibility than to genuine Christian faith; the result is an aestheticized religion.[40] Similarly, Wieland's educational ideals in his *Plan for an Academy* (*Plan einer Akademie*) are in Lessing's view vitiated by an aestheticizing tendency inimical to serious thought.[41] The same implication of insincerity underlies Lessing's splendid satire which concludes his critique of Wieland. After his pretended discovery that Wieland's *Lady Johanna Gray* has been plagiarized by an English dramatist called Nicholas Rowe, who at times 'almost attains' Wieland's own high poetic standard, Lessing reveals that Rowe died over forty years earlier: in short, Wieland himself is the plagiarist.[42]

[38] LM VIII, 15. [39] LM VIII, 166. [40] LM VIII, 16–17 and 26–7.
[41] LM VIII, 19–32. [42] LM VIII, 166–78.

This accusation is only half serious, for although Wieland had not acknowledged Rowe as his model, the fact that he retained Rowe's title and characters hardly suggests any attempt to cover his tracks. Besides, Lessing knew that this play, like other recent works by Wieland, marked a move away from Bodmer's influence; and Wieland, who would shortly translate Shakespeare, was in any case doing exactly what Lessing had reproved Gottsched for failing to do, namely looking to English literature for inspiration. But for all its severity, Lessing's criticism of Wieland is at bottom constructive: he correctly diagnosed the false consciousness on which Wieland's productions of the mid-1750s were largely based, and which Wieland, having experienced that condition himself, would later satirize with such panache in his novel *Agathon* and other works of his maturity. Lessing welcomed these developments when they came, as his warm tribute to *Agathon* in 1768[43] and his friendly letters to Wieland in the 1770s confirm.

As for Klopstock, Lessing had long regarded him as the greatest German poet: already in 1751, it will be remembered, he had written highly favourable reviews of *The Messiah*. What impressed him about that work was not, of course, its religious zeal, just as the ecstatic emotionality of Klopstock's love lyric left him cold.[44] His admiration was tinged from the start with reservations concerning the poet's religious and emotional attitudes, and what he values above all is Klopstock's linguistic and poetic inventiveness—his metre, register, imagery, and every nuance of his expression. Thus his first main discussion of Klopstock in the *Letters on Literature* is devoted to the latter's treatise on the imitation of Greek metrics in German, which Lessing acclaims as 'a model of how to write without pedantry about minor points of grammar'.[45] He then proceeds, in the same spirit, to compare the variants of the second edition of *The Messiah*, Cantos 1 to 5, with the original readings, thereby making pioneering application of the techniques of classical philology to modern poetry; this elicits from him a major pronouncement on the relationship between rules and innovation in poetry:[46]

> Alterations and amendments which a poet like Klopstock makes to his works deserve not just to be noted, but also to be studied with the closest attention. One studies in them the most subtle rules of art; for what the masters of art see fit to observe are by definition rules.

Despite this appreciative comment, Lessing does find one class of amendments unjustified, as when Klopstock, in a spirit of religious orthodoxy, had deleted poetically impressive passages as theologically unsound, and replaced terms from pagan antiquity, such as 'fate' or 'Muse', with Christian equivalents.[47] As in Lessing's criticisms of Wieland, this is again a question of demarcation; but whereas Wieland's religion was adversely affected by aesthetic considerations, Klopstock's art is adversely affected by considerations of religion.

Later in the *Letters on Literature*, Lessing makes related observations on Klopstock's religious lyric, which he describes as 'so full of emotion that one often feels

[43] LM X, 80; cf. Guthke (1983b). [44] LM IV, 376; cf. Muncker (1880) 147.
[45] LM VIII, 45. [46] LM VIII, 50. [47] LM VIII, 50–3.

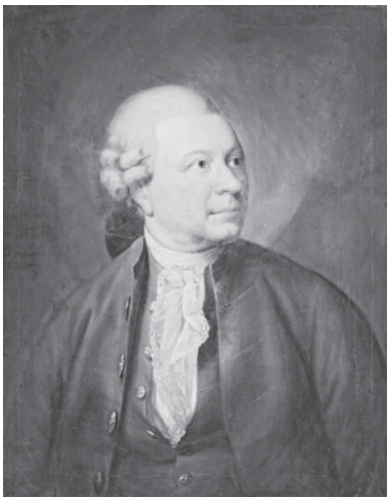

Fig. 18. Friedrich Gottlob Klopstock, painting by Jens Juel.

no emotion at all in response':[48] as in Wieland's case, an excess of sensibility has adversely affected his poetic powers, and Klopstock's free verse becomes little more than elevated prose. He later elaborates these criticisms further, adding that, far from affording insight into the source of the poet's religious fervour, Klopstock's emotion-laden language denies us access to it: the result is neither good poetry nor good theology.[49] As so often in the *Letters on Literature*, Lessing's aim in distinguishing rigorously between poetic factors and extraneous influences is to defend the autonomy of poetry—and, in true Enlightenment style, of the poet himself. That is, the intention of his criticism is essentially constructive.

To conclude: Lessing readily acknowledged Klopstock's poetic genius, but deplored, as he did with Wieland, what he saw as the adverse effects of religious enthusiasm and secular sensibility on his lyrical powers. Although he does not say so, he has little time for the vatic aura which Klopstock cultivated, and which the adulation of his admirers encouraged. These impressions were presumably reinforced by his two meetings with Klopstock on his way to Holland in 1756 (although he denies, in his anonymous contributions to the *Letters on Literature*, ever having met him).[50] Even after he made Klopstock's closer acquaintance in later years, he could not resist retaining, in the revised edition of his epigrams in 1771, that irreverent verse on those who praised his poetry without ever reading it.

Lessing's polemics against Johann Andreas Cramer and his *Nordic Guardian* (*Nordischer Aufseher*) do not seem to have been planned in advance, for Lessing had published positive reviews of Cramer's sermons a few years before, and twice commented favourably on his writings in early numbers of the *Letters on Literature*.[51] It

[48] LM VIII, 140; cf. L. to Gleim, 21 October 1757.
[49] LM VIII, 263–4; cf. Albrecht (1997) 37 and Fick (2010) 203.
[50] LM VIII, 261. [51] LM VII, 32–3 and 58; VIII 14 and 18.

is likely that a crude lampoon in Cramer's journal, ridiculing some engravings of famous poets which Lessing himself had helped to select for the *Bibliothek der schönen Wissenschaften*, aroused his anger and prompted him to look more closely at the *Nordic Guardian*.[52] What he saw did not impress him, and his two longest groups of letters in the *Literaturbriefe* are devoted to that journal.

The *Nordic Guardian* was one of the last moral weeklies in German. Its editor Cramer, a friend of Klopstock and former member of the 'Bremer Beiträger', was court preacher in Copenhagen and later chancellor of the university of Kiel. The style and title of his journal are modelled on those of Steele's *Guardian*, and its avuncular editorial persona is Arthur Ironside, purportedly the son of Steele's Nestor Ironside. Its aims are educational and edifying, and its title underlines Cramer's belief that we should each be our neighbour's moral guardian. Cramer wrote most of the journal himself; Klopstock and Basedow were occasional contributors.[53]

As he himself points out, Lessing normally had no truck with the moral weeklies,[54] whose patronizing posture he found intolerable. In this case, his polemics are directed at precisely this attitude. He warmed to this enterprise, one suspects, not because of any special animosity towards Cramer, but because it enabled him to extend what began as a mainly literary project to encompass some of the ethical and religious issues about which he had always felt most strongly.

One of those issues was the relationship of morality to religion, and when Cramer declared 'that no one could be an honest man without religion' (by which he meant, of course, Christianity), the author of *The Freethinker* and *The Jews* could not remain silent. He quickly unmasks the *petitio principii* underlying Cramer's argument: Cramer tacitly equates the 'man without religion' with the unprincipled libertine, although not all unbelievers are libertines.[55] On religion proper, Lessing detects in Cramer's sermonizing a sentimental religiosity akin to that which he had criticized in Wieland and in some of Klopstock's work: it lacks both logical and theological rigour.[56] Not for the last time in his career, Lessing steps forward as a champion of orthodoxy, declaring:[57]

> Orthodoxy has become a laughing stock; they make do with an agreeable quintessence extracted from Christianity, and evade all suspicion of freethinking so long as they can speak with fine enthusiasm about religion in general.

In particular, Cramer's Ironside advises parents not to trouble their children with religious mysteries such as the Trinity, which they can grasp more readily in later years, but to present Jesus simply as a dear friend of children. This, Lessing replies, means turning one's child into a Socinian, whereas childhood is precisely the time in which unreasoning faith is most easily accepted.[58] Lessing, of course, has little use for unreasoning faith himself; but here, as in his late theological polemics, he

[52] See L. to Mendelssohn, 29 May 1757 and L. to Nicolai, July 1757; Flory (1975) 128–9; also LM VIII, 264–5.
[53] B IV, 1182; on L. and the 'Nordic Guardian' see Goldenbaum (2004c).
[54] LM VIII, 122. [55] LM VIII, 127–31 and 239–49. [56] Cf. B IV, 1183.
[57] LM VIII, 127. [58] LM VIII, 124–5 and 249–61.

defends the pre-rational faith of simple people as their legitimate route to the central truths of religion.

The main interest of Lessing's polemics against Cramer is that they foreshadow some of the central features of his late religious thought, especially his impatience with watered-down theology, with the kind of compromise with rationalism which he would later attack in the so-called 'neologists' who retained the concept of revelation while emptying it of all substance; to this, he found both Lutheran orthodoxy and the complete rejection of revealed religion preferable, for both were at least consistent. But once he had finished with Cramer, he lost interest in further controversy, at least for the moment, and his regular contributions to the *Letters on Literature* ceased.

Despite their polemical tendency, Lessing's *Letters on Literature* contain much that is positive. They do not embody a systematic poetics, but their very freedom from poetic dogma allows Lessing to adopt a more pragmatic approach, judging each work on its intrinsic merits. His procedure is largely empirical and inductive, often proceeding from philological minutiae to an assessment of the work's internal coherence and its relation to traditional criteria of excellence. Like Klopstock, he believes that such rules as do exist are derived from poetic masterpieces, rather than the converse, and he attaches a higher value to originality than to reproduction of existing formulas. Since he believes that the genius cannot be taught—least of all by critics or theorists—his lack of a prescriptive poetics is consistent with his principles. His main criterion of the successful work of art—that it should constitute 'ein schönes Ganzes', an internally coherent, organic whole—is sufficiently general not to be unduly restrictive, and it is in any case recognized intuitively rather than by mechanical measurement.[59] Although this notion of organic unity is not original to Lessing (it is foreshadowed by Baumgarten, Mendelssohn, and others), it would later attain prominence in the aesthetics of Weimar classicism.

By no means all of the works discussed by Lessing are negatively received. He has praise, of course, for the poetry of Kleist and Gleim, but also for that of the young Gerstenberg, who is described as 'a very promising genius'.[60] Kleist's well known 'Song of a Laplander' elicits an appreciation of Latvian folk poetry which looks forward to Herder's reflections on that subject some ten years later.[61] Miscellaneous works of translation, compilation, or history are warmly welcomed.[62] But significantly, it was Lessing's negative judgements which had the most positive impact. Despite the howls of rage from his victims, reviews of the first six parts of the journal, most of which were Lessing's work, were almost uniformly affirmative.[63] One reviewer pays telling tribute, declaring: 'Even if one is at times inclined to doubt the truth of what the author says, his humorous manner is so seductive that one accepts it all as true so long as he is saying it.'[64] Favourable comment continued even after Lessing withdrew, for Abbt, Nicolai, and Mendelssohn managed to sustain, at least intermittently, his robust and incisive style

[59] LM VIII, 39–40. [60] LM VIII, 71–5. [61] LM VIII, 75–7.
[62] LM VIII, 64–70, 194–200, 280–5. [63] B IV, 1008–116. [64] B IV, 1103.

of criticism. When the author of a novel savaged by Thomas Abbt complained directly to the king, a temporary ban on publication was imposed until the authorities found in the editor's favour.[65] But it never regained its original fire, as Mendelssohn (who clearly knew the secret of Lessing's *flagello* anagram) acknowledged: 'He handed his scourge to others, but they lash too lightly, for they fear the sight of blood.'[66]

The long-term consequences of the *Letters on Literature* were considerable. Lessing's polemics had a cathartic effect on German literary life. The centre of the literary Enlightenment moved from Leipzig and Zurich to Berlin, and the leading critics of the following decade, such as Gerstenberg and Herder, drew their inspiration chiefly from the work of Lessing and his collaborators. Lessing's share in the project, long suspected but not conclusively identified, gradually came to light after Nicolai, in 1768, revealed the contributors' ciphers to Herder, who later acclaimed Lessing, on the strength of this work, as the greatest German critic of his time.[67] He certainly remained, for the rest of his life, the most feared critic in Germany, and had he so wished, he could easily have asserted the same kind of authority in literary matters as Gottsched had done before him. But the last thing he wanted was to establish a school, and at the very time when the 'Berliners' or 'Nicolites' were beginning to be regarded as such, he withdrew from the enterprise and soon left Berlin altogether. He would never again take part in a joint journalistic venture.

Soon after his return from Leipzig, Lessing began, in collaboration with Ramler, to prepare an edition of epigrams by the Silesian poet Friedrich von Logau (1604–55). It was published in May 1759 as *Friedrich von Logau's Epigrams. Twelve Books* (*Friedrichs von Logau Sinngedichte. Zwölf Bücher*), and contained just over a third of Logau's vast collection of 3,553 epigrams, edited and freely adapted by Ramler; Lessing contributed a biographical preface and a glossary of Logau's terminology and usage.[68] The plan may have originated in Lessing's studies of the epigram in Wittenberg,[69] and it was doubtless stimulated by that interest in older German literature which is evident in many of his writings of the late 1750s, such as his studies of medieval literature and his project for a drama on Faust.

The edition is a milestone in the recovery of German baroque literature and the rise of historical philology. Its strength lies not in the text itself, for Ramler's amendments are aimed not at philological accuracy but at greater poetic fluency as he understood it; he also disregards the chronology of the epigrams' composition, and rearranges them to suit his own taste. The chief merit of the edition is Lessing's glossary, with its historical introduction and detailed commentary on Logau's language. With its many examples of older usage from medieval poetry and fables, from Luther, Opitz, Fleming, Lohenstein, and other writers of the Renaissance and baroque periods, it is a forerunner of the major dictionaries of German

[65] See on this GEL: *Briefe, die neueste Literatur betreffend*, ed. Bender, 344–50; also Engel on Mendelssohn, JA V/1, xxiv–xliii.
[66] KGL 135. [67] Herder, SWS XV, 496.
[68] LM VII, 125–411; commentary in B IV, 917–21. [69] See Kochmann 249.

compiled by Adelung, Campe, and the brothers Grimm.[70] Lessing himself mentions the need for a dictionary of this kind, and he began at around this time to assemble materials for such a work, some of which were preserved in his posthumous papers.[71] One of his aims in so doing was to rescue older words and dialect expressions which might be of value to modern poets—an aspiration inherited by Herder and the Romantic movement. Such critical comment as the edition attracted was largely favourable; Lessing himself took care to publicize it by discussing it in three of his *Letters on Literature*.[72]

Another project pursued concurrently with the *Letters on Literature* was Lessing's collection of prose fables, published in the autumn of 1759 along with five short treatises on the fable under the title *Three Books of Fables, with Treatises Relating to this Variety of Poetry* (*Fabeln. Drei Bücher. Nebst Abhandlungen mit dieser Dichtungsart verwandten Inhalts*). The treatises are Lessing's first exercise in systematic poetics, and as such are forerunners of his *Laocoön*; he no doubt found this work a welcome change from the piecemeal criticism of the *Letters on Literature*.

Like the student song and the *commedia dell' arte*, the fable was a popular form to which Lessing was attracted from his early years; its appeal was enhanced by its affinity to the drama, with its clearly delineated characters and frequent use of dialogue, and to the epigram, with its climactic resolution. He studied the fable intermittently from his schooldays at St Afra to the last years of his life, and approached it from multiple angles—as poet, theorist, historian, and philologist.

It was the verse fables of La Fontaine, published between 1668 and 1694, which gave the genre literary respectability in modern times. Accessible both to a popular and a more sophisticated readership, they were widely translated and imitated. Hagedorn, Gellert, and Gleim all published collections in La Fontaine's manner, and by 1750, some fifty authors were publishing fables in Germany.[73] The fable was also taken seriously by academics and literary theorists: it found a place in the poetics of Gottsched, Bodmer, and Breitinger, and Lessing's teacher J. F. Christ lectured on the fables of Phaedrus and published an edition of Aesopic fables in his own Latin verse.[74]

Lessing's earliest fables, the first of which were published in 1747, are written in the expansive manner of La Fontaine, with rhyming verse and lines of varying length.[75] Several of these, together with his early verse narratives in the same manner and a few prose fables of more recent date, were included in the *Writings* of 1753.[76] His translation of Richardson's *Aesop's Fables* in 1757 renewed his interest in the genre and its classical origins, and the commercial success of that venture probably encouraged him to plan the collection of his own prose fables which appeared in 1759.[77] In conscious divergence from La Fontaine's leisurely and diverting style, these fables are characterized by an extreme simplicity and economy

[70] See B IV, 785 and 920. [71] LM VII, 131 and XVI, 4–95; cf. Barner (2002) 17–18.
[72] Braun I, 97–108; LM VIII, 77–9 and 111–21. [73] Brenner 67.
[74] See Markschies 132–3; also LM IV, 27. [75] LM I, 159–63.
[76] B II, 625–34 and IV, 936–7.
[77] See Mendelssohn to L., 1 July 1757 and L. to Mendelssohn, 6 July 1757.

which Lessing, in the accompanying treatises, defends as authentically Aesopic and appropriate to the genre's intrinsic character.[78] 'The Fox', based on an original of Aesop, is in this respect typical:[79]

> A hunted fox escaped by climbing a wall. To get down more easily on the other side, it took hold of a nearby thorn bush. It descended successfully by this means, except that the thorns inflicted painful wounds. 'Wretched helpers!', cried the fox, 'who cannot give help without also doing harm!'

The collection consists of ninety fables, divided into three books of thirty each; the first and last books contain mostly original fables by Lessing, the second book reworkings of fables by specified ancient authors. Most are simple, with an implicit or explicit moral; a minority are 'compound', with a concluding application to particular events or people; a few are multiple, with a series of related fables involving the same characters; most of the characters are animals or other natural entities, but some fables include human beings or gods, or a combination of all three. In short, the fables vary considerably in form and origin, their main common feature being their simplicity, or even austerity, of expression.

This stylistic minimalism is based, it is often alleged, on a misapprehension on Lessing's part, for the supposedly Aesopic brevity he cultivated is not an authentic feature of the fable, but only of the abridged form in which many fables were transmitted by medieval compilers such as Maximus Planudes.[80] But if Lessing chose to regard this quality as authentic, he did so not just out of ignorance: he points out himself, in his review of Christ's Aesopic fables, that 'these [medieval] collectors abridged, or rather mutilated' the ancient texts which they compiled.[81] He did so primarily for aesthetic reasons—firstly, because he had by now assimilated Winckelmann's doctrine of Greek simplicity; secondly, because he believed that prolixity reduces the impact of the all-important moral lesson; and thirdly, because he was currently at pains to distance himself from French courtly literature, including the work of La Fontaine. Thus he even maintains that the verse fables of the Roman Phaedrus, whose 'elegant brevity' he contrasts with the wordiness of La Fontaine, are at times unnecessarily complicated, and that Phaedrus' modifications of his Greek models are invariably for the worse.[82] The aesthetic criteria of *Laocoön* are already in place: the art of Greece is simple and exemplary, whereas that of Rome—like that of France—is overloaded and affected.

The first and most important of Lessing's five treatises is entitled 'On the Nature of the Fable'. He proceeds at first inductively, examining definitions of the fable by three French theorists (La Motte, Richer, and Batteux) and the Swiss Breitinger, refuting them in turn by rigorous analysis of their central concepts and with reference to specific examples. One of his objections is that all the criticized theorists treat the fable as in some sense allegorical, thereby implying that the relation between what the fable says and what it signifies is one of similarity. To this, he replies that the simple fable presents a particular instance of a general moral truth, and that the

[78] LM VII, 466–7. [79] LM I, 215. [80] Cf. Oehlke I, 160; Mazur 53; B IV, 971.
[81] LM IV, 27. [82] LM VII, 469–79 and 473–5.

relation of the particular to the general is not one of similarity but of identity (despite the fact that the former is concrete and the latter abstract).[83] This may well be so, but his wholesale dismissal of allegory does need qualification: the behaviour of the animals in fables is similar, but not identical, to that of the human beings they represent (the latter, for example, only rarely devour each other). In rejecting this and other imprecise concepts, Lessing gradually constructs a chain of more precise concepts which his own comprehensive definition will incorporate. But before he supplies this definition, he introduces a series of propositions, derived from Wolff's philosophy, concerning the nature of intuitive cognition (*anschauende Erkenntnis*), the mode of apprehension which he considers appropriate to the fable and essential to its motivating effect on the moral will.[84] Combining his earlier inductive findings with deduction from Wolffian principles, he finally presents his definition:[85]

> If we reduce a general moral proposition to a particular case, endow this particular case with reality, and make out of it a story in which the general proposition is intuitively recognised, this story is known as a fable.

The four remaining treatises are shorter and less substantial. The second, on the use of animals in the fable, rejects Breitinger's claim that their function is to supply that element of the marvellous (*das Wunderbare*) which the Swiss critics considered one of the most effective devices available to the poet. Lessing retorts that speaking animals can only appear marvellous on first reading, but not as a permanent convention of the fable. He argues instead that animals, by virtue of their 'universally known constancy of characters' (the cunning fox, the timid sheep, etc.), serve in the fable as a kind of shorthand, rendering their motivation—unlike that of human beings—immediately intelligible. The third treatise contains an elaborate classification, partly based on Wolff, of fables in which the events are inherently possible, those in which they are possible on the assumption that certain beings exist or on the assumption that existing beings have qualities beyond those which they normally possess, and those which display more than one of the above characteristics in various possible combinations; this classification, ultimately derived from ancient rhetoric, has not unfairly been described as 'scholastic' or even 'sophistical'.[86] The fourth treatise, on style and diction, contains the defence of Aesop's brevity referred to above, and the fifth, on the use of fables in schools, emphasizes the pedagogic value of fables for the intellectual development of the young.

With his strong facility for logical analysis, Lessing was fond of demarcating the boundaries between related or complementary disciplines, and much of his criticism, from *Pope a Metaphysician!* to the *Letters on Literature* and *Laocoön*, concerns those instances in which one discipline trespasses on and impairs the functions of the other. From this point of view, the fable is of particular interest, because philosophical, poetic, and rhetorical factors all play a part in it. His theory of the fable is therefore largely concerned to define the respective roles and interaction of these elements.

[83] LM VII, 423.
[84] LM VII, 443–4.
[85] LM VII, 446.
[86] B IV, 977; Riedel (1976) 160.

Didactic poetry enjoyed immense popularity in the eighteenth century, but it was by no means easy to accommodate it in poetic theory, for it had never been recognized by classical poetics. Aristotle had dismissed philosophical poetry like that of Empedocles (a forerunner of Lucretius) as versified philosophy, and had excluded the fable from poetry, treating it instead as part of rhetoric. Lessing followed a similar course, except that he allowed both of the outlawed forms to retain a foothold in poetry: he agreed that Lucretian poetry was unpoetic, but accepted Pope's *Essay on Man* as a poem on the grounds that it gave poetic considerations precedence over its metaphysical subject-matter; and conversely, he describes the fable as a poem (*Gedicht*) which exists 'on the common frontier of poetry and ethics'.[87] But as with the Lucretian poem, its centre of gravity lies in philosophy (in this case in ethics) rather than in poetry proper, for it should appeal 'solely to our cognition', and its primary aim is neither to move us nor to give us pleasure, but 'to convince us in a vivid manner of a particular moral truth'.[88] His authority for this view, appropriately enough, is the moral philosophy of Christian Wolff, who regarded the fable as a useful instrument of moral instruction.[89] (The cognitive ethical system which Lessing here endorses is, of course, totally at variance with the affective ethics on which he had recently based his theory of tragedy.) But whereas Wolff presents the abstract moral principle as the all-important end to which the concrete instance of the fable is merely a means, Lessing—possibly influenced by Baumgarten—gives greater weight to the concrete instance which, as already stated, is not an allegory whose relationship to a general principle requires the mediation of abstract reason, but the self-sufficient embodiment of that principle in a tangible and fully intelligible form.[90]

Whether, or to what extent, Lessing's theory invests the fable with a degree of aesthetic autonomy reminiscent of Baumgarten's poetics is an as yet unresolved question.[91] His insistence on the fable's primarily cognitive purpose, and his rejection of verse and 'the flowery digressions of the narrator's garrulous art'[92] suggest a purely instrumental view close to that of Wolff. On the other hand, his rejection of allegory and abstraction and his close attention to formal features indicate that aesthetic criteria are also involved; this is confirmed by his definition, later extended to poetry at large in *Laocoön*, of the action or plot (*Handlung*) of the fable as 'a sequence of changes which together constitute a whole'.[93] Given the brevity and summary nature of his references to Wolff and the absence of any references to Baumgarten, it is doubtful whether this question can ever be answered conclusively.

As for the fable's association with rhetoric, it is, of course, a rhetorical medium inasmuch as the object of all didactic poetry is to persuade or convince. But rhetorical argument, which attempts to sway the emotions and is directed towards specific practical ends, was traditionally distinguished from philosophical argument, whose primary concern is with the discovery of truth. By this criterion,

[87] LM VII, 415. [88] LM VII, 438. [89] On this see Harth *passim*.
[90] See Fick (2010) 225–9 and Eichner 74–5. [91] See Eichner 106, 151, 353–5; Harth 60.
[92] LM VII, 416 and 469–70. [93] LM VII, 429.

Lessing's theory, according to which the fable embodies a moral truth whose self-evidence is intuitively recognized, is plainly philosophical rather than rhetorical in character:[94] its purpose is to instruct rather than to persuade (although it is also inherent in Wolffian ethics that moral insight leads automatically to moral action).

There are, however, certain exceptions to this rule in Lessing's own fables. One of these is referred to in his theory, namely the 'compound' fable whose explicit moral is applied to a specific case, usually for polemical ends: the 1759 collection contains several fables of this kind, directed, for example, at boastful Italians, at Schönaich, and at French scholars (presumably at the Berlin Academy) who live off the fruit of German diligence.[95] Lessing's theory does not, however, cover another class of fables in his own collections, namely those whose significance is not so much moral as political. Such fables were already common in antiquity. Phaedrus, a former slave, praises the fable as a means for the oppressed to impart unwelcome truths to the powerful, and many ancient fables adopt the perspective of the powerless, who can perhaps outwit, but not directly challenge, the strong. Socio-political differences are often viewed in a critical light in Lessing's fables, as in the early verse fable 'The Dancing Bear', itself modelled on a similar fable by Gellert.[96] Like the later 'The Donkey with the Lion', it satirizes the lackeys of absolutism. Much has been written on the political significance of Lessing's fables, especially by writers from the former GDR.[97] But while some of his fables do contain political criticism—particularly of arbitrary despotism—it is of a very general kind, and it certainly does not amount to a programme for political change.

The reality depicted in numerous fables from Aesop's time to Lessing's is in fact apolitical and amoral, governed by a brutal struggle for existence—in human terms, a world of *homo lupus homini*. Cunning and opportunism, not moral or political principles, are the appropriate strategies for survival, and the characters are animals as much because they represent the rule of instinct and man's inhumanity to man as because of any 'universally known constancy of characters' such as Lessing, for formal reasons, invoked to explain their presence. The world of disillusion and cynicism—the fable was a favourite medium of the Greek Cynics—which such fables depict ('The Lion and the Tiger', 'The Dying Wolf', and 'The Fox and the Tiger' are typical examples)[98] does not, of course, reflect Lessing's personal view of humanity. It is there because it belongs to the traditional currency of the fable—and because the grim humour which often accompanies it appealed to the same side of his literary imagination that relished the wicked satire and misanthropy of Martial's epigrams.

None of this accords well with Wolff's theory of the epigram as an instrument of rational morality, or with Lessing's own theory. Various factors have been adduced to explain the discrepancy between the theory and the fables: that

[94] Cf. Ott 167. [95] LM VII, 200–2, 208, 210.
[96] LM I, 158; cf. Barner et al. (1987) 234.
[97] See, for example, Markschies, Riedel (1976), Bauer (1983).
[98] LM I, 205, 208, 210.

many of the fables were written before the theory was formulated;[99] that existing models and precedents made it difficult to apply the theory consistently; and not least the fact that many fables are open to different interpretations, so that more than one moral can be extracted from them.[100] Even the simplest fables, such as 'The Fox' (translated on p. 265 above), are not without ambiguity: is the fox shifting the blame for his own imprudence to the unoffending thorn bush, or does the fable merely suggest that help with negative side-effects is no help at all? In the preface to his fables, Lessing wryly admits that his theory and practice often diverge, and he cites the licence of the creative artist as his excuse.[101] But he comes much closer to the true explanation when he later concedes that the morals of many fables are pragmatic rather than prescriptive: 'Many of them are empirical propositions, which inform us not so much of what ought to happen, as of what actually does happen.'[102] The fact remains that his definition of the fable is unduly restrictive; but it must be said in his defence that the same is necessarily true of all attempts to define the genre precisely, because its boundaries overlap with so many cognate forms such as myths, animal proverbs, anecdotes, tales, *gnomae*, and *chreiai* that exact and exclusive definitions are impossible. Lessing quite properly followed the priority set by his own age, which regarded the moral content of the fable as its main characteristic and *raison d'être*.

The reviews of Lessing's volume—with the predictable exception of that in Gottsched's house-journal—were generally positive,[103] although not everyone was happy with his condemnation of La Fontaine.[104] Cramer, blissfully unaware of the identity of his tormentor in the *Letters on Literature*, wrote eulogistically of the fables in particular and of Lessing's writings in general.[105] Bodmer's vituperative and parodistic publication *Lessingian Unaesopic Fables* (*Lessingische unäsopische Fabeln*), in which he defended Breitinger's theory of the marvellous, elicited a witty counter-attack from Lessing in one of his last *Letters on Literature*.[106] Herder, always one of Lessing's most perceptive critics, writes appreciatively on several occasions of his work on the fable;[107] but with his customary historical and anthropological insight, he at once detects the gulf separating Lessing's carefully constructed fables, which he notes are much more poetic than their author realizes, from the homely wisdom of Aesop, and the sophisticated psychology of some of Lessing's animals from the pananimistic universe of early societies. The latter criticism is amplified and radicalized by Jacob Grimm in the preface to his edition of *Reineke Fuchs* (*Reynard the Fox*, 1834): for Grimm, the fable reflects the naive and mythical imagination of simple people, and the moral constructions of Lessing and other modern fabulists divest it of all its poetry.[108]

[99] Danzel/Guhrauer I, 410. [100] See Pikulik (1995) 79–82; Villwock 75.
[101] LM VII, 416. [102] LM VII, 428. [103] B IV, 940–7.
[104] B IV, 945 and 958. [105] B IV, 957.
[106] LM VIII, 267–77; cf. Danzel/Guhrauer I, 433–5 and Fick (2010) 234–5.
[107] For example, SWS II, 188–99; XV, 490–2, 541–4 and 553–6; XXIII, 260–70.
[108] See B IV, 983.

From today's perspective, Lessing's theory, like the whole tradition of normative poetics to which it belongs, no longer has any validity. But like so many of his writings, it still captivates through its rhetorical brilliance and the sparkling dialectics which move its argument forward. This was surely what Herder had in mind—for he was more aware than most of the theory's limitations—when he described it as 'certainly the most cogent philosophical theory on any poetic genre since Aristotle's times'.[109] But the most enduring part of Lessing's volume is the fables themselves, which have been reprinted and re-edited again and again down to the present.[110] Remarkably, they are the most often translated of all his works, with versions available in at least twenty-seven languages.[111]

For all his criticism of French literature and literary theory, Lessing did much to publicize the achievements of the French Enlightenment. He had, for example, translated a collection of essays by Voltaire, published favourable reviews of Rousseau's *Discourses* of 1751 and 1755 as soon as they appeared, and persuaded Mendelssohn to translate the second of these into German. The last completed project of his third Berlin period marks the climax of this endeavour: *The Theatre of M. Diderot* (*Das Theater des Herrn Diderot*) contains his translations of Diderot's dramas *Le Fils naturel* and *Le Père de famille* with their accompanying theoretical texts, the *Entretiens sur le Fils naturel* and the treatise *De la Poésie dramatique*. This substantial work was published anonymously, in two volumes, in the spring of 1760.

Lessing had long admired Diderot as a fertile and enlightened thinker: in 1751, as earlier mentioned, he had written a long and laudatory review of the *Lettre sur les sourds et les muets*. In that review, he alluded to Diderot's recent imprisonment for his radical ideas,[112] and contrasted his productive questioning of received dogmas with the amoralism and alleged pornography of La Mettrie. (Significantly, he would later excuse Diderot's own pornographic novel, *Les Bijoux indiscrets*, as a youthful lapse from which the author later distanced himself.)[113] In 1760, he must have known that Diderot was in trouble again, for the banning of the *Encyclopédie* in 1759 and d'Alembert's subsequent resignation as co-editor were events of European resonance.[114] His solidarity with Diderot is once more evident when, in the preface to *The Theatre of M. Diderot*, he expresses the hope that its author will receive a better hearing in Germany than in France, and declares: 'I might well say that, after Aristotle, no more philosophical a mind than his has turned its attention to the theatre.'[115]

It has long been recognized that Lessing and Diderot are kindred spirits, and there can be little doubt that Lessing was aware of this himself. Similarities are evident even in their early lives: both were destined for the Church, both rebelled against their fathers and turned to literary pursuits, and both for a time lived a

[109] SWS XV, 490.
[110] See the bibliographies by Seifert, Nos 560–642 and Kuhles, Nos 128a–147a (up to 1983).
[111] Cf. Barner (2000) 39.
[112] LM IV, 423; cf. Furbank 48 and Mortier 347.
[113] LM X, 140. [114] Cf. Furbank 184 and 200.
[115] Diderot, ed. GEL (see 'L's translations' in Bibliography), 5–6; cf. LM VIII, 230.

Fig. 19. Denis Diderot, painting by Louis-Michel van Loo, 1767.

precarious and semi-bohemian existence as freelance writers. Their affinity can be attributed in part to the fact that, as Goethe, Sainte-Beuve, and others have observed,[116] Diderot has much in common with the Germans: an interest in speculative philosophy permeates his work, his views on art—his own and that of others—have a strong theoretical bias, his style is at times less than transparent, and his encyclopaedic erudition is evident throughout much of his writing. But there are closer resemblances: like Lessing, Diderot is an eclectic thinker, and he comments favourably on that tendency in his article 'Eclecticisme' in the *Encyclopédie*. His dramas and criticism are full of the moral sentiment of Shaftesbury and Richardson, but like Lessing, he is equally capable of stepping back from it and subjecting the emotions in question to rigorous analysis. His frequent comparisons of different arts, and (in the early *Lettres sur les aveugles*) of the senses to which they relate, were very much in Lessing's spirit, and they are among the sources of inspiration for his *Laocoön*. But it is above all with Diderot the dramatist and dramatic theorist that Lessing is concerned; regrettably, he knew nothing of Diderot's major novels, for only the inferior *Bijoux indiscrets* was published during his lifetime.

Though *Le Fils naturel* and its accompanying dialogues (*Entretiens*) were first published in 1757 and *Le Père de famille*, with the related treatise *De la Poésie dramatique*, appeared in the following year, Lessing does not seem to have encountered them until 1759, by which time the plays were being reviewed and even performed in Germany. Haller reviewed them both in the *Göttingische Gelehrte Anzeigen*, and a long review of *Le Fils naturel* appeared in the *Bibliothek der schönen*

[116] Goethe: HA IX, 487; Sainte-Beuve: Furbank 463.

Wissenschaften;[117] anonymous translations of both plays were performed by Ackermann's company in the summer of that same year. The first indication that Lessing had engaged with these works is his recommendation, in the fifty-first *Letter on Literature* of August 1759, that dramatists should cultivate natural dialogue, individualized expression, and a convincing illusion of reality[118]—all of which themes are central to Diderot's dramatic theory and practice. His first explicit reference to the works in question is in the eighty-first *Letter on Literature* of February 1760, where he quotes Diderot at length in a translation little different from that in *The Theatre of M. Diderot*, which was published soon afterwards.[119] It would therefore seem that the bulk of the translation was completed during the second half of 1759.

The Diderot project accorded well with Lessing's objectives in the *Letters on Literature*. In the first place, it enabled him to follow up his strictures on the inadequate translations of others with an exemplary translation of his own. More significantly, it provided him with a powerful ally, in his campaign against French classicism in the theatre, so to speak in the enemy camp. He underlines this point in the preface to his translation, pointing out that Diderot has seen through the falsity and artificiality of the French classical theatre which 'empty heads' (*schale Köpfe*)—Gottsched is explicitly named as an example—continue to venerate, and has realized that drama is capable of greater things than Corneille and Racine ever envisaged.[120] In this respect, *The Theatre of M. Diderot* also serves as a counterblast to Gottsched's *The German Stage* (*Deutsche Schaubühne*), with its collection of translations from the French classical repertoire and German plays of French inspiration: Diderot's prose dramas of domestic life, neither tragedies nor comedies but examples of the new *genre sérieux*, provide tangible evidence that the French—or at least some of them—have moved on from the heroic and courtly theatre which many Germans still revered. Lessing doubtless enjoyed promoting this new Gallic champion in Berlin while Prussian Gallophobia was at its height, and in his otherwise scrupulous translation, he mischievously changed the name of Constance, the most enlightened and assertive female character in *Le Fils naturel*, to Theresia, the name of Frederick's arch-enemy.[121] In short, Diderot's usefulness to Lessing at the time of the *Letters on Literature* was primarily polemical. Like Shakespeare, he served as a weapon with which to attack the kind of drama Lessing sought to discredit; but since his criticism was at this time unsystematic (and in any case anonymous), he saw no more need to reconcile these two radically different models with each other—or, for that matter, with his third model of Sophocles and Greek drama—than he would in the *Hamburg Dramaturgy* seven years later.

At this point, there was in fact little of a positive nature that Diderot could offer Lessing that he did not already possess. Nearly all the main features of Diderot's dramatic theory and practice were present in Lessing's own theory and practice before he encountered Diderot's work: the use of prose, the encouragement of natural acting, the scenes of private life, the avoidance of heroics, the cultivation of

[117] B V/1, 544–55; Mortier 53. [118] LM VIII, 145; cf. B V/1, 547; Worvill 18–19.
[119] LM VIII, 217. [120] Diderot, ed. GEL, 5. [121] Lamport (2000) 173.

moral sentiment as a humanizing agent—in other words, the entire stock-in-trade of the new intermediate forms of drama—had all been deployed in *Miss Sara Sampson* and given theoretical justification in the correspondence of 1756–57 with Mendelssohn and Nicolai. But whereas *Miss Sara Sampson* was widely known, the correspondence on dramatic theory remained unpublished. Lessing's translations of Diderot's works—especially the theoretical texts—now helped to fill this gap; and although neither of Diderot's dramas was a domestic tragedy, they both occupied positions between the latter and sentimental comedy, thereby further extending the range of possible alternatives to the extremes of satirical comedy and heroic tragedy.

Lessing's immersion in Diderot did nevertheless affect his thinking on drama, as well as his own work as a dramatist, in significant ways:[122] these will become evident in later chapters of this work. Suffice it to say here that, with Diderot's help, he achieved a deeper understanding of dramatic illusion and a new attitude to dramatic language as a series of natural rather than arbitrary signs—that is, as a direct means of representing the characters and emotions concerned and not just as a collection of rhetorical devices for producing specific effects on the audience (and, in *Miss Sara Sampson*, on the actors themselves). This understanding enabled him to generate a much more immediate sense of reality in the next two plays he completed than in any of their predecessors. He would explicitly address other aspects of Diderot's dramatic theory in the *Hamburg Dramaturgy*.

The Theatre of M. Diderot marks the climax of Lessing's work as a translator, and it is his last major published translation. It is fluent and generally accurate, as usual conveying the sense in idiomatic German rather than producing a mechanically literal equivalent.[123] Diderot's key terms are on the whole consistently rendered: the neutral 'Schauspiel' is used for Diderot's correspondingly neutral terms *drame*, *comédie* (in its wider, non-comic sense), and *spectacle*, and his *tragédie domestique et bourgeoise* becomes 'das häusliche oder bürgerliche Trauerspiel'. Mendelssohn justly pronounced it an excellent translation; and in terms of influence, it was certainly Lessing's most successful one,[124] prompting him to issue a second edition in the year of his death. His authorship was generally known by the mid-1760s, and the second edition duly bears his name.

The greatest benefit of this project was to provide an eminently performable text of the better of Diderot's two plays, *Le Père de famille*, under the German title of *Der Hausvater*. Both plays, with their sentimental enactments of family crises, contests of magnanimity, and agonizing lovers at last united, were warmly received from the start, but *Der Hausvater* in particular quickly became a standard item in the German repertoire. Its popularity lasted, and even increased, until the 1780s,[125] when Otto Heinrich von Gemmingen's *Der deutsche Hausvater* (1780) fully naturalized its substance; the common legacy of these plays survived until the end of the century in the trivial, but immensely popular *Rührstücke* (sentimental domestic

[122] On this influence see Worvill 1–23 and 211–17.
[123] Cf. B V/1, 566–75; Lamport (2000) 173–6.
[124] On the work's reception see B V/1, 577–610.
[125] See Fick (2010) 247–8.

dramas) of Kotzebue, Iffland, and Schröder.[126] The mawkish *Fils naturel* was less successful—even in France, it was not performed until 1771. But the French never really took to Diderot's dramas—perhaps because, despite Lessing's strictures, their own classical tradition had left them with an abundance of far superior plays. Diderot's plays owed their success in Germany less to their own limited merits than to the novelty and accessibility of the new domestic genre; Lessing himself suggested in his preface to the second edition that the alien and artificial nature of French classicism made it easier to displace in Germany than in France itself[127]—not least, he might have added, thanks to his own efforts to discredit it. Such were the historical circumstances which made Diderot, in the words of one biographer, 'one of the founding fathers of the German national drama'.[128]

It would be wrong to leave this topic without pointing out that Lessing's perception of Diderot was necessarily limited, and that, for all their obvious affinities, there were profound differences between the two writers. Diderot's real strength as an artist lay not in his plays but in his fiction, in which his true comic gift, totally absent in his plays, comes into its own. His plays, which (despite his own condemnation of *coups de théâtre*) rely on fortunate coincidences to resolve their conflicts,[129] are more conservative, and a good deal less realistic, than his theory prescribes. With his greater dramatic talents, Lessing had little difficulty in surpassing them in his subsequent dramas, and he was more successful in implementing Diderot's theory than Diderot himself had been. Diderot also identifies himself more fully with the cult of feeling, with Shaftesburean 'enthusiasm', than Lessing ever did,[130] and his paeans to the sublimity of wild nature in the *Entretiens* can have had little appeal to Lessing, who was notoriously indifferent to the natural landscape. And of course, Lessing knew nothing of the atheism, moral relativism, and eventual cynicism of Diderot's unpublished writings, although he would himself come to relativise, in his later years, some of the religious and metaphysical certainties which Diderot had long since called into question.[131]

Finally, Lessing's interest in Diderot was not entirely unreciprocated. Although it is unlikely that the perceptive and generally appreciative review of *Miss Sara Sampson* which appeared in the *Journal étranger* in 1761[132] was written by Diderot, as was at one time suspected, Diderot did in that year commission a translation of Lessing's play which survived among his posthumous papers. It was to have been included, together with Landois' *Sylvie*, Lillo's *The London Merchant*, and Moore's *The Gamester*, in an anthology of domestic tragedies which he at that time planned to edit. But although he began work on a draft preface, the project never came to fruition.[133]

[126] See Diderot, ed. GEL, 455; Fick (2010) 248. [127] Diderot, ed. GEL, 7.
[128] Furbank 147. [129] See Diderot, ed. GEL, 447.
[130] See J. Schmidt (1985) I, 82–3.
[131] L. did, however, at some point acquire a copy of Diderot's *Pensées philosophiques* (1746) with their critique of religion: see R/S (2007) 43.
[132] Danzel/Guhrauer I, 467–70; a German translation of the review appears in GEL: *Miss Sara Sampson*, ed. Eibl, 245–8; see also Sadji 242–7.
[133] For a fuller account, see Heitner (1953).

The last literary project of Lessing's third Berlin period was a major work on Sophocles. Had it been completed, it would have complemented his presentation of Diderot's new *genre sérieux* with a parallel study of tragedy in its archetypal form.

Already in 1749, Lessing had undertaken to translate selected dramas by Sophocles, Euripides, and Aeschylus for the *Contributions*, his new theatrical journal.[134] No such translations appeared, but he did contribute essays on the Roman dramatists Plautus and Seneca, the latter of which appeared in the *Theatrical Library* in 1754; the Sophocles project may originally have been intended for this journal, but its conception implied a work of considerably greater length. At any rate, Lessing had begun to study Sophocles by 1756, for in his correspondence on tragedy of 1756–57, he illustrates his emerging theory of that genre with references to Sophoclean plays;[135] there are also allusions to Sophocles in the fragmentary tragedy *Kleonnis* of 1758 as well as in *Philotas*.[136] By February 1760, he was working intensively on the project,[137] while simultaneously engaged on the *Letters on Literature* and the Diderot translation. Two volumes of *Sophocles* were scheduled for publication in the autumn of that year, but the project was abandoned on Lessing's departure for Breslau in November.[138]

The surviving text is a curious document. Lessing announces in his preface that the work—or at least the initial biographical study—is designed to fill a gap left by Bayle, whose biographical dictionary included no article on Sophocles; and although it developed into a long and free-standing work, Lessing's biographical study retains the format and learned apparatus of a Baylean article. The 'Life of Sophocles' itself consists (in the Lachmann-Muncker edition) of less than three pages of basic biographical data, which are followed by almost eighty pages of notes, themselves annotated by numerous footnotes.[139] The plan, it would appear, was for a work in four volumes, the first containing the biographical study, with critical discussion of the dramatic œuvre and translations of the seven surviving plays occupying the rest.[140] The title page and some fifty-six pages (in the above edition) of text were printed in 1760; the remainder, with an incomplete and heavily edited reconstruction of the missing notes and a fragment of translation from Sophocles' *Ajax*, was added by J. J. Eschenburg on the basis of Lessing's posthumous papers, and published as a single volume in 1790.[141]

The 'Life of Sophocles' makes no claim to provide a rounded picture of the man and his work in their historical context: only the known facts of the playwright's life are recorded, as in a biographical dictionary. Lessing's sole endeavour, like that of Bayle before him, is to authenticate the facts by close scrutiny of the sources, which include scholia to the texts, scattered references to Sophocles in ancient

[134] LM IV, 52; see also B V/1, 680–4. [135] Cf. B XI/1, 119, 131, 181.
[136] See Barner (1997) 177–8. [137] See L. to Gleim, 21 February 1760.
[138] See LM XIV, 247. [139] LM VIII, 293–377.
[140] See LM VIII, 292; Fick (2010) 250. [141] See LM XIV, 248–88; B V/1, 299–373.

documents, and the prosopographical *vitae* of the early commentators.[142] The results are presented in long and digressive notes, in which Lessing brings his formidable philological and antiquarian learning to bear, as he promises in his preface, on each and every 'merest trifle' relating to Sophocles and his work. (The most thorough modern commentary on Lessing's text occupies sixty-five pages, but even this, as the editor concedes, does not cover all of the notes.)[143] The overall impression is one of disproportionate effort, reminiscent of Lessing's laborious critique of Jöcher's *Gelehrten-Lexicon* in 1752, which got no further than the letter 'A'. It is another example of that compulsive antiquarianism which some of his friends deplored, and which would again take hold of him, at the expense of more important projects, in the controversy with Klotz at the end of the new decade.

In the case of *Sophocles*, what one misses above all is the analysis of the plays which would have followed the biographical volume, developing further that serious engagement with Greece which, as Lessing's work on the fable had shown, was now supplanting Rome as the focus of his interest in classical antiquity. There are, it is true, innumerable comments on Greek theatre and the dramas of Sophocles in the incomplete first volume; but most concern matters of historical fact rather than interpretation. Only a few—above all the long note H, which seeks to define Sophocles' place in theatre history between Aeschylus and Euripides, and note R, in which Lessing speculates on the content of the lost tragedies—offer tantalizing glimpses of what the completed work might have contained.

Unlike the biographical materials, these interpretative comments tell us more about Lessing than about Sophocles, but they are none the less interesting for that; for the self-confessed aim of his studies of ancient theatre, from the early essay on Plautus to the analysis of Aristotle's theory of tragedy in the *Hamburg Dramaturgy*, is to extract those elements which can be turned to advantage by modern dramatists.[144] Sophocles is accordingly presented as a theatre reformer who overcame the *Schwulst* (bombastic or inflated style) of Aeschylus, replacing it with authentic sublimity and tragic fear with no need for exaggerated effects. He thus represents the ideal mean between Aeschylus and Euripides who, though described by Lessing elsewhere as the embodiment of true natural sentiment,[145] is criticized here as 'not infrequently vulgar and garrulous'.[146] The negative view of Aeschylus is typical of Lessing's time, and was shared by Gottsched;[147] Sophocles had long been regarded—for example, by Racine—as the supreme Greek tragedian;[148] and it is clear that Lessing planned to invest him with those Greek virtues of simplicity, natural sensibility, and integral humanity which Winckelmann had already consecrated as the supreme values of eighteenth-century Hellenism. The lost tragedies in particular afford free scope to Lessing's dramatic imagination: he is fascinated especially by the extremes of human suffering, and their tragic potential, which must have figured in the lost tragedies on the Thyestes legend:[149]

[142] See also B V/1, 684–6.
[143] B V/1, 699.
[144] LM VIII, 363; cf. B V/1, 694.
[145] LM VI, 190 (1754).
[146] LM VIII, 323.
[147] See Barner (1997) 183.
[148] Cf. B V/1, 692–3.
[149] LM VIII, 363.

> The despair of a ravished princess! Ravished by a stranger! In whom she finally recognises her father! A daughter dishonoured by her father! And dishonoured for revenge! Ravished to give birth to a murderer!—What situations! What scenes!

Such larger-than-life figures and terrifying situations appeal to him, one suspects, more for their contrast with eighteenth-century drama than for their potential usefulness to it (although he would react sympathetically to Gerstenberg's horrific *Ugolino*): only through radical demythologization, which would either transform their character beyond recognition or (as with Marwood in *Miss Sara Sampson*) severely reduce their credibility, could they be reconciled with modern tragedy as Lessing understood it. He would return to this problem in the discussion of Philoctetes in *Laocoön*.

Why did he abandon the Sophocles project? He may well have been daunted, as Wilfried Barner suggests, by the inadequacy of existing scholarship on the Sophoclean corpus, and by the prospect of translating seven dramas from Sophocles' intractable Greek.[150] It is certainly unlikely that the project was pushed aside by his work on Diderot,[151] for the Diderot edition was published at Easter 1760, and during the following months before he departed for Breslau in November, his work on the *Letters on Literature* had greatly diminished. Not for the first or the last time, Lessing (and his unfortunate publisher) fell victim to the habit he had contracted in his first years as a journalist—that of relying on printer's deadlines to force him to deliver copy. In this case, he sent the initial instalments to press, and the offer of new and unrelated employment in Breslau obliged him to abandon them and leave the long-suffering Voss in the lurch. The work was not, however, entirely without fruit. Lessing's painstaking scrutiny of the sources corrected several misapprehensions, thereby modestly advancing the cause of classical scholarship.[152] But more significantly, *Sophocles* laid much of the groundwork for *Laocoön* and the antiquarian works of the coming decade.

[150] B V/1, 698. [151] As Barner (1997) 181 suggests.
[152] See B V/1, 696–7; Korzeniewski 45 and 155.

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The Middle Years: War and Peace in Breslau 1760–1765

On 7 November 1760, Lessing abruptly left Berlin to take up the post of Government Secretary to General Friedrich Bogeslav von Tauentzien, commandant of the city and fortress of Breslau in Silesia. The reasons for this sudden change of course are by no means transparent. It is true that he had told his father in April of that year that, while he had no intention of actively seeking employment and becoming 'the slave of an official position', he would accept an appointment if it were offered to him;[1] but it is hard to imagine that he had in mind anything so remote from his usual way of life, and from major centres of learning, as the post which he now accepted. Nor is it likely that he left Berlin, as is sometimes suggested,[2] because of the shrill patriotism of his friends, for his move to Breslau took him to the very heart of the Prussian military effort. A more probable factor is his loss of interest in the *Letters on Literature*, especially since its authors were now coming to be regarded as a new literary school or coterie.[3] He undoubtedly felt the need for a change, for he wrote to Ramler some weeks later that he had felt it was time 'to live more among people than among books'.[4] Material factors were also involved, for he added 'one must also think, after reaching the age of thirty, of filling one's purse as well as one's head'; Karl Lessing confirms that his brother had hoped to save enough money from his new employment to finance a life of scholarly leisure thereafter.[5]

But the manner of his departure suggests that his decision was not entirely rational. He acted on impulse, and he not only omitted, as usual, to inform his friends, but even left Ramler to terminate his lease and rental agreement.[6] Apart from an early letter to Voss (now lost), in which he presumably excused himself for abandoning *Sophocles* in the middle of publication, he wrote to no one for a month. Only then, in a letter to Moses Mendelssohn, did he reveal the true reason for his secretiveness: he had not consulted his friends in case they should unmask the folly of his decision.[7]

Breaking his journey for a 'pilgrimage' to Kleist's grave at Frankfurt an der Oder—an episode which, as he cryptically comments, would merit a letter in itself (not subsequently written)[8]—he proceeded to Breslau, where news of an impor-

[1] To J. G. Lessing, 3 April 1760. [2] See, for example, KGL 126, n. 1.
[3] See Albrecht (1997), 17 and 44. [4] To Ramler, 6 December 1760.
[5] KGL 127–8. [6] To Ramler, 6 December 1760.
[7] To Mendelssohn, 7 December 1760. [8] To Ramler, 6 December 1760.

tant event overtook him. He had been elected on 23 October to external membership of the Berlin Academy, but the election, together with those of the Kassel anatomist Johann Jakob Huber and the Swiss physician Johann Georg Zimmermann, had not been announced in the press until after his departure.[9] These elections, like a number of others in that year, were a rare event, for they were made by a free vote of ordinary members, whereas elections had in the past been proposed—or at least approved—by the President in consultation with the king. But since the death of Maupertuis in 1759 and the prolonged absence of Frederick on campaign, proceedings had become more democratic under Euler's chairmanship:[10] Lessing, according to his brother, had been nominated by the Berlin theologian Johann Peter Süssmilch.[11] This distinction gave him little pleasure, however, especially since the press announcement stated that the new members had been actively seeking admission for some time—which was certainly untrue in Lessing's case—and because he was also informed that Sulzer had opposed his candidature, no doubt because of his attacks on Bodmer and the Swiss.[12] As a result, Lessing never went through the official procedure for admission, and his membership remained ineffective—except in one respect: for Frederick was furious that the elections had gone ahead without his express approval, and he thenceforth reserved the right to nominate all new members himself, refusing to approve the admission of any more Germans, such as Gellert, to the Academy.[13] For the third or fourth time—after the scandals surrounding Mylius in the early 1750s, the affair of Voltaire's missing proofs, and possibly the quarrel with Lange—Lessing's name came to the king's attention in unfortunate circumstances. He would feel the effect of this a few years later.

Breslau (today the Polish city of Wrocław) lies on the River Oder, which at this point broadens and flows from east to west. The old city, on the left (or southern) bank, has strong natural defences, for it is half enclosed by a bend in the river; a series of islands, linked by bridges, separates it from the northernmost suburbs. In Lessing's time, it was still dominated by the Gothic towers of its many churches, public buildings, and cathedral. Ramparts with angular bastions guarded the river frontage and the series of moats which protected the city to the south. Once the capital of the independent duchy of Silesia, Breslau had later flourished under Bohemian and subsequently Habsburg rule, with a mixed population of Germans and Slavs; after the Reformation, its Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish communities lived together for the most part in harmony. Its culture blossomed in the late medieval and Renaissance periods and again in the baroque era, when Martin Opitz, Angelus Silesius, Andreas Scultetus and others enriched its cultural life. Thereafter, its cultural significance waned. But after 1741, when it was seized by Frederick along with the rest of Silesia, it became the capital of Prussia's most important province, and throughout the period of the three Silesian wars (from 1741 to 1763), its strategic importance was enormous. It was the chief depot and winter

[9] D 165; Harnack 478. [10] See Consentius (1903) 523. [11] KGL 124.
[12] D 165–6. [13] Harnack 350–1 and 354; Consentius (1903) 523.

Fig. 20. Breslau with city fortifications, seventeenth century.

headquarters of the Prussian army in Silesia, with a constant stream of troops, prisoners and wounded, munitions, provisions, and supplies of every description passing through it.

Breslau was a fortress, and it had successfully resisted assault for several centuries until 1741, when Frederick took it by surprise and without a battle.[14] But its perimeter was extensive and difficult to defend without a numerous garrison, and its fortifications, largely of Renaissance date but modified according to Vauban's principles in the previous century, were now inadequate: it was vulnerable to bombardment from the higher ground to the south and west, and the Austrians retook it by this means in 1757 and held it for several weeks until Frederick recaptured it after his victory at Leuthen.[15]

Since 1758, the city had been held by Lessing's employer Tauentzien. Towards the end of July 1760, he was obliged to defend it with a garrison of less than 5,000 troops, themselves in charge of several thousand restive Austrian prisoners, against an Austrian force of over 30,000 under Laudon, who, after reoccupying much of Silesia, laid siege to Breslau.[16] Burning down indefensible suburbs to keep the enemy at a distance, Tauentzien rejected demands for surrender; these were followed on 1 August by a bombardment of shells and incendiaries. The siege was lifted on 4 August as the army of Prince Heinrich approached. Frederick himself defeated Laudon at Liegnitz on 15 August and retook much of Silesia.[17]

Tauentzien had served under Frederick's father, the 'Soldier King', and became an adjutant to Frederick himself in 1740. He distinguished himself on numerous

[14] Weiss 1037. [15] Grünhagen II, 37. [16] Venohr 250. [17] Markgraf 122–33.

occasions during the Silesian wars, as in his stubborn defence of the Prussian retreat after Kolin in 1757, when his guards lost two-thirds of their strength and he himself was wounded.[18] Lessing first met him in Leipzig through Kleist, probably in February 1758, at which time Tauentzien was still a colonel.[19] When Lessing joined him in Breslau, he had been promoted to the rank of Lieutenant General in recognition of his defence of Breslau three months before; he now enjoyed a status approaching that of Kleist's hero Schwerin in Prussia's military pantheon. Blunt and direct, Tauentzien was a stickler for discipline; Karl Lessing aptly describes him as 'one of the greatest gems, albeit an unpolished one'.[20] When the Austrian Colonel Rouvroy demanded the surrender of Breslau in 1760, failing which not even infants in the womb would be spared, he famously replied: 'Neither I nor my soldiers are pregnant';[21] and in the winter of 1761, he drilled his first batallion of guards in the historic upper chamber of the Town Hall until cracks appeared in the vaults below.[22] Lessing, who admired his directness, got on well with him, and enquired affectionately after the welfare of 'my trusty old Tauentzien' many years later.[23] No records survive of how Lessing came to be offered the job of secretary, although it is possible that Gleim, who had held a similar post under Prince Wilhelm of Brandenburg-Schwedt in the early 1740s, put in a word for him.[24]

Lessing arrived in the battle-scarred city, now swarming with troops, towards the middle of November 1760. It seems that he lodged for a time in the house of a baker in the Schweidnitzer Strasse, the main thoroughfare linking the city centre with the south.[25] (He certainly never occupied Tauentzien's house in the Junkernstrasse, which subsequently bore a medallion with his portrait, for Tauentzien did not take up residence there until Lessing had left his employment.)[26] His official duties, as described in later years by one of his Breslau associates, were relatively light.[27] He rose late and dealt with the General's correspondence in the latter part of the morning, probably drafting the letters himself on the basis of Tauentzien's brief instructions.[28] The majority of these letters were to the king, dealing with such matters as the disposition of troops and the movements of the enemy, with prisoners, deserters, and the debasement of the Prussian currency; others were addressed to Prince Heinrich and to officials of the court, government, and Breslau municipality. Many of them—especially where a security risk was involved—were in cipher, and the originals or decrypts in the Prussian archives often bear Freder-

[18] On the following, see the article 'Tauentzien' in ADB XXXVII, 443–7.
[19] See Kleist II, 475–6; Pröhle 175–7.
[20] KGL 129.
[21] Archenholtz (1789) 309–13.
[22] Kertscher 140.
[23] To Karl Lessing, 20 September 1777.
[24] Pröhle 180; but Gleim's agency is doubtful, since Gleim still had no idea towards the end of the year where L. was: see A (2003) 82–3. According to Danzel/Guhrauer I, 459, L. was recommended to Tauentzien by Quartermaster Gottlob Naumann, of whose translation of a French work on the class ethos of soldiers L. had written a positive review (LM V, 154–5).
[25] Danzel/Guhrauer I, 463, n. 1. [26] See Markgraf 152–62. [27] KGL 139–43.
[28] See the editor's note to LM XVIII, 370.

ick's own notes for replies.[29] After lunch, Lessing would visit the bookshops or return home around 4 p.m. to deal with petitioners; he seems to have treated them with sympathy and understanding, if the surviving testimony of one grateful citizen many years later is at all representative.[30]

Tauentzien had recently been appointed Director General of the Mint, and his chief role in that capacity was to oversee the introduction in Silesia, which had its own government mint, of the debased coinage which Frederick, by reducing the silver content of the Prussian taler by around a third, secretly introduced at this time in order to defray the huge costs of the war.[31] The state gained considerably in the short term, although the long-term inflationary consequences were disastrous. Those who knew in advance when the debased coinage was due to be circulated could plainly enrich themselves considerably, and they could do so without breaking any laws, for in those days there was no legislation against insider dealing; Tauentzien is said to have made 150,000 talers out of currency speculations.[32]

The main operator of the scheme was the wealthy Jewish entrepreneur Veitel Ephraim, whose splendid Berlin residence (the Ephraim-Palais), financed by such initiatives, still stands at the end of the Heiliger-Geist-Strasse where Lessing had recently lived. In moral terms, such speculations were, of course, highly questionable, and Moses Mendelssohn, when invited by Ephraim to become an agent, indignantly refused and warned Lessing against any personal involvement; Lessing thanked him and promised to be on his guard, urging Mendelssohn to keep him informed.[33] Financial motives certainly played a part in Lessing's decision to work for Tauentzien, and he did earn enough money to amass a considerable library, to help his family financially, and to live in some style during his Breslau years. He also had to arrange some of the contracts for the debasement of the coinage.[34] But despite recent allegations to the contrary,[35] all the surviving evidence suggests that he had profound reservations concerning the morality of the operation and refused to make capital through his inside knowledge.[36] For him to have done so would in any case have been out of character: apart from his habitual indifference, not to say irresponsibility, towards his own financial affairs, one need only recall his incensed reaction, in the controversy with Lange, to the suggestion that his criticisms of the latter's work were motivated by financial self-interest.

Lessing spent much of his time in Breslau in the company of soldiers, and his brother comments that, in those years, he got to know most of the officers of the Prussian army.[37] Of his particular friendships among them, we know virtually

[29] For the text of these letters, see LM XVIII, 369–501 and XXII, 308–9; see also the letters to Oberauditeur Wilcke in LM XVII, 186–90, 194–5 and 199–200.

[30] Thomas Thomson to L., 8 December 1773.

[31] KGL 126; see also Michelsen (1990e) 236–7.

[32] Oehlke I, 385.

[33] D 174; L. to Mendelssohn, 7 December 1760; cf. B XI/1, 840.

[34] See LM XVIII, 371, 414–18, 499–500.

[35] See Jasper 135–6; cf. Hans-Jürgen Schings' negative review of this work in FAZ, 9 October 2001, L 31.

[36] See, for example, Michelsen (1990e) 236–7; D 173–4.

[37] KGL 129.

nothing—if only because few of them can have remained in Breslau when Karl Lessing researched his brother's biography there in the 1780s. On his friends in the learned community, we are better informed. From Karl Lessing's descriptions and other sources, it is clear that some of them had more than a touch of that pedantry and eccentricity to which Lessing was invariably attracted.[38] One of them was Samuel Benjamin Klose, teacher at the St Maria Magdalena-Gymasium and subsequently Rector of the Heiliger-Geist-Schule, a primary school where he remained for thirty-five years despite the offer of better jobs.[39] Of similar age to Lessing, Klose was a polymath and authority on Silesian history, on which he published various compilations, invariably anonymously. A confirmed bachelor, he became disillusioned and cantankerous in later years, but remained devoted to Lessing and his memory, supplying Karl Lessing with a valuable memoir for his biography;[40] according to one report, he even made the journey on foot to Wolfenbüttel in later years to see Lessing once more before he died.[41] Klose was Lessing's guide to the rich archives and monastic libraries of Breslau, including that of St Maria Magdalena; he was himself the curator of the library of St Bernhardin.

Another of Lessing's learned associates was the much older Johann Kaspar Arletius, polyhistor and Rector of the Elisabeth-Gymnasium and curator of the Rhedigersche Bibliothek in the Church of St Elisabeth.[42] Also a bachelor, Arletius published little but lived for his studies, accumulating a personal library of over 12,000 volumes. His curious learning extended to alchemy and the paranormal; Frederick, who got to know him some years later, found his earnest harangues entertaining, and was persuaded by him to improve the teaching of classics in Prussian schools. Arletius was Lessing's guide to the codices and rare books of the Rhedigersche Bibliothek. It was during this time that Lessing assembled his own library of some 6,000 books, which inflation had rendered more affordable. Nicolai recalls bidding, on Lessing's instruction, at a Berlin auction for a book which eventually sold at an inordinately high price, only to discover that his rival bidder was also acting on Lessing's behalf.[43]

In the evenings, as Klose informs us, Lessing regularly went to the theatre. Franz Schuch's company, already known to Lessing from its Berlin performances, had also appeared in Silesia since the 1740s. Unaffected by the reforms of Gottsched and Caroline Neuber, Schuch continued to present the improvised farces (with himself as the Hanswurst) and *Haupt-und Staatsaktionen* of the old popular theatre, interspersed with more serious items such as *Miss Sara Sampson* on Schuch's nights off. His theatre at the corner of the Ohlauer and Taschenstrasse had served as a billet for Croatian troops during the Austrian occupation of 1757 and was badly damaged when the magazine of the nearby Taschenbastion blew up during the Prussian assault in December of that year, but it had been repaired and extended by the time Lessing arrived.[44] Lessing's particular friend among the actors was

[38] KGL 134.
[39] See article 'Samuel Benjamin Klose' in ADB XVI, 226–7.
[40] KGL 139–43.
[41] Grünhagen II, 514.
[42] See article 'Johann Kaspar Arletius' in ADB I, 530–2.
[43] D 181; see also KGL 132 and L. to Nicolai, 22 October 1762.
[44] Grünhagen II, 527–8; KGL 136.

Johann Christian Brandes, whose autobiography recalls how Lessing gave him tuition in acting. Lessing was present at Brandes' wedding to Charlotte Koch, a gifted actress to whom he had presented material for a new costume in appreciation of her performance as Sophie in Diderot's *Der Hausvater*.[45] Brandes and Karl Lessing both point out that Lessing much preferred Schuch's burlesques to his more serious productions. He found it increasingly difficult to sit through dramatic or musical performances as the years went by,[46] and in Breslau, he usually left early to gamble over cards with the officers until well into the night.[47]

Lessing, as already noted, was extremely reticent about his inner life. In the Breslau years, this deficiency is compounded by the paucity of evidence. Always a poor correspondent, he is known to have written only twenty-six personal letters during his four-and-a-half-years in Breslau, four of which are lost; only six letters survive for the period from his arrival to the end of 1762.[48] These letters do, however, afford important clues to his state of mind during this critical time, which he himself viewed as a turning-point in his life. In addition, his brother's biography is more useful than usual for this period, not just because Karl Lessing was able to interview Klose and others after he himself moved to Breslau in 1779, but more particularly because he saw a great deal of Lessing after his return to Berlin in 1765, when Karl, now aged twenty-five and old enough to enjoy his brother's confidence, came to stay with him for over a year.

It is clear that, from the moment of his arrival, Lessing bitterly regretted his decision. His first two letters, to Ramler and Mendelssohn in December 1760, are full of self-reproach. He bemoans the folly of his decision, and asks himself:[49]

> When will you begin to be content with yourself? It is, of course, true that nothing really drove you away from Berlin, […] and that you will have little time for study. But was it not all of your own free will?

As in later years, his repeated failure to answer his closest friends' letters is a sure sign of depression. He admits as much a few months later when he finally replies to Mendelssohn, complaining bitterly of his dissatisfaction at his lot and his frustration at the round of insignificant tasks and mindless diversions which have frequently brought him to the point of abandoning his job; only the thought that one rash impulse might not compensate for another prevents him from doing so.[50] His discovery of the first edition of Logau's epigrams generates a rare spark of enthusiasm in a brief letter to Ramler on 7 September 1761,[51] but there are no more letters until May of the following year, when the affair of his landlady's legacy compels him to write again to Ramler. The tone is again one of depression: 'I am as fed up with my present situation as I have ever been with any. If peace doesn't come soon, I won't stick it out any longer!'

It is against this background that one must view his addiction to gambling, which dates from this time and on which Karl Lessing comments in some detail in

[45] D 182 and 184. [46] Cf. D 274 and 339–40. [47] KGL 143.
[48] See B XI/1, 353–427. [49] To Ramler, 6 December 1760; to Mendelssohn, 7 December 1760.
[50] To Mendelssohn, 30 March 1761. [51] Cf. KGL 140.

his biography. These remarks, which afford significant insight into Lessing's psychology, are worth quoting at length. After reviewing Lessing's leisure activities at large, Karl continues:[52]

> But nothing caught his friends' attention so much as his addiction to gambling, which is said to have begun in Breslau and ended in Wolfenbüttel.
>
> His favourite game was faro, which appears to derive its entire attraction from the high sums at stake […] To anyone who has not actually played it, it must seem the most tedious of pastimes; and anyone who takes part solely in order to win will achieve the opposite of what he intended.
>
> So what impelled Lessing to indulge in it? Concern for his health—Does this not seem ridiculous? And even more so if one reflects that he played with great passion.
>
> One of his friends who observed him at the faro table noticed once how drops of sweat were running down his face. He also saw that he was not doing badly, but was on a winning streak that evening. On the way home together, he took Lessing to task on the grounds that he would ruin his health. 'Quite the reverse', Lessing replied. 'If I played cold-bloodedly, I wouldn't play at all; I play so passionately for a good reason. The vigorous emotion activates my sluggish constitution [*Maschine*] and gets the juices circulating; it frees me from a physical anxiety from which I sometimes suffer.' […] If the sweat which his friend had noticed was induced by the risk of the game, it could hardly, in the normal course of nature, be conducive to his health. It seems rather to have been caused by the warm room, which was full of people and smokers.
>
> […] If Lessing's own testimony counts for anything, he confessed to having gambled often, and for high stakes, in Breslau, but to having lost little or nothing on average. His General had even reproached him with the high stakes he played for, but he had always replied that it made no difference whether the stakes were high or low, except that high stakes had the advantage of holding the attention, whereas low stakes meant that one was very easily distracted.

Cards, lotteries, wagers and all forms of gambling were, of course, popular throughout Europe in the eighteenth century, especially among the upper classes,[53] and the Prussian officers with whom Lessing associated—the vast majority of whom were aristocrats—were no exception. Gambling is a major theme in the literature of the time, particularly in the drama, in which it regularly appears in a comic context but usually with a moral slant, as well as in tragedy, for gambling was widely perceived as a social evil.[54] Lessing was familiar with much of this literature,[55] and his own work is full of references to gambling, often as a metaphor for sudden changes of fortune.[56] At least two of his own dramatic projects appear to have been undertaken as the result of a wager.[57]

[52] KGL 130–2.
[53] See, for example, Dunkley; J. Walker; Ashton.
[54] See Fritz *passim*.
[55] See, for example, LM III, 246; VI, 296–300; IX, 241; also Dunkley 155–217.
[56] For example, LM II, 114 and 240–1; III, 92; VIII, 233; X, 320 and 420; XIII, 28 and 34; also Guthke (1981b) *passim* and Göbel (1971) 130–1.
[57] D 81–2; B VI, 867–8.

In all of this, he is not untypical of his time. What is less typical is the intensity of his commitment and its strong association, of which he was himself well aware, with his attitude to life in general. The efforts of so rational a thinker to justify so manifestly irrational an activity as faro, in which everything depends on the random combinations of cards turned over by the dealer and the odds are heavily weighted in the banker's favour,[58] tell us much about the less rational side of his personality.[59]

Lessing's remarks, as reported by his brother, on the therapeutic effect of gambling on his 'sluggish constitution' and the 'physical anxiety' he sometimes suffered, leave little doubt that he found in it an antidote to depression and to the lethargy which this induced, for we know that he was profoundly depressed during his first two years in Breslau. This same behaviour pattern was noted by someone who observed him many years later:[60]

> He was prone at times to a morose and ill-tempered mood in which he was unable to work […] Then gambling would often take the place of his learned pursuits. His lively spirit could never remain inactive.

Psychologists confirm that the thrill which gambling affords derives less from the prospect of winning than from the sheer uncertainty of the outcome:[61]

> The normal person does his best to avoid painful uncertainty, but uncertainty is precisely what the gambler seeks […] The tension of gambling is logically inexplicable […] The element of insecurity, win or lose, is of prime importance […]

In other words, it is the emotional stimulus that counts, and it is to this that Lessing himself appeals, with his references to passion and emotion, in order to justify his addiction. Significantly, the French thinker Du Bos, in that study of the arts and their effect from which Lessing had translated a section for his *Theatrical Library*, explains the attraction of games of chance, as opposed to games of skill, along similar lines:[62]

> The reason for a predilection so contrary to one's interests is that those games in which the outcome depends largely on the skill of the player require a more consistent mental effort, and do not maintain the soul in a continuous state of emotion as do lansquenet, basset, and other games where the results depend entirely on chance; in the latter, every move is decisive and every result entails some loss or gain. They consequently maintain the soul in a kind of ecstasy, and they continue to do so without its needing to devote any serious attention to it […]

Lessing, who shared Du Bos' opinion that the primary function of the arts is to move the emotions, may well have had this explanation in mind when he justified his own gambling in terms of its cathartic psycho-physical effect.

[58] See Parlett 77–8.
[59] See on this Guthke (1981b); Nisbet (1973) 85–9; Hildebrandt (1982) 258–64.
[60] D 451–2. [61] Bergler 5–6. [62] Du Bos (1993) 8.

This feature of Lessing's temperament also helps to explain some other aspects of his behaviour, especially his tendency to act on impulse, as with his sudden move to Breslau and all the other unannounced departures of earlier years. When a fixed routine became oppressive, a critical point was reached at which a total break seemed essential, even if it could not be rationally justified.[63] It was in this spirit that he defended the decision of an acquaintance to leave on impulse for England in 1757, commenting 'Do we not have to act unreflectingly if we want to induce fortune to do something for us?'[64] In Lessing's own case, this tendency generates in his life a rhythm of relative security and unsettledness, of alternate desires for solitude and society, for continuity and change, as he tires of each new situation and depression sets in, generating a convulsive urge to escape.[65] And when he could not escape, as in Breslau and again in Wolfenbüttel, he would relapse into depression—and often into gambling. A rhythm such as this precludes, of course, that organic kind of development which, since Goethe's time, the Germans have associated with the ideal of *Bildung*, the progressive unfolding of the individual's full potential in response to ever-widening experience. In Lessing's case, his rhythm of contrary impulses meant that each stage in his life, each new appointment, was not so much a necessary stage in a process of growing maturity as a temporary interlude, to be succeeded unpredictably by a new and equally provisional condition.[66] With this in mind, one commentator goes so far as to describe Lessing's career as a '*curriculum vitae* without a biography', a repetitive alternation of fundamentally similar situations.[67] This, it will later be argued, is not the whole story, for it does less than justice to major developments in Lessing's inner life and thought in his later years, when he came to believe that fulfilment is not so much a state as a process.

Conditions in Breslau, of course, could only reinforce Lessing's conviction that chance and contingency are powerful determinants in life as well as in gambling, for the role of chance is never more apparent than in wartime, especially to soldiers. No one was more conscious of this than Frederick the Great, whose *Epître sur le hasard*, written during the Seven Years War, depicts chance as the chief determinant of our destinies; it remained one of his favourite compositions, and he reworked it on several occasions.[68] Lessing's liking for military company doubtless owed something to the provisional character of the soldier's lifestyle, which he must have felt was akin to his own. He described his own life, in 1763, as 'a play of chance', and as Karl Lessing observes, he routinely refused to advise others, including his brothers, on their future careers, 'because much, indeed everything, depends on contingency, which no one can determine with any probability, and human beings must take risks'.[69]

There is evidence that Lessing was also attempting, in Breslau, to make philosophical sense of gambling and the realm of chance. He wrote to Mendelssohn,

[63] See Barner (2005) *passim*. [64] To Nicolai and Mendelssohn, 29 March 1757.
[65] Cf. B IV, 787. [66] Cf. Steinmetz (1993) 492–3. [67] Steinmetz (1998).
[68] Friedrich der Grosse, Œuvres XII, 57–9; also Schieder 206–7.
[69] To Nicolai, 20 July 1763; KGL 127.

who had discussed games of chance in his own essay on probability a few years earlier,[70] 'I have a lot of sophistries on gambling to regale you with'.[71] Of these 'sophistries', we hear nothing more, but there are other indications that he was speculating at this time on the role of chance in thought and learning as well as in ordinary life. One of his unrealized plans in the Breslau years was for a journal entitled *Hermaea*, which, as his draft preface tells us, is 'the word the Greeks applied to everything that is found by chance at the wayside, for Hermes was for them, among other things, the god of highways and of chance'; the preface continues with what is obviously a self-portrait, in which the author describes himself as 'a learned vagabond' who—one is also reminded of Klose and Arletius here—spends his time collecting scholarly curiosities.[72] There is Sternean whimsy here—Lessing had recently discovered *Tristram Shandy*[73]– but there is also a note of self-reproach, for Lessing's conscience, shaped long before in the Lutheran parsonage, continues to tell him that a life governed by contingency instead of purposeful endeavour is a life misspent:

> Imagine a man of boundless curiosity, with no inclination towards any particular discipline. Incapable of giving his mind a firm direction, he will roam around, to satisfy that curiosity, through every field of learning, gaze in wonder at everything, seek to grasp everything, and grow weary of everything. If he is not wholly devoid of genius, he will observe much but fathom little; discover many different tracks but follow none of them through; make more curious discoveries than useful ones; open up new vistas, but on regions which are often not worth contemplating.

Chance is accordingly a potent factor in Lessing's life and thought during his years in Breslau. His indulgence in gambling helped him to rationalize this interest, and made him more aware of the positive, therapeutic effect of the unpredictable as an existential necessity—but no less of its incompatibility with any sustained pattern or purpose. Like most of his contemporaries, however, he no longer elevated contingency to the status of a metaphysical power—the Fortuna of earlier times—except in a metaphorical sense. He doubtless shared Mendelssohn's[74] (and Frederick's) view that the unpredictable and unexpected is simply the product of complex natural causes, whose consequences only an omniscient being could foresee, and whose operation can only be understood after the event. Providence (German *Vorsehung*) remains for Lessing the ultimate backstop and guarantee of meaning and continuity in human life; its problematic relation to contingency is one of the philosophical and religious problems with which he would grapple in later years.

When Lessing arrived in Breslau in November 1760, he had good reason to be depressed. The war had entered its fifth year, and there was still no end in sight.[75] The city was full of ruined and burnt-out buildings, displaced persons, prisoners

[70] JA I, 500–1. [71] To Mendelssohn, 17 April 1763. [72] LM XIV, 290.
[73] See Mendelssohn to L., May 1763.
[74] See Mendelssohn's essay 'Von den ungefähren Zufällen' (1753) in JA I, 35.
[75] On the following see Archenholtz (1789) 292–498; Venohr 285–342.

and deserters, and troops in crowded winter quarters; the contrast with Berlin, still largely undamaged, was stark. Outside the campaigning season, Lessing's work as secretary was not onerous, but it was also tedious: Tauentzien's correspondence is sparse, dealing mainly with routine administrative matters such as payments and movements of supplies. The campaign of 1761 began in May when Frederick moved out of Saxony to shadow the Austrian army under Laudon in Upper Silesia. His pressing concern was to prevent a conjunction of the Austrians with two Russian forces advancing from the east. By the end of July, cossacks were raiding the northern outskirts of Breslau, and the infantry and artillery which followed behind them began to bombard the city from across the Oder. Sallies by Tauentzien's forces drove them off. Throughout the latter part of July and most of August, Tauentzien wrote almost daily, through Lessing, to Frederick, who wished to be kept informed of the dispositions and movements of the Russians. Despite the king's best efforts, the Russian force under Buturlin succeeded in joining the Austrians near Liegnitz on 19 August, confronting Frederick with overwhelming numerical superiority. Only his brilliant defensive manoeuvres from fortified positions at Bunzelwitz, some thirty miles west of Breslau, averted disaster, although he was unable to prevent the Austrians retaking the neighbouring fortress of Schweidnitz at the beginning of October. When the campaigning season ended with the onset of winter, Frederick retired on 9 December to Breslau, and remained there until the following May.

The royal palace on the Karlsstrasse on the southern edge of the city had suffered severely from the Austrian attack of the previous year, and only a few rooms were habitable by the time of the king's arrival. As he moved into the snow-covered ruins, Prussia's fortunes were at their lowest ebb. Misanthropic and depressed, Frederick no longer played his flute but spent most of his time reading; he wrote to d'Argens that Fortuna alone could decide his destiny. The parallel with Lessing's situation is not fortuitous: everyone knew that the situation was dire, and Frederick's despondency must have communicated itself to all around him. No correspondence between Tauentzien and the king survives for that winter in Breslau, but there cannot have been many letters in the first place: communications between them were no doubt conducted for the most part in person or by messages via adjutants.

The new year began with hard frost as Frederick's fiftieth birthday approached on 24 January. Supplies were short and robbery and corruption were rife. The first glimmer of hope came on 19 January, when news arrived that the Empress Elizabeth of Russia (whom Frederick referred to as 'the Messalina of the North')[76] had died two weeks before: the 'miracle of the House of Brandenburg' began to unfold. Rumours that Elizabeth's successor, Peter III, was anxious to make peace with Prussia were confirmed in February, but the armistice agreed in March was not formally ratified until Frederick received the signed treaty on 20 May. A *Te Deum*, with trumpets and cannonades, was sung in Breslau on 21 May,[77] followed soon

[76] Venohr 313. [77] Grünhagen II, 234.

after by the conclusion of peace with Sweden. Frederick was now free to reinforce his depleted army with recruits from the territories until recently occupied by Russia.

But the war was still far from over, especially when the 20,000-strong Russian corps under Chernyshev, recently transferred from the Austrian command to that of Prussia, received orders on 18 July to withdraw to Poland after the assassination of Peter III and the assumption of power by the future Catherine the Great. Frederick's immediate task was to attack the Austrians and drive them out of Silesia, and in particular to retake the fortress of Schweidnitz which guarded the route from Breslau to the Bohemian frontier.[78] In mid-July, Tauentzien was duly ordered to assemble a siege train and invest Schweidnitz; it is from this point that his almost daily correspondence with Frederick, drafted as usual by Lessing, resumes. Frederick meanwhile defeated the Austrian commander Daun at Burkersdorf on 16 August, forcing him to break his links with Schweidnitz. He then kept the Austrians at bay to allow the siege to proceed.

Tauentzien eventually arrived with his huge train of sappers, wagons, and artillery, completing the encirclement of Schweidnitz on 4 August and setting up camp in nearby Teichenau to prepare for the assault. Although the garrison of around 12,500 men outnumbered the besiegers by over 2,000, the Prussians were confident of an early victory[79] as their approach trenches zigzagged towards the defences and Simon Le Febvre, the French siege engineer in Frederick's service, made ready to deploy the new device of compression spheres (*globes de compression*) to demolish the enemy's fortifications by a more concentrated blast than that of traditional petards.[80] Unfortunately for him, his old comrade Jean-Baptiste de Gribeauval, equally proficient in fortress warfare, was aiding the defenders, and Le Febvre's mines and tunnels were repeatedly destroyed by Austrian countermines in a protracted subterranean struggle; the siege was further prolonged by Frederick's refusal to accept anything short of unconditional surrender. The progress of the siege can be followed in detail in the many letters Lessing drafted for Tauentzien, especially the long periodic reports he wrote for the information of Prince Heinrich, currently campaigning in Saxony.[81]

As the bombardment continued day and night—little now remained of Schweidnitz apart from its fortifications—a lucky hit from a Prussian howitzer ignited an Austrian magazine with half a ton of gunpowder, and the entire bastion housing it exploded, killing over two hundred defenders. Le Febvre's fourth and final compression sphere, primed with 5,000 pounds of powder, was set off the following night, blasting a further hole in the defences, and the Austrian commander, Count Guasco, surrendered next morning (9 October) before the storming party could scale the breach. The siege had cost 3,033 Prussian and 3,552 Austrian casualties; over 300,000 artillery rounds were exchanged by the two sides.

[78] On the siege see Archenholtz 458–75.
[79] Cf. L. to Wilcke, early September 1762 (LM XVII, 186–7).
[80] See Duffy 139–43.
[81] LM XVIII, 429–31, 437–40, 449–52, 459–60.

Fig. 21. Siege of Schweidnitz, 1762.

These momentous events were witnessed throughout by Lessing, from the centre of the Prussian command. With his customary reticence about his own experiences, he left no personal account of what he had seen. There is, however, indirect evidence that the siege of Schweidnitz was engraved on his memory: the elaborate metaphors of siege warfare—of outworks, bastions, sallies, approach trenches, breaching batteries and scaling parties—with which he describes the assault on Christianity by Hermann Samuel Reimarus some fifteen years later closely resemble the last stages of the siege of Schweidnitz as portrayed by contemporary historians.[82] But we do have direct evidence of his state of mind at the time in the remarkable double letter he wrote on 22 October to Nicolai and his recently married wife from nearby Peile (Peilau), to which Tauentzien had moved his headquarters after the fortress fell. The change in tone from his previous Breslau letters is remarkable: it is among the most exuberant of all Lessing's letters, jesting at the currency debasement and his own lack of capital, and addressing the new Madame Nicolai, whom he had never met, in a mischievous and even flirtatious tone. For the first time, Lessing actually declares 'I am a bachelor who does not wish to remain one for ever.' His release from Breslau, the intense activity of the campaign,

[82] LM XII, 430–1 and XIII, 22; cf. Archenholtz 473–5.

and the excitement of victory had plainly banished his depression, and he was able to look once more to the future; his letters thereafter are also more equable, and more frequent, than before. Since Duke Ferdinand of Brunswick's recent victories over the French in the west and Frederick's reconquest of Silesia, peace could no longer be far away. News of Prince Heinrich's defeat of Austria and her German allies at Freiberg in Saxony on 29 October consolidated Prussia's now impregnable position, and when an armistice was agreed with Austria on 24 November, the way was clear at last for peace negotiations.

With the Peace of Hubertusburg, signed on 15 February 1763, the Seven Years War was finally over. At 8 a.m. on 10 March, the Town Council and government officials of Breslau assembled to hear the official announcement read out from a specially erected stage, to the accompaniment of trumpets and drums. It would be nice to think that, as Klose reported some two decades later, the proclamation was read out by Lessing.[83] But the *Schlesische Zeitung* of 12 March and other contemporary sources clearly state that this task was performed by a government official (*Oberamtssekretär*) by the name of Förster.[84] (Lessing may, of course, have drafted the proclamation.) A triumphal arch with Ionic columns was erected to the east of the Town Hall, adorned with an illuminated portrait of Frederick and poetic tributes to the main events of the war, and several days of festivities followed. Lessing and Tauentzien returned briefly to Schweidnitz around 18 March[85] to arrange the exchange of prisoners, but they were doubtless back in Breslau in time to welcome Frederick on 24 March when he entered the city, his carriage drawn by farm-horses.[86] He received a tumultuous welcome. It is, however, safe to assume that most of the assembled citizens were celebrating the return of peace even more heartily than the return of Frederick.

The feelings of the Prussian populace at the end of the war were understandably mixed.[87] On the one hand, Prussia had emerged from the war as a major power, and Frederick's military triumph had been spectacular. But some 180,000 Prussian troops and large numbers of civilians had died in the war, which had cost Prussia itself around 100 million talers, along with half as much again extracted from occupied Saxony and considerable subsidies from Britain.[88] Emergency payments to the devastated provinces and a six-month moratorium on taxes, together with a major programme of reconstruction, brought some relief, but the state fulfilled its obligations poorly: the volunteer *Freibataillone* and other irregulars were simply dismissed; pensions went unpaid, while salaries were paid in the debased currency; and *travailler pour le roi de Prusse* became a popular euphemism for ill-paid or unpaid work.[89] The king himself was also a changed man. His aloofness and misanthropy were more pronounced than ever before, and when an adjutant said to him that the day of the peace treaty must surely be the greatest day of his life, he

[83] KGL 142. [84] Grünhagen II, 260; Markgraf 159; cf. LM XXII, 297.
[85] See L. to Wilcke, 18 March 1763 in LM XVIII, 195. [86] Weiss 1057.
[87] See Schieder 208–12. [88] Kunisch 465; Gagliardo 334.
[89] Grünhagen II, 266–78.

replied 'My dear fellow, the greatest day of one's life is the day on which one leaves it.'[90]

Lessing remained in Tauentzien's service for two more years after the peace was signed. The correspondence he handled now dealt with the aftermath of the war—with the exchange of prisoners, the return of deserters, the removal of temporary fortifications, and the like; he was doubtless also engaged in implementing the decisions in question. In July 1763, Tauentzien was summoned to Potsdam to confer with the king, who appointed him Governor of Silesia, a post which he held for the rest of his life. Lessing accompanied him on this journey, and was able to see some of his old friends, albeit briefly, in Berlin before returning to Breslau with his employer in early autumn. He was by now in a good state of mind to engage in serious study,[91] and most of the literary plans he formulated in Breslau date from the last two years of his stay. His brother Theophilus visited him for some weeks in the summer of 1764, during which time Lessing suffered a brief but serious illness; this disrupted his plan to complete *Minna von Barnhelm*, the outline of which was by now clear in his mind.[92] He had reached the age of thirty-five a few months earlier, and he plainly regarded this as a turning point in his life.[93] Renewing those speculations on the somatic basis of mental states with which he had previously explained his love of gambling, he now hopes that his fever has rid him of his youthful weaknesses:[94]

> All our temperamental changes are associated, I believe, with the workings of our animal economy. The serious epoch of my life draws near; I am beginning to be a man, and I flatter myself that I have burnt off the last traces of my youthful follies in this high fever. Fortunate illness!

With a rueful reference to his gambling habit, he reaffirms his intention of returning to serious literary production soon.

By the end of the Breslau period, it was clear that Lessing had not, after all, managed to achieve that financial security on which he had hoped to base his future as an independent writer. As soon as his father learned that he now enjoyed a relatively high income, his regular letters, to which Lessing finally began to reply once the war was over, were filled with requests for financial support for himself and his wife, and for Lessing's younger brothers Theophilus, Gottlob, and Karl, none of whom as yet earned an independent income. (His fourth surviving brother Gottfried died, aged twenty-eight, in January 1764.) The 300 talers which Lessing received in October 1764 on the successful conclusion of his lawsuit against Winckler went almost entirely to his family, in addition to various earlier subsidies and support for his brothers at university or on their visits to him. According to Karl Lessing, he even borrowed to support them,[95] and by the time he left Breslau, his fine personal library was his only substantial asset. He could, no doubt, have saved much more if he had seriously applied himself to it; but as he frankly admit-

[90] Venohr 336. [91] See L. to J. G. Lessing, 30 November 1763.
[92] L. to Ramler, 20 August 1764. [93] See L. to J. G. Lessing, 13 June 1764.
[94] To Ramler, 5 August 1764. [95] KGL 132.

ted to Ramler, 'I am no economist.'[96] His plans for the future remained vague. He spoke to Klose of his wish in due course to visit Vienna, Italy, and Greece[97]—the first hint we receive of an ambition he would partially realize some ten years later. By March 1765, he had resolved to leave Tauentzien's service, despite the fact that Tauentzien had offered him favourable terms to stay on.[98] His initial intention was to return to Berlin before spending a month or two in Dresden (presumably to further the art-historical interests which now preoccupied him), and to visit Kamenz on the way. In the event, he left Breslau on or soon after 20 April[99] to visit friends in various parts of Prussia and Saxony, and spent some time with his parents, whom he had not seen for over nine years.

Lessing published nothing during his four-and-a-half years in Breslau; and apart from a short contribution to the *Letters on Literature* on his return to Berlin, he published nothing further until Easter 1766, when his *Laocoön* appeared. This long hiatus, unique in a career of constant publication, represents what would nowadays be called a career break: for once, he had not needed to write for a living. He nevertheless continued his studies and made plans for new literary and scholarly works throughout the Breslau period, especially in the latter half; these will now be considered.

His first concern was to explore the Breslau libraries, especially their fine collections of books and manuscripts relating to ancient, Renaissance, and baroque literature. His notes on ancient literature deal, among others, with Homer, Aeschylus, Euripides, Xenophon, Ovid, Pliny, Martial, and Seneca;[100] some of these notes would later be used in *Laocoön* and in his work on the epigram in 1771. *Laocoön* itself arose out of Lessing's reflections on the difference between the poetic and visual arts, and his first drafts probably date from the first half of 1763.[101] A further stimulus—and the incentive to give the statue of Laocoön a central position in the work—came from his study of Winckelmann, whose *History of the Art of Antiquity* (*Geschichte der Kunst des Altertums*) appeared towards the end of 1763. By the time he left Breslau, plans for the work were well advanced, and Mendelssohn and Nicolai had submitted their comments on some of the draft material.[102]

According to Klose, he also studied the prose tales of Georg Wickram and other Renaissance writers, thereby renewing that interest which had inspired the scurrilous verse tales of his early Berlin period. That he wrote further verse in this vein on recovering from his illness in 1764 confirms that his state of mind had greatly improved towards the end of the Breslau years.[103] Following up that interest in seventeenth-century poetry which began with his edition of Logau, he also immersed himself in the poetry of Andreas Scultetus, some of which he would edit and publish in 1771.

Compared with earlier years, Lessing's dramatic work during the Breslau period was very limited. Klose tells us that he continued to work on his *Dr Faust* and on a tragedy entitled *Alcibiades*, two sketches for which survive.[104] The latter play,

[96] To Ramler, 7 September 1761. [97] KGL 143. [98] Ibid. 142.
[99] Ciołek 8. [100] LM XV, 424–53 and 457–61; also commentary in B V/1, 765–9 and 857–9.
[101] Blakert 86. [102] B V/1, 639–40. [103] LM I, 190–2; cf. KGL 140–1.
[104] KGL 140; LM III, 399–406 and commentary in B V/1, 777–91; Barner (1989).

which is set in Persia, culminates in the assassination of the eponymous Athenian general, politician, and pupil of Socrates. Although it draws mainly on Plutarch's life of Alcibiades and on earlier dramas on this figure by Otway and Campistron, it also contains strong autobiographical echoes. Alcibiades, now in exile in Persia, longs to withdraw into a life of contemplative solitude, but is repeatedly drawn back into the world of power politics; his refusal to lead a Persian army against his native country also fails to protect him from the implacable hatred of his compatriots. Lessing's desire to live his own life (*sich selbst zu leben*),[105] and the tension in his own experience between withdrawal and social commitment, are surely alluded to here, and likewise, perhaps, his unease at serving the conquerors of his native Saxony. Alcibiades, now aged forty, has also reached a turning point in his life, and is resolved to put the folly of his earlier years behind him; he is at the same time attracted, in the second fragment, to the natural religion and simple virtue of the Zoroastrians in contrast to the superstition and idolatry of Greece—sentiments reminiscent of one of Lessing's fragments of around this time entitled *On the Origin of Revealed Religion* (*Über die Entstehung der geoffenbarten Religion*). The chief interest of *Alcibiades*, which is not fully enough developed to be judged in dramatic terms, is therefore autobiographical; but its themes of orientalism, cosmopolitanism, philosophical wisdom, natural religion, and withdrawal from society give it strong affinities with *Nathan the Wise*.[106]

The Jokers (*Die Witzlinge*), a fragmentary comic scenario with echoes of Otway, Shadwell, and Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*, is reminiscent, in plot and characterization, of Lessing's early comedies.[107] Its chief significance is that it marks his return to comedy, but it was soon put aside in favour of *Minna von Barnhelm*, of which he produced a sketch in the spring of 1764 before his illness brought progress to a halt in July of that year.

Apart from the drafts of *Laocoön* and *Minna*, the most notable of the Breslau writings are a series of sketches and fragments, some of them quite substantial, on philosophical and religious topics. Although none of them was published in Lessing's lifetime, they do concern issues which would figure prominently in the writings and conversations of his later years. The first group consists of two short fragments entitled *Spinoza Only Put Leibniz on the Track of [His Theory of] Pre-established Harmony* (*Durch Spinoza ist Leibniz nur auf die Spur der vorherbestimmten Harmonie gekommen*)[108] and *On the Reality of Things outside God* (*Über die Wirklichkeit der Dinge ausser Gott*).[109] Klose tells us that one of the writers whom Lessing studied in Breslau was Spinoza. The incentive to do so probably came from Mendelssohn's *Philosophical Dialogues* (*Philosophische Gespräche*), which deal largely with Spinoza and the relation of his philosophy to Leibniz. Lessing had already published an appreciative though mainly descriptive review of that work when it first appeared in 1755;[110] but he clearly felt obliged to comment on it in more detail when Mendelssohn sent him the second edition of 1761 with a

[105] See on this theme Albrecht (1993b) *passim*. [106] Barner (1989) 34.
[107] LM III, 407–8; cf. B V/1, 792–6. [108] LM XIV, 294–6.
[109] LM XIV, 292–3. [110] LM VII, 13–14.

specially printed dedication 'To a Curious Person' (i.e. Lessing).[111] The fragment on Spinoza and Leibniz accordingly deals with the first of Mendelssohn's four *Dialogues,* in which Mendelssohn had argued that Leibniz's doctrine of the pre-established harmony of mind and body is already essentially present in Spinoza's philosophy; and since much of the fragment corresponds closely to equivalent passages in Lessing's letter of 17 April 1763 to Mendelssohn, it seems to have been conceived as a draft for that letter, or at least for the relevant section on Spinoza, even if parts of it were omitted from the letter itself.[112] The second fragment relates to the second of the *Dialogues*, in which Mendelssohn had again looked for affinities between Spinoza and Leibniz by arguing that Leibniz's view of the world as it exists within the divine understanding before the act of creation is essentially the same as Spinoza's view of the world as it actually is—the difference being that Leibniz accords the created world an additional existence external to God.[113]

Understandably, Mendelssohn admired and sympathized with Spinoza as a Jewish philosopher like himself. His aim in emphasizing the affinities between Spinoza and Leibniz was to rescue the former, at least to some extent, from the infamy which still attached to his name on the grounds of his supposed atheism, and to underline his importance in the history of rationalism.[114] The closer he could bring Spinoza to the respected Leibniz, the more likely he was to receive a fairer hearing. Thus, while Mendelssohn's own philosophy remained rooted in that of Leibniz and Wolff—as when, for example, he defends God's freedom of choice against Spinoza's universal determinism—he was ready to affirm Spinoza's philosophy in so far as it could be shown either to anticipate or to be compatible with Leibnizian principles.[115]

With his habitual liking for sharp distinctions, Lessing was not convinced by Mendelssohn's conciliatory endeavours (which are admittedly somewhat forced). In response to Mendelssohn's claim that Spinoza anticipated the theory of pre-established harmony, he argues—as the title of his first fragment suggests—that Spinoza merely pointed the way towards Leibniz's theory, for his own premises were radically different from those of Leibniz: in fact, the 'harmony' which Mendelssohn claims to detect between mind and body (or in Spinoza's terms, thought and extension) is not so much a harmony between two distinct substances as a correspondence between two attibutes of one and the same substance. For mind and body, in Spinoza's radical monism, are fundamentally identical, whereas Leibniz's pre-established harmony seeks to bridge the gap between two fundamentally distinct elements. Lessing's fragment concludes with a parable of two savages who for the first time see their reflections in a mirror and try to explain the parallel movements of their own bodies and those of their reflections. Although the fragment breaks off at this point, it has long been accepted that the parable would have continued with two rival explanations: the one savage would argue, like Spinoza, that

[111] KGL 135, ed's note; Danzel/Guhrauer I, 463, n. 2; cf. L. to Mendelssohn, 17 April 1763.
[112] See B V/1, 807. [113] JA I, 1–19. [114] See Altmann (1973) 37 and 50–3.
[115] Cf. Allison (1982) 224.

the parallel movements are basically identical but viewed from different perspectives, whereas the other would contend, like Leibniz, that the two movements are quite distinct but synchronized by an external power.[116] This would in turn imply that Lessing found Spinoza's monistic solution to the mind-body problem—and perhaps his metaphysical monism in general—more plausible than Leibniz's artificial attempt to overcome dualism while retaining its theologically essential aspects (such as personal immortality and moral freedom).

In the second fragment, *On the Reality of Things outside God*, Lessing implicitly accepts Mendelssohn's claim that Leibniz's view of the world as it exists in the divine understanding is essentially the same as Spinoza's view of the world as it actually is;[117] but he further concludes that Leibniz has no need to endow the created world with an additional existence external to God. That is, Lessing abolishes Leibniz's distinction between possible and actual worlds and thereby implies, like Spinoza, that the actual world is the only possible one.[118] This conclusion should come as no surprise, for it is no different from his earlier suggestion, in *The Christianity of Reason* of 1753, that the creation of the world as we know it is not so much a free choice as a necessary emanation of the perfect being, for whom thought and creation are identical.[119] Pressing this argument to its conclusion, Lessing also contends that the only meaningful sense in which any existing thing can be contingent is by virtue of its ontological dependence on God, not by virtue of any arbitrarily conferred attributes it may possess as an independent entity.

The overall tendency of these two fragments is therefore to reject Mendelssohn's attempts to reconcile Spinoza with Leibniz, and to emphasize Spinoza's radical monism and determinism in contrast to Leibniz's Christian-inspired doctrines of the soul's immortality and a transcendental God. In both cases, his sympathies appear to lie with Spinoza rather than with Leibniz. But although the fragments are compatible with Spinozism, we are not therefore justified in concluding that Lessing was now a committed Spinozist.[120] They undoubtedly show that he had recently studied Spinoza's *Ethics*, which he cites on several occasions, and they display that sympathy with certain forms of determinism which was already evident in *The Christianity of Reason* and which he liked to deploy for dialectical purposes, as in his conversations with Brawe in 1757. But his description of finite beings as ideas in the mind of God is more reminiscent of Leibniz than of Spinoza,[121] and he continues in later years, as already in the early 1750s, to draw freely on Leibniz's monadology, theodicy, and other metaphysical doctrines. Most significantly of all, both his letter to Mendelssohn of April 1763 and the fragment on which it is based break off at the point where, as the unfinished parable of the two savages indicates, he would have had to come down firmly for or against the doctrine of pre-established harmony as the cornerstone of Leibniz's philosophy. That he chooses not to do so suggests that he was not at this point prepared to commit himself decisively to Spinoza's monism. It would therefore seem that, in these frag-

[116] See Danzel/Guhrauer II, 375; Allison (1982) 226. [117] Cf. Spinoza, *Ethics*, Part I, Prop. XV.
[118] Cf. ibid., Part I, Prop. XXIX. [119] LM XIV, 175–6.
[120] Cf. Allison (1982) 230. [121] Cf. Allison (1966) 71–2.

ments, he is more concerned to simplify Leibniz's philosophy than to refute it. His philosophical position remains that of an eclectic.[122]

Finally, three fragments of the same period deal with the origin of religion, and of Christianity in particular. The first, which bears the title *On the Elpistics* (*Über die Elpistiker*),[123] was written in response to a work edited by Johann Christian Leuschner, which Lessing had reviewed in 1755[124] and in which Leuschner and three other scholars sought to establish the identity of the Elpistics, an obscure philosophical sect mentioned by Plutarch, who based their beliefs on the concept of hope (Greek *elpis*); Lessing had rejected the hypothesis of Leuschner and another of his contributors that the Elpistics were in fact Christians. We know that he returned to this problem in Breslau, for Karl Lessing tells us how his brother, on discovering that Leuschner, who lived in Breslau, refused to accept his criticisms, confronted him one day in a Breslau library and produced one book after another to substantiate his claims.[125] This incident must have led him to compose the relevant fragment, which contains the outline of a much longer work refuting the theories of Leuschner and his fellow contributors to the 1755 volume, according to which the Elpistics were either Christians, Stoics, or Cynics. Lessing has no difficulty in showing that all of them overstretch the meagre evidence which Plutarch supplies; but his own theory that the Elpistics were 'pseudomancers' or false prophets suffers from precisely the same deficiency. His interest in this theme was probably first aroused because the hope from which the Elpistics took their name related primarily to the afterlife, a topic to which he would frequently return in later years.[126] But his attitude towards this and other sects of the early Christian period—including the Christians themselves—is at this time sceptical and highly critical, as when he refers to some of their adherents as 'false martyrs who should be regarded as no better than suicides'.[127]

This theme is further developed in the second, and most substantial, of the religious fragments, entitled *On the Manner in which the Christian Religion Was Propagated and Disseminated (Von der Art und Weise der Fortpflanzung und Ausbreitung der christlichen Religion)*.[128] It is to this work that Klose refers when he reports that, in the last years of his stay in Breslau (presumably 1763 and 1764), Lessing engaged in theological studies, especially of the patristic writers, and planned a major work on the persecution and martyrdom of the early Christians.[129] He did not complete this work, but the surviving fragment contains a very full outline of it. The aim of the work was to refute one of the traditional arguments for Christianity, according to which the speed with which it spread and triumphed in the Roman Empire, against all the odds, is a sure indication of its divine origin.[130] To achieve his aim, Lessing employs a rigorously empirical approach, and concludes that Christianity arose and spread by a perfectly natural process and under highly favourable circumstances. The style and approach of the fragment, which looks forward to

[122] Further details in Coulombeau 254–64. [123] LM XIV, 297–311.
[124] LM VII, 20–2. [125] KGL 134. [126] Cf. B V/1, 816–17.
[127] LM XIV, 300. [128] LM XIV, 314–32; see on this Pons (1964) 163–75.
[129] KGL 142. [130] See on this Vollhardt (2002) 42.

Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, is typical of the radical Enlightenment and especially of its criticism of religion. It contains verbal echoes of the article 'Mahomet' in Bayle's *Dictionnaire*, and there are parallels in Bayle's writings both for its main argument and for Lessing's provocative contention that the Romans were perfectly justified in persecuting the early Christians—not because they were Christians, but because they were lawbreakers.[131] Lessing's account of the guile with which the early Christian proselytizers gained their converts recalls the English deists, and his cynical observation that the encouragement to refrain from work both on the Jewish sabbath and on Sunday was a powerful incentive to apostasy is worthy of Voltaire's *Dictionnaire philosophique*, which appeared (in 1764) at around the time when the fragment was written. And although it is uncertain whether or not Lessing had read Spinoza's *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* by this time, the spirit of the fragment accords very well with that work's insistence that no religious doctrines can be demonstrated by historical means.

It would not have been difficult for Lessing to expand this fragment, in which all of the main arguments are presented and a great deal of evidence from the Church Fathers and ancient historians is assembled, into publishable form. Its subversive character may well have deterred him from doing so. For although he concludes with the *captatio benevolentiae* that the spread of Christianity by natural causes demonstrates its founder's wisdom in choosing so propitious a time, the whole tenor of the work is critical of Christianity, more so than any of Lessing's other writings: among the all-too-human psychological motives by which he explains the early conversions, religious faith plays no part whatsoever. It is easy to imagine how such a work would have been received by Pastor Lessing.

The last of the three religious fragments, *On the Origin of Revealed Religion* (*Über die Entstehung der geoffenbarten Religion*),[132] is of uncertain date, but its equally radical treatment of revealed religion suggests that it was written at around the same time as the one just discussed. It begins as follows:

> To recognise one God, to try to form the worthiest ideas of him, to take account of these worthiest ideas in all our actions and thoughts, is the most comprehensive definition of natural religion.

This minimal definition, from which Lessing uncharacteristically excludes even the doctrine of immortality, is immediately relativized by the statement that, since each individual will interpret natural religion differently, it must be supplemented in every community or state by a 'positive' (i.e. conventional) religion. Religions of this kind, he adds, derive their authority from the claims of their founders that their positive teachings are as surely derived from God as the truths of natural religion are derived from reason. The claims of these positive or revealed religions are then relativized in turn:

[131] See Nisbet (1978) 19–21. [132] LM XIV, 312–13.

> The indispensability of a positive religion, whereby natural religion is modified in each state according to that state's natural and fortuitous condition, I call its inner truth; and this inner truth is as great in the one as in the other.
>
> All positive religions are consequently equally true and equally false.

That is, they are true inasmuch as they are suited to the needs of the communities they serve, and false inasmuch as they obscure or distort the essential basis of natural religion. Lessing concludes, in words which might well have been written by Reimarus:

> The *best* revealed or positive religion is that which contains the fewest conventional additions to natural religion, and imposes the fewest limitations on the good effects of natural religion.

It is, of course, conceivable that this fragment was written in Hamburg after Lessing discovered the clandestine work of Reimarus, and one commentator actually dates it to the later 1760s.[133] But it could equally well have been written in Breslau, and the stark distinction it draws between natural and positive religion may well owe something to Rousseau's similar distinction in his 'Profession of Faith of the Savoyard Vicar' in *Emile* and again in *The Social Contract*, both published in 1762.[134] The fragment is at any rate more radical in its criticism of revealed religion than any of Lessing's Wolfenbüttel writings, in which he is more concerned to stress the relative truth of all religions, including Christian revelation, than to downgrade them collectively in favour of natural religion.

In conclusion, it is obvious both from the philosophical and from the religious fragments that Lessing's interest in religion and the philosophy of religion, already evident in the 'vindications' of the Wittenberg period and again in the controversies with Cramer and Basedow, continued to develop in Breslau. It now took on a more radical direction than ever before, perhaps in response to the strident but frequently implausible 'proofs' of Christian doctrine put forward by contemporary apologetics;[135] this radicalism may help to explain why he was so eager to publish Reimarus' work as soon as he discovered it a few years later. In the realm of metaphysics, his study of Spinoza in the Breslau years complemented and modified his long-standing interest in Leibniz. These two thinkers would thenceforth dominate his philosophical reflections until the end of his life.

[133] Pons (1964) 214.

[134] Rousseau II, 575 and 579 (*Contrat social*); III, 204–5 ('Profession de foi du Vicaire Savoyard').

[135] See Vollhardt (2002) *passim*.

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10

Laocoön; Last Years in Berlin 1765–1766

Laocoön, or On the Limits of Painting and Poetry (*Laokoon, oder über die Grenzen der Malerei und Poesie*) is Lessing's main contribution to aesthetics, and one of his most successful and problematic works. It played a major part in the rise of German Hellenism and eighteenth-century Neoclassicism. Its aims and content are accurately defined by its title: it seeks to distinguish the respective functions of the visual arts and poetry, and it demonstrates its central thesis by showing how differently artists and poets have treated the death of Laocoön in their respective media. More particularly, it seeks to remove some of the confusion associated with Horace's famous phrase *ut pictura poesis* ('as the picture, so the poem'),[1] which, taken out of context, was regularly used to argue that the two kinds of art are essentially similar, and should actively imitate one another's procedures.

This chapter will first consider how Lessing came to write *Laocoön*, and how it developed through successive drafts to attain its final state. The work's two centres of gravity—its critique of Winckelmann and his theories of ancient art, and the abstract conceptual framework it employs in order to distinguish the separate arts—will then be discussed in detail. The problems and tensions to which this framework gave rise will also be examined, along with Lessing's attempts—including his plans for an unwritten sequel—to resolve them. Finally, the work's strengths and weaknesses will be reviewed in the context of its varied and productive reception.

The topic with which Lessing deals was very much in the air around the middle of the eighteenth century, and his own interest in it may well go back to a statement of Diderot's which he quotes in 1751 in his review of the latter's *Lettre sur les sourds et les muets*, a work which had greatly impressed him: 'Since every mimetic art has its own particular signs [*hiéroglyphes*], I wish that some well-informed and sensitive spirit would some time make it his business to compare them.'[2] Nicolai also tells us how, when Lessing returned to Berlin in 1758, the three friends frequently discussed the subject matter of Mendelssohn's recently published *Reflections on the Sources and Connections of the Fine Arts and Belles-Lettres* (*Betrachtungen über die Quellen und Verbindungen der schönen Künste und Wissenschaften*, 1757), an essay in which some of the basic issues of *Laocoön* are already addressed.[3] *Laocoön* also has affinities with several of Lessing's earlier works and preoccupations, including his comparisons of epic and drama in the correspondence on tragedy of

[1] On this topic see Howard (1909); Buch; Schweizer; Markiewicz.
[2] LM IV, 421; Diderot (1975) IV, 182.
[3] JA I, 167–90; cf. D 140.

1756–57, his unpublished treatise on Sophocles, and his studies of Homer and other ancient authors in the Breslau libraries.

Lessing's achievement in *Laocoön* consists not so much in propounding new theories, as in criticizing and co-ordinating a whole range of earlier insights and established commonplaces. Numerous precedents, from antiquity to his own century, can accordingly be found for many of his ideas, and most of them were identified and enumerated by the positivistic scholarship of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.[4] No attempt will be made to repeat this exercise here—not least because it is rarely certain which of the numerous variants of a given idea were known to or utilized by Lessing. Suffice it to say that his key distinction between painting and poetry, as arts of space and time representing bodies and actions respectively, is foreshadowed by James Harris in his *Three Treatises* of 1744 (a German translation of which Lessing possessed at least in his later years);[5] and his other basic distinction between the 'natural' signs of painting and music and the 'arbitrary' signs (i.e. conventional linguistic units) of poetry had already been employed by several prominent theorists of the eighteenth century, including Du Bos, Diderot, and Mendelssohn, to all of whom he is in various ways indebted.

Lessing's plans for *Laocoön* probably date from the first months of 1763,[6] and it may well be that, like the Spinoza fragments of the spring of that year, the project was prompted by the 1761 edition of Mendelssohn's philosophical writings, which included a revised version[7] of the essay of 1757 referred to above. The precise chronology of the surviving drafts and paralipomena to *Laocoön* is still debated,[8] but it is generally agreed that a brief conceptual outline and its much expanded second version (nos. 1 and 3 in the standard editions of Lessing's works)[9] were the first items written. The most interesting feature of the initial outline is that it contains all the essential concepts and theories of the finished work. It is also significant that, given the serious problems which Lessing would eventually encounter in reconciling the two central distinctions already mentioned (arts of space and time, and natural and arbitrary signs), both distinctions are specified, and explicitly linked, from the beginning:[10]

> *Painting* uses figures and colours in *space*.
> *Poetry* [uses] articulated sounds in *time*.
> The former's signs are *natural*, the latter's are *arbitrary*. And these are the two sources from which the particular rules for each should be derived.

These distinctions are not, however, absolute; for although Lessing does say that bodies are the object of painting and actions that of poetry, he also declares that each art can represent the object of the other indirectly (*andeutungsweise*), by selecting and depicting a particularly suggestive feature of the object in question. And finally, although the initial outline consists primarily of abstract deduction from

[4] See, for example. Blümner; Howard (1909); Howard (1910) Introduction.
[5] Harris (1744); see R/S (2007) 51.
[6] See Blakert 86.
[7] With the new title 'Über die Hauptgrundsätze der schönen Künste und Wissenschaften'; JA I, 427–52.
[8] LM XIV, 333–440; commentary in B V/2, 863–916; see esp. Blakert *passim*.
[9] LM XIV, 334–8 and 342–71.
[10] LM XIV, 334.

his two basic distinctions, he already supplies concrete examples of how poetry ought to represent its object: apart from a brief reference to Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and an analysis of Anacreon's portrayal of beauty added at Mendelssohn's prompting, all of these are taken from Homer's *Iliad*. This implicit limitation of the term 'poetry' to the epic genre is equally conspicuous in the expanded version of the initial outline: all of the positive examples of poetic usage are again from epic poetry, and the great majority are once more from Homer. This limitation is significant, for it would later cause problems when Lessing planned, in the projected continuation of *Laocoön*, to include drama and other related forms in his conceptual scheme; it is also matched by a similar, but acknowledged,[11] imprecision in his use of the term 'painting' (*Malerei)* to include sculpture as well as painting.

Lessing sent the expanded outline of his work to Mendelssohn and Nicolai for their written comments, either during, or just before, his visit to Potsdam in the summer of 1763; during that visit, he also discussed these comments with them in person (his next draft refers to 'our oral discussions').[12] Mendelssohn's comments are much longer, and more perceptive, than Nicolai's, and Lessing took account of some of them—especially on the need to define the term 'actions' (*Handlungen*) more precisely[13]—in a revised draft (no. 5) of the relevant section.

Hitherto, Lessing's drafts had focused primarily on poetry, and his remarks on the visual arts had dealt mainly with the extent to which painters could—or more often could not—depict events in the *Iliad*. In his next substantial draft (no. 7),[14] probably written in the winter of 1763–64, a major shift in emphasis takes place: Winckelmann's interpretation, in his *Thoughts on the Imitation of Greek Art* (*Gedanken über die Nachahmung der griechischen Werke*, 1755, henceforth referred to as the *Thoughts*), of the famous statue of Laocoön, who—unlike his counterpart in Virgil's *Aeneid*—allegedly suppresses his cries out of noble self-restraint as the serpents attack him, now becomes the focus of Lessing's attempt to distinguish between the two art forms. Laocoön suppresses his cries in the statue not out of noble self-restraint, but because the sight of his contorted face would offend the law of beauty, which is the supreme imperative in the visual arts; but Virgil, as a poet, is perfectly free to describe his cries as a natural expression of his agony. This new, polemical focus has the dual advantage of addressing a well-known example of visual art, which had received relatively little attention in the previous drafts, and of bringing the leading art historian of the day into the debate. Consequently, the following draft (no. 8),[15] probably written in the summer of 1764, consists of a new table of contents, in which the statue of Laocoön and the disagreement with Winckelmann become the starting point of the entire work and the main topic of the opening chapters; the original conceptual framework is not introduced until much later. Only now does the work (apart from its planned continuation, outlined in this draft but never written) take on approximately its final structure; it is also augmented by comments on Winckelmann's *History of the Art of Antiquity* (*Geschichte der Kunst des Altertums*, henceforth referred to as the *History*), which

[11] LM IX, 5–6. [12] LM XIV, 371 and n. 3; cf. Blakert 86. [13] LM XIV, 371–4.
[14] LM XIV, 375–8. [15] LM XIV, 378–84.

had just appeared in December 1763. The remaining drafts and paralipomena consist chiefly of extracts from Lessing's reading and notes for the planned continuation.

By the time he left Breslau, Lessing's plan for *Laocoön* was therefore essentially complete. He produced the final manuscript after his return to Berlin in 1765 and in the first months of 1766, during which time he benefited from discussions with Mendelssohn and Nicolai on at least two occasions per week.[16] *Laocoön* finally appeared at Easter 1766.

Although the work had begun as an abstract philosophical outline reminiscent of Mendelssohn's thought, Lessing now insists, in the published preface, that he has no systematic intentions; he also distances himself explicitly from the abstract rationalism of Baumgarten. In the same context, he describes *Laocoön* not as a treatise but as a collection of essays (*Aufsätze*), and adds:[17]

> They arose in a fortuitous manner, more from the sequence of my reading than through methodical development of general principles. They are accordingly rather a collection of materials than a book as such.

These claims are justified inasmuch as the work does contain a diverse assortment of empirical examples in addition to its original deductive framework. There is much close reading of Homer in particular, but also of Virgil, Sophocles, Horace, Ariosto, Haller, and even Shakespeare. As in the unfinished *Sophocles*, Lessing's fascination with philological and antiquarian detail often spills over into long, Bayle-like footnotes—albeit with a lightness of touch and an eye for entertaining examples which are rarely present in the earlier work.

Nevertheless, his protestations regarding the work's informal and empirical character need considerable qualification. His relaxed and digressive style can easily obscure two features which are fundamental to the work's appeal. The first is his literary and rhetorical artistry. Instead of propounding his central distinctions at the beginning and then illustrating them by examples, he creates the agreeable illusion that he is working towards them as he goes along, testing successive hypotheses, questioning and demolishing the arguments of other authorities, generating tension by hinting at solutions to come and ending most chapters with a striking image or aperçu—in short, by sustaining the reader's interest through constant movement and variety. Secondly, the work does in fact have a coherent structure, including a rigorously systematic core. Thus, after briefly outlining his central thesis in the preface, Lessing proceeds for the most part inductively throughout the first half of the work, examining the practice of ancient artists and poets in order to discover the fundamental principles of their respective arts; symmetrical polemics against two authorities who deny these principles (Spence and Caylus) reinforce his inductive conclusions. In Chapter 16 (which is also the work's dramatic turning point), he deduces these same principles systematically from the concepts of space and time, formulating his conclusions in a stringent set of syllogisms; in the following chapter, he supplements this deduction by the concepts of natural and

[16] D 189 and 198. [17] LM IX, 5.

arbitrary signs. He subsequently returns to empirical examples, testing them against his now doubly validated principles to show how artists and poets succeed or fail in practice according to whether or not they adhere to them. Finally, in another dramatic change of course (Chapter 26), he announces that Winckelmann's long-awaited history of ancient art has at last appeared, at which point his continuous argument comes to an end; unlike the rest of the work, the remaining chapters are genuinely haphazard in character, taking critical issue with assorted points in Winckelmann's history.

It was only after he began work on *Laocoön* that Lessing fully realized the importance of Winckelmann. He probably first heard of him on his visit to Dresden in March 1756, when Winckelmann's conversion to Catholicism and recent departure for Rome were still regular topics of conversation; the references to Greek statuary in his preface to Thomson's tragedies,[18] written around the time of his Dresden visit, also confirm that he had seen some of the antiquities described in Winckelmann's *Thoughts*. It is nevertheless doubtful whether he had yet read the *Thoughts* as such, for only some fifty or sixty copies of the first edition were printed in 1755, mainly for private distribution, and the second edition did not appear until April of the following year.[19] His attention was certainly drawn to it in December 1756 by Mendelssohn, who warmly recommended it in the course of their correspondence on tragedy and explained why Winckelmann regarded the statue of Laocoön, with its noble self-restraint, as more admirable than Virgil's description of the dying Laocoön's screams;[20] it was this disapproving aside on Virgil, Lessing would later declare, which first led him to doubt Winckelmann's interpretation of the sculpture.[21] But after Nicolai's laudatory review of the *Thoughts* in the first volume of the *Bibliothek der schönen Wissenschaften*, which Lessing saw through the press in 1757, he must have realized that this was no ordinary essay: Nicolai described it as indispensable to connoisseurs of art, and its style as vivid and without parallel among German writers; its author, he concluded, would one day bring glory to his (Prussian) fatherland.[22]

Lessing had certainly read the *Thoughts* by the time he wrote his second, expanded outline of *Laocoön* early in 1763, for it contains several allusions to Winckelmann's essay.[23] In the draft of the following winter (no. 7) in which he deals explicitly with the *Thoughts*, he also refers to the forthcoming publication of Winckelmann's *magnum opus*, the *History*, which appeared in December of that year;[24] this work actually appeared before Lessing's draft was completed, for the second half of the draft contains page references to Winckelmann's published text.[25] It would therefore seem that Lessing decided towards the end of 1763 to give Winckelmann prominence in *Laocoön*, by which time he knew that the long-awaited publication of his major history of Greek art was imminent.[26] Winckelmann, who now enjoyed a European reputation—he was appointed papal antiquary in that same year[27]—was simply too eminent to ignore.

[18] LM VII, 68–9. [19] See Winckelmann (1968) 27–59; Justi I, 389.
[20] Mendelssohn to L., first half of December 1756. [21] LM IX, 7, n. 1.
[22] Nicolai III, 235–42. [23] LM XIV, 354–5. [24] LM XIV, 376.
[25] LM XIV, 377–8. [26] Cf. Justi III, 94–6. [27] Justi III, 22–5.

Winckelmann's writings relate almost exclusively to visual art, but their significance and impact are altogether wider. He became for his age the leading exponent of the Hellenic ideal, and of classical perfection in art. Focusing the diffuse insights of earlier antiquarianism in the light of that first-hand, encyclopaedic knowledge of Greek art which he acquired during his first years in Rome, he made of Greece a coherent, luminous, indeed brilliant image, which became a guiding light for the Neoclassical movement and an inspiration to such diverse figures as Goethe, Hölderlin, Byron, and Shelley. The Greek ideal as he taught it is, of course, primarily aesthetic. But it is a good deal more. It incorporates moral, cultural, and political elements which extended its influence beyond the visual arts to literature, historiography, ethics, anthropology, and many other areas. What Winckelmann proclaimed was in fact a myth, and an extremely potent one in its time. Its appeal was enhanced by the fact that he wrote in an accessible and emotionally charged idiom, and—after his move to Italy—with the empirical authority of a field worker in direct contact with the latest discoveries from Herculaneum, Pompeii, and other classical sites. On the strength of this experience and his own indefatigable efforts, he became the founder of modern art history and a pioneer of classical archaeology.[28]

There was much about Winckelmann with which Lessing could feel an affinity. From an even poorer background than Lessing, Winckelmann rejected a career in the Church while struggling to continue his studies. Devoted to books but with no liking for academic life, he eventually found work as a librarian, but the drudgery this entailed on his employer's behalf left him little time for independent study. The classics were his real passion, and in terms of the contest of ancients and moderns, he was, like Lessing, emphatically on the side of the ancients: in his early years as an ill-paid schoolteacher, he slept only four hours per night[29] in order to keep up his studies, reading Homer three times in the original in the course of a single winter. Ideologically, his sympathies were with the progressive Enlightenment: Voltaire, Bayle, and Shaftesbury were among his favourite authors, and his libertarian views on politics—he admired the Athenian democracy—were akin to those of Rousseau. He was repelled by Prussian absolutism, and deplored the influence of French culture in Germany: like Lessing, he saw the art and culture of Greece as an alternative and preferable model to that of France. And again like Lessing—or at least the Lessing of the 1760s—he regarded the art and culture of Rome as inferior, and even degenerate, in comparison with that of Greece. In addition to these obvious affinities, Lessing could not but acknowledge the brilliance of Winckelmann's achievements. After his move to Italy, and especially after the publication of the *History*, which was soon translated into French and English, he became the first German writer since Leibniz to attain international celebrity; and in his mastery of German prose and his ability to appeal not only to scholars but also to the literate public at large, his only rival was Lessing himself. All of these factors help to explain why, on hearing of Winckelmann's tragic death in 1768, Lessing declared that he would gladly have given him a few years of his own life if he could,[30] and why he

[28] Leppmann 184 and 290. [29] Ibid. 65. [30] To Nicolai, 5 July 1768.

planned, around the time of his journey to Italy in 1775, to prepare a new edition of Winckelmann's *History*.[31]

On the other hand, Winckelmann's style, methods, and attitude to his subject differed profoundly from Lessing's. Finally released, at the age of thirty-eight, from his stultifying duties in Germany, Winckelmann reacted to the Greek antiquities in Rome as if to a life-transforming revelation. While insisting on close empirical study of the works in question—his knowledge of the Roman collections, derived from painstaking first-hand observation, was second to none—he had only contempt for the minutiae of antiquarian scholarship. His descriptions of the Belvedere torso of Hercules, of the Belvedere Apollo, and even (in his pre-Italian *Thoughts* of 1755) of the torments of Laocoön are hymns of praise to divine human forms, suffused with homoerotic passion. Though he was the first to distinguish, on stylistic grounds, the main phases in the evolution of Greek art, he eschewed all claims to scholarly detachment:[32] on the contrary, his primary intention was to fire his readers, and particularly artists, with his own enthusiasm for the ideal beauty of the Greek sculptures.[33] On this subject, he writes like a poet, or even a priest, as in his tribute to the Belvedere Apollo:[34]

> I forget all else at the sight of this miraculous work of art, and myself adopt an exalted stance in order to contemplate it appropriately. My breast seems to swell and rise up in veneration, like those I see as if dilated by the spirit of prophecy, and I feel myself transported to Delos and the Lycian groves, places which Apollo honoured with his presence; for the image before me seems to gain life and movement, like Pygmalion's beauty. How can one possibly paint and describe it! Art itself would have to counsel me and guide my hand if I were ever to execute the first strokes I have outlined here. I lay the impression I have given of this work at its feet, like the wreaths of those who could not reach the heads of the divinities they wished to crown.

All this is worlds away from Lessing's dispassionate rational analysis. Not only does Lessing rely almost exclusively on printed materials—on the accounts of Pliny, Pausanias, and other classical writers whose comments on ancient masterpieces could be subjected to philological analysis, and the great engraved tomes of Montfaucon and other antiquarians who listed and illustrated the monuments of antiquity in indiscriminate compilations. He also saw no need to examine the originals, and declared, when his own identification of the so-called Borghese Gladiator as the Greek general Chabrias[35] was rightly challenged: 'I have not been to Italy; I have not myself seen the Gladiator!—But what does it matter? What has this to do with *seeing for oneself*?'[36] In a sense, he was right: for the question which interested him here, as on so many other occasions, was basically literary rather than iconographical. But more to the point, it was not in his nature to be carried away or enraptured by anything; and even if he had been, he would never have expressed his enthusiasm so effusively as Winckelmann did. He was by inclination an Aristotelian, whereas Winckelmann was by nature a Platonist.

[31] See LM XV, 7. [32] On this see Seeba (1982) *passim*. [33] Cf. von Einem 320–4.
[34] Winckelmann (1825–29) VI, 223. [35] LM IX, 170. [36] LM X, 273.

Consequently, Lessing's response to Winckelmann shows the same ambivalence as his response to Klopstock: he admired his gifts and achievements, but he disliked his hierophantic posture and vatic pronouncements. In addressing him in *Laocoön*, his manner is respectful and even deferential; but his underlying attitude is critical and implicitly polemical. This is clear from his initial comments on the *History* as reported by his friends, for he told them that it was full of errors which he intended to expose.[37] His attitude will have become no more conciliatory when he discovered, as he worked on *Laocoön*, that Winckelmann was also a professional rival, for he had just been offered the post of Royal Librarian to which Lessing himself aspired.

He accordingly prepared his ground with care. His decision to begin his work inductively, conspicuously disclaiming all systematic pretensions and postponing his abstract conceptual deductions until half way through the work, was an astute one. On the one hand, it would appeal to the fashionable amateurism in antiquarian studies, itself largely inspired by Winckelmann's work on engraved gems, which favoured the direct study of ancient models (if only in casts or paste reproductions) in preference to scholarly abstractions. On the other, it might head off the accusation by Winckelmann—which he did in fact make in private—that Lessing was an arid theorist typical of the German universities. (Winckelmann had found little to interest him in his studies at Halle, and was notoriously dismissive of the German academic system.) Lessing also confined his disagreements with Winckelmann mainly to areas in which he was confident of his own superiority—notably to literary and philological matters—and tackled him only with great circumspection on art history itself. It accordingly suited him to concentrate, at the beginning of *Laocoön*, on Winckelmann's *Thoughts*, with its literary comparisons, and to deal with the recently published *History* in an apparently hurried postscript in which he could nevertheless indicate that even a cursory reading showed up numerous inaccuracies.[38]

The celebrated passage from the *Thoughts* at which Lessing directs his criticism runs (slightly abridged) as follows:[39]

> The universal and predominant characteristic of the Greek masterpieces is ultimately a noble simplicity and quiet greatness, in both attitude and expression. Just as the depths of the sea remain forever calm, however much the surface may rage, so does the expression of the Greek figures, however strong their passions, reveal a great and steadfast soul.
>
> Such a soul is depicted in the face of Laocoön, and not only in his face, despite his most violent torments [...] This pain, I maintain, nevertheless causes no violent distortion, either to his face or to his whole attitude. He raises no terrible clamour, as in Virgil's poetic version of his fate: his mouth is not wide enough open to allow this [...] Laocoön suffers, but he suffers like the Philoctetes of Sophocles: his agony touches our very soul; but we wish we were able to bear such agony as this great man does.

Lessing's disagreement with Winckelmann is, at first sight, a minor one. For he accepts Winckelmann's implicit assumption that the supreme imperative for the visual arts of antiquity was the law of beauty. What he objects to is the moral

[37] D 186–7 and 199. [38] See esp. LM IX, 171–2. [39] Winckelmann (1968) 43.

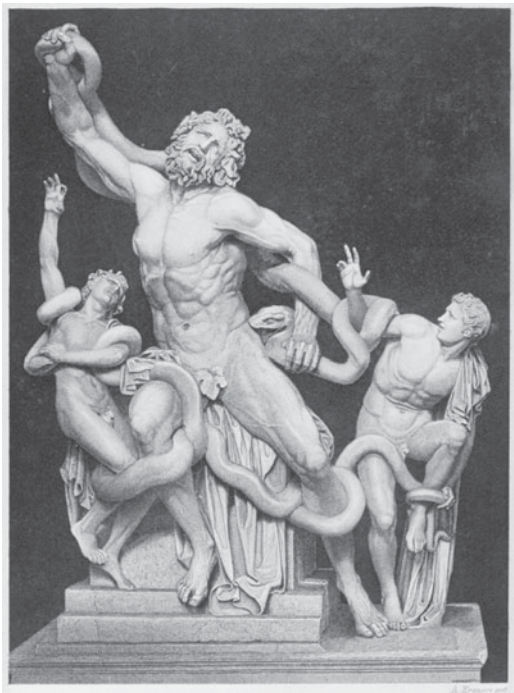


Fig. 22. Laocoön, state of the group with restorations, eighteenth century.

component in Winckelmann's theory of beauty. He does not deny that the Greeks were morally admirable; he merely denies that their visual art, as distinct from their literature and way of life, was determined by moral considerations. Thus, he does not accept that Laocoön's mouth is a sign of stoical fortitude—that is, of moral excellence. For Greek heroes, whether in Virgil's *Aeneid* or Sophocles' *Philoctetes*, did not consider it unmanly to cry out aloud in dire predicaments. The statue, Lessing argues, shows him at the moment just before he screams, because to show him actually screaming, with his mouth wide open, would offend the law of beauty; but the poets are free to describe his screams, because the law of beauty does not apply to poetry.

From Lessing's point of view, Winckelmann's interpretation of the statue obscures a vital distinction between the two kinds of art. For it contains two disparate elements, one aesthetic and the other moral, the first Platonic and relating to ideal beauty, the second Longinian and relating to moral sublimity.[40] Anxious to discover both of the supreme values of eighteenth-century aesthetics, namely beauty and sublimity, in this sculptural masterpiece, Winckelmann—like Boileau and French classicism before him—regards the two as complementary; but Lessing, like Burke, regards them as opposites. The first evokes aesthetic pleasure,

[40] Cf. Baeumer 64–6 and 74.

whereas the second invites admiration for moral qualities which, in Lessing's eyes, are both irrelevant to the visual arts and not in any case admirable.

There is much about Winckelmann's formula of noble simplicity and quiet greatness that Lessing finds unacceptable, particularly as applied to the statue of Laocoön. Winckelmann's conflation of beauty with moral excellence, a tendency he inherited from Shaftesbury and which in turn goes back to Plato,[41] exemplifies for Lessing the same confusion which, in the *Letters on Literature*, he had detected in Wieland's ideal of *kalokagathia*,[42] according to which beauty is the primary means of education to moral and spiritual excellence; for in Lessing's view, there is no necessary link between beauty and any non-aesthetic values. But the particular moral value which Winckelmann admires in the Laocoön group is, for Lessing, neither sublime nor deserving of admiration. It is the kind of stoic fortitude which denies and suppresses natural feelings, and which Lessing now explicitly associates with the tragedies of Seneca on the one hand, and those of Corneille on the other;[43] it is the inhuman virtue of the Roman gladiator and of the equally unnatural heroes of baroque tragedy. These negative judgements are not just a response to Winckelmann. They follow directly from Lessing's rejection, in his correspondence of 1756–57 with Mendelssohn and Nicolai, of admiration in favour of pity as the appropriate tragic emotion;[44] and they are applicable to Laocoön as a highly dramatic, and to that extent untypical, work of sculpture, whose central figure was also the subject of a lost tragedy by Sophocles. So in this case, a moral response is indeed justified, but only in the shape of pity for suffering humanity, and emphatically not of admiration for soulless heroism.

Winckelmann's definition of Greek beauty is over-determined: in its various formulations, it encompasses Platonic idealism, Longinian sublimity, a strong sensuous—indeed sensual—element absent from both of these, and a restraint in the expression of emotions (which, in the case of Laocoon, he interprets as stoical). This incongruous collection results from his determination to invest the statues he venerates with as many ideal human attributes as possible. Thus, although he expressly declares that masculine beauty is superior to feminine, he also detects a feminine, or even androgynous, element in what he regards as the supreme examples of male beauty, namely certain statues of Apollo and Bacchus:[45] only thus can their ideal humanity be considered complete.

To all of this, Lessing characteristically applies Occam's razor. Given that beauty is that which is visually pleasing, since the aim of the arts is to afford pleasure, and since only the visual arts can directly depict that which is visually pleasing, the primary function of the visual arts must be to depict beauty.[46] Beauty, for Lessing, is an exclusively aesthetic category, and when he does venture to define it conceptually, the qualities which he attributes to it are purely formal: it results from 'the unified effect of manifold parts which can be viewed simultaneously';[47] or (with

[41] Cf. Winckelmann (1968) 30; also Gombrich 143 and Leppmann 115.
[42] LM VIII, 19 and 22. [43] LM IX, 10 and 30–2.
[44] Cf. L. to Mendelssohn, 28 November 1756; also Hurstel 141 and 145.
[45] Winckelmann (1968) 216; cf. Baeumer 68. [46] LM IX, 13–14. [47] LM IX, 120.

more obvious reference to the Wolffian model on which he basically relies), it is the visible manifestation of perfection, which he in turn defines in purely formal terms as unity in variety.[48]

But in limiting beauty, and by implication the visual arts whose remit is to depict it, to so narrow a function as this, Lessing is not so much negating Winckelmann's theory of beauty as isolating and amplifying one of its most important elements. For in his efforts to minimize expression (*Ausdruck*) in art as prejudicial to beauty, Winckelmann often defines the latter *ex negativo*, as in his famous image of the sea whose unseen depths are forever untouched by the storms above. Ideal beauty, he sometimes says, is distinguished by indeterminacy (*Unbezeichnung*)[49]—that is, not so much by what it is, as by what it is not. In practice, this could result in a restrained, linear, and in the last resort insipid variety of beauty such as Herder already detected, and deplored, in contemporary art:[50]

> It becomes a dull and monotonous succession of long-limbed, straight-nosed, so-called Greek figures, who all stand there on parade and take as little part in the action as possible, and after a few days or hours strike us as so empty that we do not wish to see any more of these masks for years to come.

But it suited Lessing's purpose to emphasize this aspect of Winckelmann's theory. The more narrowly the limits of visual art were drawn, the more scope was left for poetry, which interested him far more profoundly: it encompassed the entire moral universe ('the whole immeasurable realm of perfection', as he put it),[51] and was free to depict human actions and passions of every kind. By the same token, the province of Winckelmann, as an exponent of classical principles in art, was diminished in the same measure as that of Lessing, as an exponent of classical principles in literature, was enlarged. It is no wonder that E.H. Gombrich could describe *Laocoön* as 'not so much a book about as against the visual arts'.[52]

It should now be evident that, for all his superficial deference, Lessing's attitude towards Winckelmann is fundamentally polemical. But if that is so, it may well be asked why he kept up the pretence of not having read Winckelmann's *Thoughts* until *Laocoön* was almost finished, whereas we now know that he read that work some two years before *Laocoön* went to press. One reason for this subterfuge has already been mentioned: it allowed him to concentrate his critique on the *Thoughts* and on the issue which concerned him most, namely the differences between the arts, as raised by Winckelmann's comparison between the statue and Virgil's account of Laocoön's death. Equally important was the fact that, as Lessing noted on three occasions in his drafts,[53] his own central argument concerning the law of beauty and the consequent differences in procedure between the visual and poetic arts in depicting human passions is explicitly, if only cursorily, anticipated in the *History.* As Winckelmann puts it:[54]

[48] Cf. LM V, 371. [49] Winckelmann (1825–29) IV, 61; cf. Blümner 496.
[50] SWS VIII, 34 (1778). [51] LM IX, 22. [52] Gombrich 140; cf. Mitchell 107–9.
[53] LM XIV, 377, 380, 411. [54] Winckelmann (1825–29) IV, 204–5.

> The artist has less scope than the poet in the representation of *heroes* [...]. Since the former must select the most beautiful element in the most beautiful depictions, he is limited to a certain degree of expression in the passions, such as will not be prejudicial to his creation [*Bildung*].

But perhaps most significantly, his subterfuge allowed him to develop at length his most substantial criticism of Winckelmann's methodology as an art historian, without appearing to attack him directly. For as Lessing at once noticed,[55] Winckelmann's chronology of Greek art, as expounded for the first time in the *History*, was based not on historical evidence, but on subjective aesthetic judgement. His argument was implicitly circular: the best works of art must date from the best period, and the best period is that which produced the best works of art. Lessing therefore stuck to his original plan of demonstrating that the statue of Laocoön must date from the early Roman Empire, and that the artists probably knew, and were influenced by, Virgil's account of the Laocoön story. And although his arguments are not conclusive, they do display impressive historical knowledge. He was then free to deploy more telling arguments towards the end of the work, after claiming that he had only just discovered Winckelmann's putative dating of the statue in the *History*. In so doing, he would appear only to be defending points which he had made before Winckelmann had even mentioned the statue's chronology.

We now know, of course, that Lessing was much nearer the truth than Winckelmann, who dated the work almost three centuries too early, as a work produced in Greece in the age of Alexander the Great,[56] whereas modern authorities regard it as the product of Greek artists working in Rome either in the first century BC or even—as Lessing suggested—in the early Roman Empire.[57] And if Lessing failed to prove his case, he did at least employ some cogent historical arguments, pointing out, for example, that Greek commentators such as Pausanias might have been expected to mention so notable a work, or other works by the same artists, if they had been created in Greece before their time.[58]

Nicolai reports that Lessing retained further evidence, to be deployed at a later date, that Winckelmann's *Thoughts* was 'more an idealized work than a genuine history'[59]—a criticism which Heyne, F. A. Wolf, and other classical scholars would subsequently echo.[60] It is likely that he kept such material in reserve in case Winckelmann reacted to *Laocoön* polemically, as Nicolai and others feared. In the event, Winckelmann made no public response; he did, however, comment on *Laocoön* in his private correspondence. His initial reaction was positive, and he declared that 'Lessing [. . .] writes as one might wish to have written', adding that he would publish 'a worthy response' to his criticisms.[61] On further reflection, he modified

[55] LM XIV, 379. [56] Winckelmann (1825–29) VI, 16; cf. B V/2, 846.
[57] See, for example, Lahusen 296–7; Strocka 313; Pollitt 120–6. [58] LM IX, 160–2.
[59] Nicolai to Gessner, 9 January 1767, in Winckelmann (1952–57) IV, 141.
[60] Cf. Seeba (1982) 186–7.
[61] To Friedrich Wilhelm von Schlabrendorf, 16 August 1766 in Winckelmann (1952–57) III, 199.

this judgement some weeks later, declaring that Lessing still had much to learn and ought to come to Rome for further instruction.[62] But two months later, he is far more severe, saying of Lessing:[63]

> This man has so little knowledge that no answer would mean anything to him, and it would be easier to rebut someone of sound common sense from the Uckermark [a rural region north of Berlin] than a university intellectual [*Universitätswitz*] who seeks to attract attention by means of paradoxes. So let him go without an answer.

It may well be that, after the disarming effect of Lessing's complimentary phrases wore off, Winckelmann realized that he was up against a serious adversary whom it might be better to ignore than to antagonize. His decision was a wise one, for given his touchy and insecure temperament, he would almost certainly have overreacted to further opposition and become the victim of Lessing's superior dialectics. This affair has a pleasing epilogue: ten years later, when Lessing was shown the offending passages in a collection of Winckelmann's letters for posthumous publication, he insisted that they be printed in full.[64]

One final item concerning the first, and largely inductive, half of Lessing's *Laocoön* must be mentioned, namely the extended polemics against Joseph Spence and the Comte de Caylus which follow the initial chapters on the Laocoön theme and occupy nearly a quarter of the work (Chapters 7 to 14). Both Spence and Caylus feature prominently in Lessing's earliest drafts and paralipomena, and it is likely that he planned to make them the main targets of his polemics before Winckelmann was allotted that role. Since his criticisms of them serve essentially the same purpose as his disagreements with Winckelmann over the statue—that is, to demonstrate inductively that the limits and procedures of the visual and poetic arts are fundamentally different—one might have expected him to omit them altogether from the finished work. He nevertheless retains them, probably because they allow him to refute in detail the parallel kinds of error perpetrated by those who fail to recognize the distinctive nature of the different arts—Spence by suggesting that poets should imitate the procedures of visual artists, and Caylus by suggesting that painters should base their works on scenes depicted by poets, particularly Homer. At the same time, they allow him to underpin his basic argument with numerous concrete examples, thereby displaying his own formidable knowledge of classical philology. But Spence and Caylus are merely targets of convenience, and Lessing's purpose is not to do justice to their overall achievements, which were in both cases considerable; it is enough for him that both are well-known authorities on classical art and culture, and that statements can be found in their works which, taken out of context, illustrate the fallacies which he seeks to expose. The fact that both Spence and Caylus, like Lessing himself, also emphasize the greater freedom of poets to depict actions as well as bodies, whereas the visual artist is confined to a single moment in time, is nowhere mentioned; their function in *Laocoön* is simply to illustrate the consequences of failure to respect the differences between the arts.[65]

[62] Ibid. 204. [63] Ibid. 220. [64] B V/2, 688.
[65] On Spence, see Siebert 75 *passim*; on Caylus, see Hausmann 207 *passim*.

After demonstrating inductively that the visual and poetic arts follow fundamentally different procedures, Lessing is now able, in Chapter 16, to consolidate his case theoretically by deducing the same difference from a priori principles, as indicated in his original conceptual outline. He accordingly declares:[66]

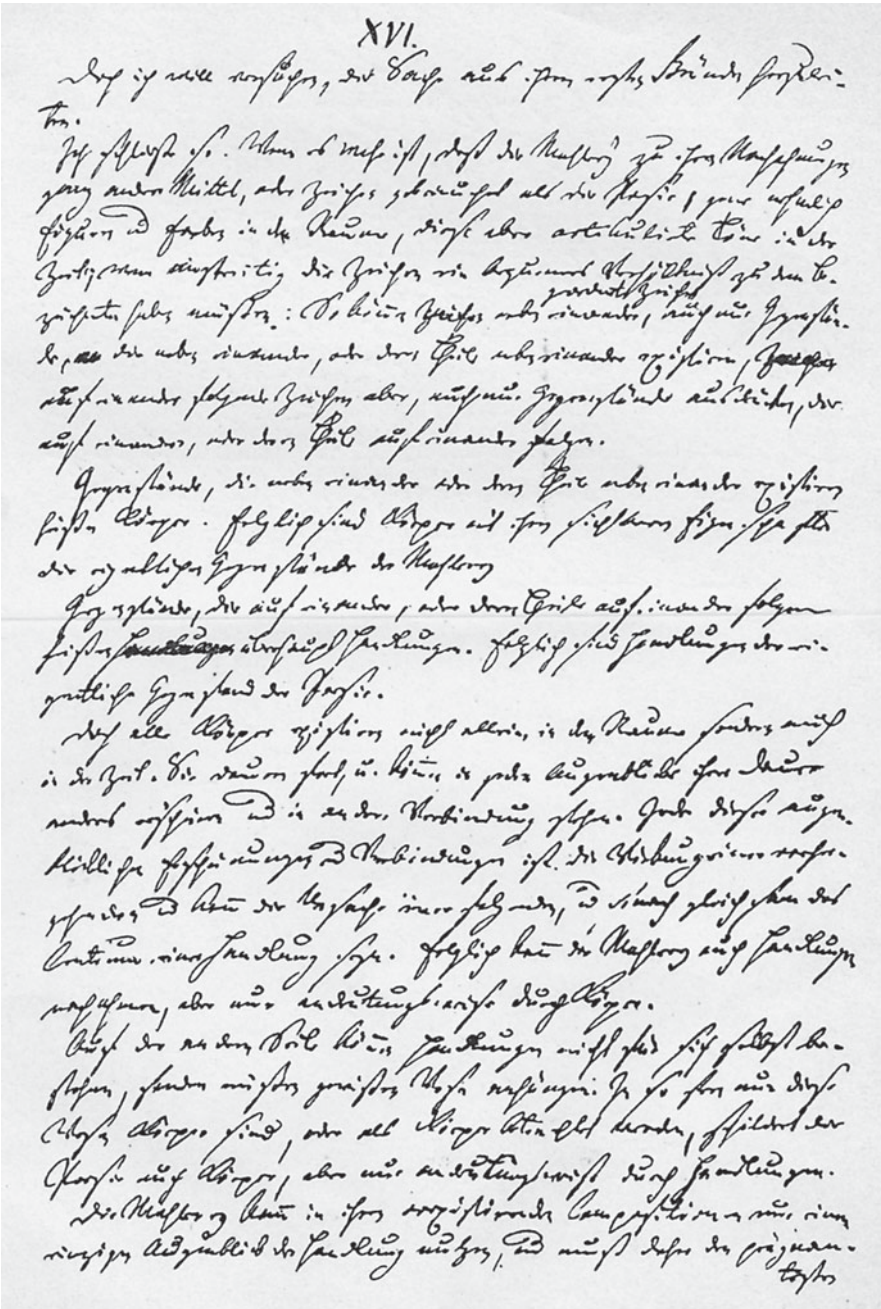
> If it is true that painting employs for its imitations means or signs quite different from those employed by poetry—that is, if the former employs figures and colours in space, whereas the latter employs articulate sounds in time; and if the signs employed must unquestionably have an easy [*bequemes*] relationship with what they designate; then signs arranged side by side can express only objects which also exist, or whose parts also exist, side by side, whereas signs which follow each other can express only objects which follow each other, or whose parts follow each other.
>
> Objects which exist side by side, or whose parts exist side by side, are known as bodies. Consequently, bodies with their visible properties are the proper objects of painting.
>
> Objects which follow each other, or whose parts follow each other, are generally known as actions. Consequently, actions are the proper object of poetry.

The corollary to this rule, Lessing adds, is that if each art wishes to represent the object of the other, it can do so only indirectly (*andeutungsweise*): that is, artists can also represent actions, but only by suggesting them through bodies, and poets can also represent bodies, but only by suggesting them through actions.

It should be noted that, although only Lessing's primary distinction between figures and colours in space and sounds in time is mentioned here, his second basic distinction between 'natural' and 'arbitrary' signs is also implicit in what he says; and unlike the first, this second distinction has an evaluative basis, for the status of the two kinds of sign involved is by no means equal. The 'signs arranged side by side' (that is, figures and colours) are 'natural' or iconic signs, akin in character to the bodies they represent, whereas the 'signs which follow each other' (that is, the words or conventional units of meaning used by poetry), are 'arbitrary' signs with no natural connection with their specific objects. This in turn implies that natural signs, because of their natural affinity with their objects, must afford a more convincing representation of the latter than the arbitrary signs of language, which (with a few exceptions such as onomatopoeia) have nothing in common with what they represent. In other words, although language, with its ability to denote abstract ideas and other non-perceptible objects, has a far wider range than the media of the visual arts, it has to work much harder, when used in poetry, to overcome its inherent disadvantage by investing its arbitrary signs with as natural a quality as possible.

This requirement is reinforced by the central doctrine of German Enlightenment aesthetics, as propounded by Baumgarten, Mendelssohn, and others and also implicit in Lessing's reflections,[67] according to which the task of the arts, and particularly poetry, is to convey a clear intuition (*Anschauung*) of the represented object. This intuition, or image, need not be visual in character; but it does have to be sensuous—that is, vividly enough perceived to create an illusion that the object

[66] LM IX, 94–5. [67] Cf. Mendelssohn, JA I, 437–8.



XVI.

Doch ich will versuchen, die Sache aus einem noch klärern Grunde herzuleiten.

Ich setzte voraus. Wenn es wahr ist, daß die Malerey zu ihren Nachahmungen ganz andern Mittel, als Zeichen, gebraucht als die Poesie, so muß sie solche Zeichen in der Raume, diese aber artikulirte Töne in der Zeitfolge einstreiten, die Zeichen mit bezeichneten Gegenständen gleichförmig zu den Begriffen selbst nennen: Es müssen Zeichen neben einander, auch nur Gegenstände, die neben einander, oder deren Theile neben einander existiren, auch nur einander folgende Zeichen aber, auch nur Gegenstände artikulirt, die auf einander, oder deren Theile auf einander folgen.

Gegenstände, die neben einander oder deren Theile neben einander existiren heißen überhaupt Körper. Folglich sind Körper mit ihren sichtbaren Eigenschaften die vornehmlichen Gegenstände der Malerey.

Gegenstände, die auf einander, oder deren Theile auf einander folgen heißen überhaupt Handlungen. Folglich sind Handlungen der eigentliche Gegenstand der Poesie.

Doch alle Körper existiren nicht allein in der Raume sondern auch in der Zeit. Die dauern fort und können in jeder augenblicklichen ihrer Dauer anders erscheinen und in andern Verbindungen stehen. Jede diese augenblickliche Erscheinungen und Verbindungen ist die Wirkung einer vorhergehenden und kann der Ursache einer folgenden, und scheint gleichsam der Inhalt einer Handlung zu seyn. Folglich kann die Malerey auch Handlungen nachahmen, aber nur andeutungsweise durch Körper.

Auch der an den Tod Ninus gehaufte Handlungen nicht gleich sich gleich bestehen, sondern nicht geringe Veränderungen erleiden. Ja so fern nur diese Folge Körper sind, oder als Körper agiren helfen, schildert der Poesie auch Körper, aber nur andeutungsweise durch Handlungen.

Die Malerey kann in ihrer vorgeschriebenen Composition nur einen einzigen augenblicklichen Handlung nutzen, und muß daher den prägnantesten

in question is intuitively present. Only if it succeeds in so doing will the reader or listener forget the 'arbitrary' semiotic medium and receive a convincing illusion of what it represents; and although words can never be truly iconic in the way that pictures can, they can, as it were, become more transparent if they have what Lessing calls an 'easy relationship' with what they represent. This occurs, for example, when they describe actions, thereby exploiting their naturally successive character to represent a successive object. All this reinforces the need for poetry to convert its arbitrary signs into natural signs as far as possible; and since Lessing is particularly anxious, in the first, completed part of *Laocoön*, to show that poetry can rival the visual arts on their own ground—that is, in representing visible, or at least perceptible, objects—it is with this function, rather than with poetry's ability to deal with thoughts, feelings, and other abstract entities, that he is chiefly concerned.

He is now in a position to condemn those who violate the rules he has deduced—especially in poetry, which, as always, concerns him more immediately. He accordingly proceeds, as promised in the preface to the work,[68] to censure descriptive poetry as a wholly misguided exercise, in contrast to epic poetry, whose function is to depict not bodies but actions. This critique was a timely one, for descriptive poetry, which had enjoyed great popularity in the first half of the century—from Thomson's *The Seasons* to Brockes' poetic disquisitions on innumerable natural forms—was now no longer in fashion. Lessing duly takes his old adversary, the Swiss critic Breitinger, to task for praising the word-painting of his compatriot Haller, as well as Haller himself for the circumstantial descriptions of Swiss flora in his poem *The Alps* (*Die Alpen*).[69] Lessing's point is not that language cannot describe flowers, or for that matter any other objects, in detail; his point is that it cannot do so convincingly in poetry, whose aim is not to depict a succession of parts but to convey an illusion of its whole object, whose parts must be perceived simultaneously. And given the successive nature of language, this is by definition impossible.

It is at this point that the limitations of Lessing's primary distinction begin to show themselves. For he also concedes that poetry can, and often must, convey an image of its object by selecting a single striking attribute and describing it by one or at most a few adjectives, as Homer regularly does.[70] This concession is less explicit in the published text of *Laocoön* than in the drafts, where he notes that 'a single attribute of a visible object is sufficient to call the others to mind at once, because we see them all together every day'.[71] What this means is that the operation is completed by the imagination, by way of suggestion and association, so that an external, subjective factor is necessarily involved; in other words, the successive nature of language is not after all an insuperable obstacle to the vivid representation of visible objects.[72] It also means that, if the object in question is a familiar one, a detailed poetic description of it will evoke a livelier impression than it could of an unfamiliar object. It follows from this that Haller's poetic description of the Alpine flora will seem more effective to his Swiss readers than to Lessing and his

[68] LM IX, 5. [69] LM IX, 102–3. [70] LM IX, 95–6 and 109–11.
[71] LM XIV, 405; cf. XIV, 412. [72] Cf. Hamm 52.

German public, for the responses of readers are no less variable than the practice of poets. Besides, the graphic representation of objects is by no means the only function of descriptive poetry. As Lessing acknowledges in the table of contents for his planned sequel to *Laocoön*, Homer's descriptions of Priam's palace in the *Iliad* and of the gardens of Alcinous in the *Odyssey* are not meant to convey an image of the whole, but to create an impression of vastness;[73] and although he does not say so, Edgar's description of the cliffs at Dover in Shakespeare's *King Lear*, quoted in full in another of the drafts,[74] likewise serves only to convey an impression of sublimity.

None of these criticisms invalidates Lessing's basic contention that long descriptions in poetry rarely convey a coherent impression of their object, which comes to life much more readily if presented by way of actions or movements: consistently enough, he had praised James Thomson's *The Seasons* ten years before for this very quality, as depicting 'all the cheerful and happy, grave and terrible scenes of the changing year as they emerge from and dissolve into one another'.[75] But they do confirm that the successive nature of language is not in itself sufficient to account for the distinctive procedures and effects of poetry.

Conversely, if the successive nature of language allegedly prevents it from conveying an illusion of whole bodies, it may well be asked why it does not also prevent it from conveying an illusion of whole actions, which are also made up of successively enumerated parts—or, for that matter, why we can readily apprehend sentences, chapters, and entire works of literature, which also consist of successive parts, as integral wholes.[76] This paradox stems from an ambiguity in Lessing's term 'action' (*Handlung*), an ambiguity to which Mendelssohn drew attention in his comments on the expanded first draft of *Laocoön*. In that draft, as in the equivalent passage in Chapter 16 already quoted, Lessing defined actions as 'objects which follow each other, or whose parts follow each other'. This, Mendelssohn objected, is a definition of movements (*Bewegungen*) rather than actions, for actions may well be simultaneous (as in collective actions) or motionless (as in holding a torch aloft) rather than successive.[77] (He also implies, without actually saying so, that actions are the work of intelligent agents, directed towards a specific end.)

Lessing duly substituted *Bewegungen* for *Handlungen* in subsequent drafts of his work, in one of which he significantly redefined an action as 'a series of movements aimed at an ultimate purpose'.[78] In so doing, he is repeating the teleological definition of action which he had employed some years before in his treatises on the fable, where it is described as 'a sequence of changes which together constitute a whole' whose unity in turn depends 'on the conformity of all the parts to an ultimate purpose';[79] later in that same work, he had defined it even more comprehensively by adding that 'every inner conflict of the passions, every sequence of different thoughts where one supersedes the other, is an action'.[80] Although it is briefly echoed in one of the drafts, this latter, wider definition is not included in the

[73] LM XIV, 413. [74] LM XIV, 424. [75] LM VII, 67 (1756).
[76] Cf. Hamm 46; Cohen 22. [77] LM XIV, 344–5. [78] LM XIV, 372 and 380.
[79] LM VII, 429. [80] LM VII, 435; cf. Dryden in LM VI, 276.

published text of *Laocoön*—no doubt because its expression in poetry would too obviously diverge from the 'natural' use of language to represent perceptible objects. But although the previous, teleological definition of action in terms of an ultimate purpose is not explicitly included either, it is nevertheless implicit in all the examples of actions whose representation Lessing commends in Homer, such as the manufacture of Juno's chariot, of Agamemnon's sceptre, of the bow of Pandarus and the shield of Achilles.[81] For none of these is a succession of unconnected movements; all of them entail causal sequences directed towards an ultimate purpose. That is, their unity depends not on the illusion of a visible whole generated by the successive nature of language, but on a unifying concept of causality or purpose supplied, or implied, by the poet and registered by the listener or reader.[82]

This inconsistency, like the one before it, does not detract from the valuable critical insights which Lessing's conceptual framework makes possible. It is perfectly true, for example, that the successive narration of successive events entails an 'easier' relationship between sign and signified than the successive description of co-existent objects; or as Lessing himself puts it, such narration confers a more 'natural' quality on the 'arbitrary' signs of language.[83] What this means in practice is also clearly demonstrated by his close readings of Homer, which cast much light on Homer's narrative technique and on the function of parataxis in epic poetry. Nevertheless, it is once again evident that his primary distinction between bodies and actions is not in itself enough to account for the fundamental differences between the arts: on this occasion, it has to be supplemented by concepts and thought processes of a wholly abstract nature.[84]

Lessing's parallel rules on what the visual arts may and may not do, display similar tensions and anomalies. In the preface to *Laocoön*, he had proposed to censure not only descriptive poetry but also the equivalent abuse in the visual arts, namely 'allegorising' (*Allegoristerei*)—that is, the misguided attempt (he describes it as 'false taste') on the part of painters or sculptors to depict abstract ideas, whose proper medium is language. Surprisingly enough, he has little to say on visual allegory in the work itself. Instead of criticizing modern artists who indulge in allegory, he merely points out that, in antiquity, the allegorical statues of gods and goddesses were governed by religious rather than aesthetic considerations, and are therefore not strictly works of art at all; he adds that, if an artist needs to represent abstract ideas, he has no choice but to employ allegorical symbols. The only polemical elements in this section are antiquarian disagreements with Spence and Caylus.[85]

This uncharacteristic restraint is probably influenced by two considerations. The first is that Winckelmann warmly approved of allegory and recommended it in his *Thoughts*, saying: 'An artist with a soul which has learned to think [. . .] will attempt to show himself as a poet and to represent figures by means of symbols [*Bilder*], that is, allegorically.'[86] Since Lessing had already resolved to oppose Winckelmann

[81] LM IX, 96–100 and 120.
[82] See Rudowski 333: Wessell (1984) 190–2; Mülder-Bach (1998) 131–43.
[83] LM XIV, 428–9; cf. IX, 101and 104–5. [84] See on this Knodt 79.
[85] LM IX, 65–7 and 71–6. [86] Winckelmann (1968) 55.

on the interpretation and chronology of the best known of all Greek sculptures, he could scarcely condemn his artistic taste as well without appearing to launch a full-scale polemic against him. He accordingly held back his critique of allegorical art (to include Raphael's 'School of Athens') for the planned, but unwritten, continuation of *Laocoön*.[87] The second reason why he avoided this subject may well be that, since allegory entails the use of 'arbitrary' signs, the symmetrical structure of his argument would have obliged him to deal with the equivalent phenomenon in poetry, namely the representation of abstract ideas. This would once more have conflicted with his basic requirement that poetry should represent only perceptible objects such as actions—unless he were prepared to condemn all poems dealing with abstract ideas, such as Popes's *Essay on Man*, which we know he admired.

In elaborating his primary distinction between bodies and actions, Lessing had conceded that poetry may depict bodies by selecting a single attribute by which to characterize them; this operation is completed by the imagination of the listener or reader. As usual, he makes a parallel concession for the visual arts: the artist may also depict actions, but only by selecting what Lessing calls the most 'fruitful' or 'pregnant' moment, which allows the viewer to reconstruct the preceding and succeeding moments, i.e. to imagine the action as a whole.[88] The prime example of such an action is, of course, the statue of Laocoön. Lessing is here reiterating a well-established theory already propounded by Diderot,[89] Mendelssohn,[90] and many others, and his formulation is close to what Mendelssohn had said in his essay of 1757. But just as in his discussion of descriptive poetry, he is again obliged to invoke an external, subjective factor in addition to the medium of the art in question in order to explain how that art creates a successful illusion.[91]

The above reflections indicate that, while Lessing's primary distinction between bodies and actions yields valuable insights into the media and functions of the two kinds of art discussed, it does not provide a rigorous means of distinguishing between them, let alone between the particular arts and poetic genres they encompass. It must not, however, be forgotten that his stated aim was not to provide a classification of the visual and poetic arts, but merely to refute the widespread fallacy that the two kinds of art in question can perform one another's functions, as implied by the misunderstood injunction *ut pictura poesis*. In order to do this, he was obliged to compare the ways in which these arts perform identical tasks, and since the visual arts were involved, this could only mean the way in which visible objects are represented. It is with this aim that *Laocoön* is chiefly preoccupied.

The effect of this, of course, is to give a very limited view of poetry: nearly all the examples of good poetic usage are from the verse epic, and from Homer's *Iliad* in particular. This does not sit easily with Lessing's references to 'the broader sphere of poetry, the infinite field of our imagination, and the immateriality [*Geistigkeit*] of its images'[92] and 'the whole immeasurable realm of perfection'[93] which lies open to it. On the one hand, poetry is tied to the representation of visible actions, but on

[87] LM XIV, 383. [88] LM IX, 19–20 and 95. [89] Diderot (1975) IV, 185.
[90] For example, JA I, 178 and 440. [91] Cf. Mülder-Bach (1992) 14.
[92] LM IX, 44. [93] LM IX, 22.

the other, it is free to do much, much more. This fundamental tension remains unresolved throughout the published version of *Laocoön*. There are, however, signs that Lessing intended to confront at least some aspects of it in the unwritten sequel.

The sequel was to consist of two further parts.[94] But in view of the many drafts and notes associated with it, it is impossible to say exactly how it might have looked. It is at any rate certain that Lessing was still actively considering the project several years later, and his remarks on it to Nicolai in 1769 show that it continued to develop at least until that date.[95]

The materials for the sequel are extremely varied, but they can be divided into two main categories, namely the overflow, so to speak, from the published Part I, and new materials on other issues which would have greatly extended the original project. To the former category belong a number of criticisms of Winckelmann, chiefly antiquarian in character.[96] It is difficult to see how these could have been accommodated in the sequel, although they might well have been useful if a polemical conflict had arisen. Other comments simply enlarge on the published text to take in, for example, beauty of colour and expression, non-visual images in poetry, and collective actions (as a subject common to both kinds of art);[97] and although these hardly add up to a coherent new argument, they do indicate that Lessing was becoming increasingly aware that the distinction between the two kinds of art was less abrupt and more fluid than he had initially suggested.[98]

The new materials for the sequel are dominated by Lessing's second basic distinction between natural and arbitrary signs.[99] He considers the relevance of this distinction not just to the visual arts and poetry, but to the fine arts in general. In keeping with his growing awareness that visual art and poetry can perform many of one another's functions, he examines the role of arbitrary signs in painting—not just in allegory but also in such examples of synaesthesia as Hogarth's engraving 'The Enraged Musician', where sounds are suggested by visual signals.[100] Conversely, he explores the role of natural signs in poetry, both as genuinely natural signs such as onomatopoeia and emotive cries, and as poetic devices to lend the arbitrary signs of poetry a quasi-natural character. These devices include, of course, the successive narration of successive actions, but also, he now adds, metaphors and similes;[101] this list is later expanded to include the effects of tone, choice and order of words, metre, and figures and tropes in general.[102] A significant change can be detected in these observations: Lessing's view of both visual art and poetry is becoming more inclusive than before, and he is now prepared to look seriously at forms in which the imagination plays a relatively greater role. This means, as he says explicitly in 1769,[103] that he does not now propose to dismiss out of hand such forms as allegorical painting—and presumably didactic poetry—in which arbitrary

[94] See LM XIV, 378–84; also L. to Nicolai, 26 May 1769.
[95] Loc. cit.; also L. to C. F. Voss, 5 January 1770.
[96] For example, LM XIV, 408–10 and 420–2.
[97] LM XIV, 411, 381, 382. [98] Cf. Wellbery 190; Allert 383.
[99] See Krieger *passim*. [100] LM XIV, 430. [101] LM XIV, 428–9.
[102] See L. to Nicolai, 26 May 1769. [103] Loc. cit.

signs predominate; he merely says that they are aesthetically of a lower order than those in which natural signs are primary.

But the most important new development is that he now proposes to look at all the various arts, and especially at combinations of more than one art, as in opera and dance. This was no part of his original intention, and such topics first appear not in his own drafts for *Laocoön*, but in Mendelssohn's comments on the original outline, which repeatedly draw Lessing's attention to contrasts and analogies in music, dance, and even architecture.[104] In his essay of 1757 on the different arts, revised in 1761, with which Lessing was closely familiar, Mendelssohn had also discussed the arts and their combinations at some length, classifying them according to their use of natural and arbitrary, simultaneous and successive signs.[105] This, no doubt augmented by his regular discussions with Mendelssohn, is plainly the basis of his plan to classify the arts and their combinations in the sequel to *Laocoön*—but with one major difference. Unlike Mendelssohn, who is more concerned to classify than to evaluate the different art forms, Lessing also ranks them according to their relative success in creating a convincing illusion, observing firstly that combinations of successive signs (as in poetry and music) work better than combinations of successive and simultaneous signs (as in poetry and painting),[106] and secondly—as in *Laocoön* itself—that natural, or quasi-natural, signs are always superior to arbitrary ones.[107]

Unfortunately, these reflections got no further than scattered notes and comments. But it is certain that, if he had developed them fully, Lessing would have encountered as many unresolved tensions in his second basic distinction as he did in the first. He had indeed grappled with some of them in *Laocoön* itself. For example, the most successful illusion ought logically to arise when natural signs denote natural objects.[108] Yet the media employed by painting or sculpture, which certainly fulfil this condition, may themselves act as a barrier to a successful illusion: the recalcitrant marble or two-dimensional canvas may prevent the imagination, as the key instance in every aesthetic illusion, from forgetting the medium and bringing the represented objects to life.[109] As Lessing noticed, this problem is particularly acute when movements or transient states are involved, and the portrait of the laughing La Mettrie, or the image of a screaming Laocoön, can readily freeze into unnatural permanence.[110] By similar reasoning, painting and sculpture, with their predominantly natural signs, should be inherently superior to the epics of Homer, whose signs can at best be quasi-natural.[111] Or again, if the natural signs of drama, which include the direct speech of the actors, make drama the highest form of poetry, as Lessing later contends,[112] then those epics and novels with most direct speech should be aesthetically preferable to those consisting mainly of third-person narrative. All of these anomalies are rooted in the mimetic theory of illusion favoured by rationalist aesthetics, and it is with this, and with Lessing's efforts to overcome its limitations, that the final part of this analysis will be concerned.

[104] LM XIV, 344, 352–3, 360, 367–8, 370. [105] JA I, 436–51.
[106] LM XIV, 430–5; on L's views on music, see Pizer *passim*.
[107] To Nicolai, 26 May 1769. [108] Cf. Du Bos (1993) 134. [109] Cf. Wellbery 119.
[110] LM IX, 20. [111] Cf. Mülder-Bach (1998) 147–8. [112] To Nicolai, 26 May 1769.

Already in his treatises on the fable of 1759, Lessing's theory of illusion has features which transcend the narrowly mimetic. His definition in that work of 'action' as including 'every inner conflict of the passions, every sequence of different thoughts' in a causal or teleological sequence, requires an imaginative effort on the part of the recipient, who must do much more than recognize that the action depicted conforms to some external model (especially since the actors must in this case convince us, as Lessing declares, that they really are animals and not just allegories of human beings).[113] This enlarged conception of illusion is evident in the *Hamburg Dramaturgy* of 1767–69, in which the test of a successful dramatic illusion is not whether the action conforms to some external model; it must rather be judged by its 'internal probability',[114] a quality which, as he demonstrates, is so fully present in the ghost scene in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* that it is able to convince even those who do not believe in ghosts.[115] In other words, the test of the illusion lies not in objective accuracy, but in the subjective response of the viewer[116]—as in the dramatic theory of Diderot.

It is therefore surprising that the mimetic theory is still so much in evidence in *Laocoön*, which was written between Lessing's work on the fable and the *Hamburg Dramaturgy*, and years after he encountered Diderot's theory of illusion. But even here, as already noted, it is substantially qualified by subjective factors; and Lessing's debt to the mimetic theory, most evident in the terminology he uses, is often more apparent than real—especially in his comments on poetry. For although he regularly refers to the task of poetry as imitation (*Nachahmung*) and speaks of its attempts to paint (*malen*) or depict (*schildern*) its objects,[117] he no longer believes that any external object is involved (except in descriptive poetry like Haller's verses on Alpine flora, which he in any case condemns). The objects in Homer are not external to his work itself, and no inspection of Achilles' shield, for example, is necessary or even possible to determine the objective accuracy of the poet's description, as implied by Mendelssohn's theory of an original image (*Urbild*) or model (*Vorbild*) on which the work of art is based:[118] it is enough if it creates a successful illusion. But the legacy of representational aesthetics—especially obvious in Lessing's theory of arbitrary and natural signs—remains an essential element of *Laocoön*, co-existing uneasily with the subjective theory of illusion which would shortly come into its own in the *Hamburg Dramaturgy*.

Laocoön is consequently a transitional work in aesthetics, retaining the currency of an older aesthetic paradigm while foreshadowing a new one which would shortly replace it.[119] One of those who, like Diderot, had already prepared the way was Edmund Burke, whose treatise on the sublime and beautiful Lessing himself, it will be recalled, had begun to translate and edit in 1757, and which he still intended to publish eleven years later. Burke had flatly denied that poetry is an art of imitation, declaring instead that it works on our feelings and imagination by

[113] LM VII, 422 and 463–4; cf. Hasselbeck 109–11. [114] LM IX, 261.
[115] LM IX, 228–9. [116] See Dieckmann *passim* and Daemmrich 88–90.
[117] LM IX, 50–1, 95–6, 101–2, etc. [118] Cf. Mülder-Bach (1998) 116–17.
[119] See Knodt 100–2.

suggestion;[120] the 'arbitrary' character of its medium is consequently no obstacle to its power to create illusion. Significantly, Lessing tells his brother in 1768 that he does not regret his delay in completing the edition, since the essays he originally planned to append to it would no longer reflect his views; by this, he may well mean that his views on poetic illusion are now much closer to Burke's. The emancipation of poetry from the mimetic theory would shortly be completed in Germany by Herder, for whom its defining attribute is its capacity to express and arouse feelings.

All this helps to explain the most conspicuous and puzzling omission in *Laocoön*, namely Lessing's failure to discuss, even in his drafts for the sequel, the one poetic form on which he could speak with unchallengeable authority, namely the drama. It is true that he discusses Sophocles' *Philoctetes* at length;[121] but the aim of this discussion is to illustrate Greek sensibility and to demonstrate that the expression of extreme pain is more acceptable in poetry—even in dramatic performance—than in the visual arts, and not to analyse the medium and poetics of drama as such. Similarly, his substantial quotations from *King Lear* and *Richard III* serve to illustrate the portrayal of ugliness in literature, and those from Beaumont and Fletcher the portrayal of the disgusting.[122] But apart from some brief remarks in the *Hamburg Dramaturgy* to the effect that drama in performance combines the visual and poetic arts,[123] Lessing's only comment on the place of drama within the conceptual framework of *Laocoön* is the following curious statement in his letter of May 1769 to Nicolai concerning the planned Part III:

> the highest genre of poetry is that which transforms its arbitrary signs completely into natural signs. But that is the dramatic genre, for in it, the words cease to be arbitrary signs and become *natural* signs of arbitrary things.

This appears to mean not just that, in performance, the actors will, by their gestures and behaviour, give visible and emotive expression to the actions suggested by the dialogue[124]—for that would hardly suffice to 'transform' the entire dialogue. It may therefore mean that, in converting the entire written text into spoken dialogue—reinforced by the actors' skills—the live performance makes the linguistic signs transparent, thereby completing the illusion that the words are those of the characters represented.[125] But as several commentators have noticed, the signs of the text and the words of the characters are one and the same thing, so that the difference between sign and signified collapses altogether, and it is no longer possible to discuss drama—as distinct from the art of acting—within the conceptual framework of *Laocoön*.[126] For the dramatic illusion, in so far as it is generated by the text rather than the actors, can only be discussed in a different conceptual framework, such as that of the *Hamburg Dramaturgy*, which was already complete by the time Lessing wrote in the above terms to Nicolai. If this interpretation is correct, the letter to Nicolai serves not to integrate drama into *Laocoön*, but to justify its exclusion retrospectively.

[120] Burke 163–75; cf. McCormick 199. [121] LM IX, 23–33.
[122] LM IX, 141–3 and 153–5. [123] See LM IX, 204.
[124] As Buch 45 suggests. [125] Cf. Worvill 165. [126] See Wellbery 226–7; Knodt 133.

Although Lessing's comment to Nicolai raises more questions than it answers, it is clear for several reasons that drama could not play any significant part in the planned continuation of *Laocoön*. As already noted, Lessing had already expounded his ideas on dramatic illusion in the *Hamburg Dramaturgy* before he told Nicolai of his plans for the sequel to *Laocoön* in 1769, so that he had no need to rehearse them again in the latter work. Secondly, he had never, even in his early years, based his theory of dramatic illusion on the linguistic medium: already in his correspondence on tragedy in 1756–57, he had based it on the subjective reaction of the audience in the shape of *Mitleid* and sympathetic emotions. And thirdly, if drama was now to figure as 'the highest genre of poetry' with its exclusively natural signs, all other kinds of poetry, as Lessing concedes in his letter to Nicolai, must therefore be 'the lower genres'. This means, of course, that the Homeric epic, which had figured in the first part of *Laocoön* as the definitive form of poetry, would have had to be retrospectively downgraded. For all these reasons, it is unlikely that Lessing could ever have completed *Laocoön* along the lines of his surviving notes and his comments to Nicolai.

On its publication at Easter 1766, *Laocoön* was an immediate success: Goethe, who encountered it as a student at Leipzig, likened its impact to 'a ray of light from dark clouds'.[127] Coming hard on the heels of Winckelmann's *History*, it seemed to extend to ancient literature at least as great a service as Winckelmann had performed for ancient art, and its direct engagement with great works in both areas was doubly welcome to readers alienated by the abstractions of rationalist aesthetics and the dry compilations of the antiquarians. It set the seal, so to speak, on the Hellenic revival.

The critical response, whose volume far exceeded that to any of Lessing's previous works, was likewise overwhelmingly positive,[128] and reviews appeared even in French and British periodicals.[129] But to Lessing's disappointment, the approval was in most cases bland and superficial:[130] few were in a position to grasp the work's theoretical implications. The most intelligent responses were Christian Garve's long review in Nicolai's *Allgemeine Deutsche Bibliothek*,[131] and the first of Herder's *Kritische Wälder* (*Critical Silvae*), a full-length treatise devoted exclusively to *Laocoön*.[132] Garve retraces the steps in Lessing's argument and the ways in which it stimulates the reader's thought processes, while Herder takes a more independent line: although his admiration for Lessing is never in doubt, he has no less respect for Winckelmann, whose methods he strongly defends. He criticizes Lessing's rules as over-restrictive, pointing out, for example, that Homer's epic style is not appropriate to every kind of poetry, and that the inventiveness of poets and the powers of the imagination are greater than Lessing concedes. In a similar spirit, Herder proceeded soon afterwards to attribute separate aesthetic principles to two-dimensional painting, whose appeal is primarily to sight, and three-dimensional

[127] HA IX, 316. [128] See B V/2, 674–734.
[129] Seifert (L.-Bibliography) 126 No. 734; Todt 5.
[130] See Fick (2010) 284–5; also L. to Nicolai, 13 April 1769.
[131] Braun I, 260–84. [132] SWS III, 1–189.

sculpture, which also involves the sense of touch, whereas Lessing had treated the two arts as one.[133]

Laocoön has continued to resonate ever since, not least in Britain, where it is one of the best known of Lessing's works.[134] J. H. Füssli (Henry Fuseli), who spent most of his life in London, was early familiar with it, and after Thomas De Quincey translated substantial portions of it in 1826,[135] it influenced artists and writers from Flaxman and Macaulay to Arnold[136] and Ruskin.[137] Less attention has been paid to its reception in other countries—Italy is a notable exception[138]—but it must be very extensive, for the work has been translated, in whole or part, into at least seventeen languages.[139] In Germany itself, it enjoyed great esteem in the later nineteenth century, when it became a standard text in the classical grammar schools and was even translated into Latin.[140] It has attracted renewed international interest since the middle of the twentieth century,[141] on the one hand from Marxist theorists investigating the history of realism,[142] and on the other from writers on semiotics and critical theory. The latter have published at least four symposia or essay collections on the work,[143] which are especially noteworthy since they treat *Laocoön* not just as an object of historical research but also as an incentive to develop and supplement Lessing's ideas with the tools of contemporary theory: surely no greater compliment can be paid to a work written over two centuries ago. Finally, it is worth mentioning that, despite Lessing's literary bias, critics and historians of art have also found his work stimulating. His disagreement with Winckelmann over Laocoon's facial expression and mental state started a long-running debate over precisely which moment in his death throes the statue depicts,[144] and it is to the provocative remarks on visual art in *Laocoön* that we are chiefly indebted for E. H. Gombrich's splendid essay of 1957 on Lessing's work and personality.

Finally, a word on some of the shortcomings of *Laocoön*, and on why, in spite of these, it remains a work of major importance. By restricting the visual arts to the portrayal of classical beauty, Lessing implicitly excludes whole schools, genres, and centuries of art—including the Middle Ages, the Dutch school, portraiture, and genre painting—as misguided or inferior. He declares in his drafts that flower painting (and presumably all still life) and landscape are both incapable of ideal beauty, and that they afford little or no scope for genius;[145] in a later note on Rembrandt, he describes his manner as best suited to 'base, ludicrous, and revolting subjects' since it usually envelops them in deep shadow.[146] Even on Greek art, his thesis is too narrow, for Greek art—especially, but not exclusively, Hellenistic art—is full of movement, action, expression, and realism (one need only think of the Pergamum altar, admittedly unknown in the eighteenth century). All of these are grave limitations; but they are also the limitations of Lessing's age; and in almost every case, they are taken over from Winckelmann.

[133] SWS IV, 44–90. [134] See Gombrich 138. [135] See Zelle *passim*.
[136] See Corner *passim*. [137] See Kenwood 344–8. [138] See Costazza *passim*.
[139] See Seifert (L.-Bibliography) 259–341. [140] Ibid. 302 No. 2250.
[141] See Meyer-Kalkus 71. [142] See, for example, Szarota and Hamm.
[143] Gebauer (ed.); Koebner (ed.); Burwick (ed.); Baxmann et al. (ed.).
[144] See Nisbet (1979) *passim*. [145] LM XIV, 381 and 415. [146] LM XV, 356–7.

As for the theory of poetry, it has already been noted that drama is conspicuously absent in *Laocoön*; but so too are most kinds of lyric and other shorter forms such as the elegy, love poem, ode, hymn, and epigram (though the last of these would be dealt with in a separate treatise a few years later)[147]—not to mention the novel, which did not yet count as a serious literary form. It should, of course, be remembered that the aim of *Laocoön* was not to supply a comprehensive poetics, and that even Aristotle has nothing to say on the lyric; but the fact remains that, by confining poetry in general to the representation of actions—that is, to the epic genre—far too much is left out.

Nevertheless, *Laocoön* has rightly been described, despite its unfinished state, as the German Enlightenment's most complete statement on the semiotics of art and poetry,[148] and it is one of the few basic works on aesthetics to have attained canonic status outside a narrow circle of specialists. For this, Lessing's lively style is largely responsible, but so too are the sheer energy and excitement of his argument, even when it is patently one-sided or false; for as his opponents discovered to their cost, Lessing is one of those few writers who are no less impressive when they are wrong than when they are right. *Laocoön* does have a systematic element, which can, if one fills in the gaps with the help of Mendelssohn and others on whom Lessing drew, be expanded into a coherent system—as David Wellbery, in his impressive study of the work, has in fact done.[149] But Lessing did not so expand it, and it was not in his nature to do so. He preferred debate to dogma, and he distrusted anything resembling a closed system, expressly repudiating such claims in his next major work of criticism, the *Hamburg Dramaturgy*.[150] In *Laocoön*, he pushed one aesthetic system to its limits until he himself broke through them, thereby revealing its basic instability; he talked of rules while himself undermining them, declaring, for example: 'Nothing is more deceptive than general rules for our sentiments', or again: 'How much would appear incontovertible in theory if genius had not succeeded in actively demonstrating the opposite.'[151] These were discoveries made through experience; he would justify them theoretically in later years. But they already invest *Laocoön* with an open character, and it is largely to this that it owes its enduring interest.

On leaving Breslau in April 1765, Lessing sent his manservant ahead to Berlin with his books and personal effects, and set off to visit friends and relatives, including his parents, in various parts of Prussia and Saxony.[152] He spent the last part of this journey in Leipzig, where he called on Weisse and other old friends; among them was Nicolai, currently in Leipzig for the Easter book fair. The two returned to Berlin together around the middle of May, and Lessing moved into his new quarters on the northern edge of the old city. The house in question (no. 10 Königsgraben) belonged to the brothers Schleuen, engravers by profession, to whom Lessing had no doubt been recommended by Nicolai.[153]

[147] LM XI, 214–315. [148] See Wellbery 234. [149] See ibid. 225.
[150] LM X, 187–8. [151] LM IX, 29 and 24. [152] Cf. L. to J. G. Lessing, 17 March 1765.
[153] See L. to Karl Lessing, 22 December 1766.

His fourth and final period in Berlin began inauspiciously. He found his belongings in chaos, and discovered that his servant, who had passed himself off to the landlords as his brother, had worn his clothes and run up debts in his name; money and papers were also missing from his desk.[154] Always inclined to leniency on such occasions—and not impervious to the comic side of the episode—Lessing merely dismissed the man and set about organizing his library on shelves which soon filled every wall of his lodgings.[155] Unfortunately, the next servant he appointed, a soldier of French origin named Reich who was seconded to Lessing's service by his Prussian commanding officer, proved even worse than his predecessor. Though suspected of dishonesty on several occasions, he managed to conceal his worst offences until Lessing left Berlin in 1767. Not only had he sold as waste paper a number of books which had been shelved behind a bed, including the medieval *Heldenbuch* with Lessing's manuscript annotations; he had also erased the record of his own monthly payments from Lessing's diary, and now claimed arrears of two years' wages from Karl Lessing, who remained behind in Berlin. Only after the military authorities ruled that, if Lessing testified on oath that he had paid him regularly, Reich would have to run the gauntlet, did he abandon his claim.[156] Such incidents would shortly form the basis of Just's account of Tellheim's faithless servants in *Minna von Barnhelm*.[157]

It was now clear to Lessing that he would once more have to work for a living, and he again began to hope for some fixed employment which would leave him enough time to pursue his literary activities. Meanwhile, he had to earn what he could from publishing, although he now found sustained work difficult after his irregular routine in Breslau. Appropriately enough, as the inaugurator of the *Letters on Literature* over six years earlier, he supplied the final contribution, apart from Nicolai's editorial postscript, to the last issue of that journal.[158] At the same time, he pressed ahead with *Laocoön*, whose publication might enhance his prospects of employment. Karl Lessing, who shared his lodgings, recalls his brother's restless state of mind around this time:[159]

> He now no longer had diversions and distractions *outside* his study, but *within* it. As he paced up and down doing his best work, the title of a book would catch his eye. He would open it and find an idea which, though totally unconnected with his present meditation, was nevertheless so splendid, so excellent, that he at least had to write it down; and as he did so, he could not remain silent on what he thought of it. This was in turn related to something else which he could not possibly refrain from investigating if he were not to risk overlooking it when he needed it.—What a new discovery! What a fine explanation!—But the printer's boy was at the door asking for copy. Yes, it was certainly ready, but it would have to be checked through once more [...] But he got up from his work, and although his getting up had given him enough material for a new book, the manuscript now in press had not been checked after all.

In these circumstances, it is remarkable that Voss was able to publish *Laocoön*—or at least the first part of it—at Easter 1766.

[154] Cf. D 187–8; KGL 146; L. to J. G. Lessing, 4 July 1765. [155] D 212. [156] Loc. cit.
[157] LM II, 207–10. [158] LM VIII, 280–5 (July 1765). [159] KGL 150–1.

Early in 1765, when Lessing was still in Breslau, the post of librarian and archivist at the Royal Library in Berlin became vacant on the death of the incumbent, and Colonel Karl Theophilus Guichard, known in Frederick's inner circle as 'Quintus Icilius', was one of those charged with finding a successor. Guichard was sympathetic towards Lessing, whom he knew through Nicolai, and he put his name forward for the post soon after Lessing returned to Berlin.[160] Mindful of the negative associations which Lessing's name still held for him, the king summarily rejected Guichard's proposal, and Winckelmann was approached instead; but he, too, was rejected when, encouraged by Nicolai, he requested a salary of 2,000 talers, a sum which Frederick considered excessive for a German. Lessing's hopes remained alive well into the following year, for the post had still not been filled. It may be that, as some have suggested, Guichard once more put forward his name and the king categorically refused.[161] At any rate, Lessing's humiliation was complete when the king finally resolved to appoint an obscure Frenchman, Jacques Pernéty, whose book on physiognomy he had enjoyed reading. In the event, the offer was misdirected to an even obscurer Pernéty, a Benedictine monk who accepted it with alacrity. Though he proved totally incompetent, he held the office for over fifteen years, until false prophecies of a Prussian Armageddon caused him to flee to Spain, where he finally discovered his vocation as a prophet in his own right.[162]

Despite the success of *Laocoön*, nothing came of Lessing's hopes for a post at the Dresden galleries, if only because no suitable vacancy arose.[163] But two other steps which he took around this time were probably connected with his quest for employment. The first was to agree to act as temporary tutor to a young aristocrat named Leopold von Brenkenhof, later a Colonel in the Prussian army, and to accompany him to Bad Pyrmont, a fashionable spa some forty miles south-west of Hanover.[164] Lessing got on well with him, as he usually did with younger men (he was used to dealing with younger brothers), and even put him up in his Berlin lodgings; but he was also aware that Brenkenhof's father was a Prussian Privy Councillor and influential economist, and there is evidence that he sought his help with employment at least for his brother, if not for himself.[165] His second step, before leaving for Pyrmont, was to renew his friendship with the well-connected Gleim and arrange to visit him on the return journey to Berlin.[166]

On the way to Pyrmont, Lessing stopped at Brunswick and met Johann Arnold Ebert, whom he already knew through Gleim[167] and who would later make possible his move to Wolfenbüttel. By a happy coincidence, a French production of *Miss Sara Sampson*, translated by Prince Friedrich August, the second son of the reigning Duke of Brunswick, was due to be performed that day, and Lessing agreed

[160] Schaefer 44 *passim*; also Degering 39–48.
[161] Schaefer 45; but cf. also PO XV, Part 17, 21–3.
[162] E. Schmidt I, 527; Oehlke I, 219.
[163] B VI/1, 514.
[164] KGL 152; Danzel/Guhrauer II, 92–3.
[165] Cf. L. to Karl Lessing, 22 December 1766; Danzel/Guhrauer II, 93.
[166] To Gleim, 13 May 1766; also Gleim to L., 18 May 1766.
[167] See L. to Gleim, 12 May 1759.

to attend;[168] although he was not impressed by the changes the Prince had made to his text, the contacts he made with members of the court that evening no doubt strengthened his case when Ebert took steps to secure his services some three years later.

Bad Pyrmont, where Lessing stayed from around 25 June to the middle of July,[169] fulfilled a function in North Germany during the later eighteenth century not unlike that of Bath in England and Spa in Belgium. In the summer season, it was patronized by large numbers of aristocrats and members of the educated middle classes, and although social barriers still existed, they were more relaxed than elsewhere, and nobility and commoners breakfasted together and mingled on the promenade and in the ballroom; large sums of money were won and lost at faro.[170] Lessing will not have lacked company: as the author of *Laocoön*, he must have attracted more attention than he wished. One of those he met was Justus Möser, the historian and senior administrator from Osnabrück and a regular visitor to Pyrmont, to whom he expounded that theory on the origins of Freemasonry which he would later develop in the dialogues *Ernst and Falk*;[171] that the dialogues themselves appear to be set in Pyrmont[172] no doubt commemorates his conversations there with Möser. Möser's efforts to promote a national culture on the basis of authentic German traditions—he was already working on his *Patriotische Phantasien*—were also welcome to Lessing, who praised his defence of the harlequin a year later in the *Hamburg Dramaturgy*.[173] For his part, Möser greatly enjoyed Lessing's company, as his wife later confirmed—despite the fact that Möser, perhaps under Lessing's influence, gambled away all his ready cash and had to borrow money for his fare home.[174] During his visit, Lessing also seems to have met Count Wilhelm of Schaumburg-Lippe, currently the employer of Thomas Abbt and subsequently of Herder.[175]

From Pyrmont, the young Brenkenhof presumably made his own way back to Berlin, while Lessing went on to Göttingen; he must have stayed there for some time, for he was still there on 2 August.[176] He visited his old friend Kästner, as well as the orientalist Michaelis, who was apparently prompted by Lessing's withering comments on the remoteness of learned theologians from the common people to begin work on his edition of the Old Testament for untutored readers.[177] He made friends with the librarian Johann Andreas Dietze, one of the few Hispanists in Germany, with whom he later corresponded,[178] and he may well have met Benjamin Franklin and Sir John Pringle, President of the Royal Society, both of whom were in Göttingen at this time.[179] He also visited Kassel and its collection of antiquities before resuming his homeward journey.[180]

As promised, Lessing stopped at Halberstadt on the way back to Berlin and once more enjoyed Gleim's lavish hospitality. During his stay, they discussed Lessing's chances of obtaining the vacant post of curator of antiquities and an associated

[168] D 205–6. [169] Cf. Kuhnert 24–5. [170] Ibid. 188–9.
[171] See Möser to Abbt, 11 October 1766 in Möser 227. [172] Cf. LM XIII, 362.
[173] LM IX, 258. [174] See Möser 223–4. [175] See A (2005) 172.
[176] D 208. [177] D 209.
[178] Only one letter survives: L. to Dietze, 5 January 1769; cf. Danzel/Guhrauer II, 95.
[179] D 208–9. [180] Cf. L. to R. E. Raspe, 30 December 1768.

Fig. 24. Lessing, painting attributed to Rosina de Gasc.

professorship of archaeology at Kassel, and Gleim prevailed upon his friend Dietrich Ernst von Spiegel, a court dignitary from Ansbach and brother of one of Gleim's colleagues in Halberstadt, to write to Kassel on Lessing's behalf.[181] This initiative came close to succeeding some months later,[182] but Lessing had meanwhile accepted an offer to join the projected National Theatre in Hamburg; the Kassel post went instead to Rudolf Erich Raspe, editor of Leibniz and of the adventures of Baron Münchhausen. Spiegel may have been responsible for commissioning the splendid portrait of Lessing which Goethe later admired and borrowed. It was traditionally attributed to Georg Oswald May, but has recently been reattributed to Rosina de Gasc. If Spiegel was indeed responsible, it may have been painted during Lessing's visit to Gleim in 1766. But whatever its provenance, Gleim acquired it at some time between 1768 and 1778 for his 'Temple of Friendship', where it remains to this day.[183]

Lessing's precise movements during the next few months are uncertain, given his meagre correspondence and customary reticence about his private life. He returned to Berlin in the late summer or early autumn, but he tells Gleim in October that he has again been away more than once[184]—hardly to Kamenz, as some authorities suggest,[185] for his father reproaches him in February 1767 for his failure to visit Kamenz in the previous year.[186] The vexation and illness which he mentions in the same letter may well be linked to the final shattering of his hopes of appointment to the post of Royal Librarian at around this time,[187] and a recurrent note of bitterness enters his correspondence and conversations, particularly with regard to Prussia; he now wished

[181] See Gleim to L., 6 January 1767 [182] See Gleim to L., 28 March 1767.
[183] See Rudloff-Hille (1991) 14–16; Scholke 137–40; Siwczyk 28–9.
[184] To Gleim, 31 October 1766. [185] Cf. D 205.
[186] J. G. Lessing to L., 19 February 1767. [187] Cf. E. Schmidt I, 527.

to leave Berlin at the first opportunity. As he writes to his father from Hamburg a year later, 'I left Berlin after the one thing I had so long hoped for, and which I had so often been led to expect, failed to materialize.'[188] His disillusion with the Prussian regime was doubtless intensified by the introduction, in 1766, of the hated *Regie*, a punitive system of taxation enforced by French tax farmers,[189] and comments such as the following (to Ramler, in 1768) now typify his attitude to Prussia: 'You have been ill, dearest friend.—But how can one possibly be well in Berlin? For everything one sees there must make one's blood boil.'[190] Such sentiments culminate in his famous outburst of 1769 to Nicolai, who had contrasted the oppressive censorship in Austria with the greater freedom elsewhere (that is, in Prussia):[191]

> For the rest, don't speak to me about your freedom to think and write in Berlin. It amounts quite simply to the freedom to peddle as many anti-religious stupidities as one wishes [...]. But just let someone try in Berlin to write as freely on other matters as Sonnenfels[192] did in Vienna; let him try to tell the noble courtly rabble the truth in the way that Sonnenfels did; let someone stand up in Berlin and raise his voice in support of citizens' rights and against exploitation and despotism, as is now happening even in France and Denmark, and you will soon discover which country is to this day the most servile country in Europe.

Such were Lessing's feelings at the end of his final period of residence in Berlin. His hopes for the revival of German culture, and of the theatre in particular, were now transferred to Hamburg. It now became imperative to complete and publish *Minna von Barnhelm*.

[188] To J. G. Lessing, 21 December 1767.
[189] See Ribbe I, 399.
[190] To Ramler, 6 November 1768.
[191] To Nicolai, 25 August 1769.
[192] Joseph von Sonnenfels, who campaigned in the 1760s for a humanitarian revision of the Austrian penal code: see Beales I, 236–7.

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11

Minna von Barnhelm

On several counts, *Minna von Barnhelm, oder das Soldatenglück* (*Minna von Barnhelm, or the Soldier's Fortune*) is an exceptional work. It occupies an isolated position in Lessing's dramatic œuvre, for it is the only comedy he completed in his mature years. In due course, it proved the most consistently successful of all his plays, and it has the added distinction of being the earliest German drama still regularly performed today. Hailed by Goethe as 'a brilliant meteor' and a work of national importance,[1] it was before long canonized as the greatest comedy in the German language.[2] Its prominence is all the greater because, as Lessing already noticed,[3] Germany's comic tradition has never been strong in comparison with that of other European nations; the long succession of German philosophers who, since his time, have looked above all to tragedy for true metaphysical insight has done nothing to rectify this imbalance.[4] In addition, it is a play of deceptive simplicity: at first sight clear and transparent, it proves on closer inspection to be allusive and complex.[5] For this reason, different ages have interpreted it in radically different ways, although it has retained its popularity throughout.

The play was conceived in 1763, soon after the end of the Seven Years War; that is certainly the implication of the words 'composed in 1763' on the title page, even if the work was completed only four years later. We know that Lessing produced a first draft in the spring of 1764, and that progress was interrupted by his illness of that summer;[6] his work on *Laocoön* caused further delay. The final version was written after his return to Berlin, where he submitted it act by act to Ramler for critical scrutiny; most of Ramler's suggestions were accepted.[7] He finished work in the winter of 1766–67, by which time his move to Hamburg was already agreed; the need to augment the Hamburg theatre's repertoire doubtless accelerated the work's completion. It finally appeared in a collected edition of Lessing's comedies at Easter 1767.

The play is set in the aftermath of the Seven Years War. During the war, Tellheim, a major in Frederick's army, had been ordered to extract oppressive payments from the populace of occupied Saxony, by force if necessary. Faced with a substantial shortfall, he made good the difference himself, in exchange for a written undertaking

[1] Goethe HA IX, 281; also conversation with Eckermann, 27 March 1831.
[2] Quotation from Grillparzer in GEL: *Minna von Barnhelm*, Erläuterungen u. Dokumente, ed. Hein, 70.
[3] LM VI, 295. [4] Cf. Steinmetz (1976) 141. [5] Cf. Fick (2010) 308–9.
[6] See L. to Ramler, 20 August 1764. [7] D 223.

by the Saxon representatives to repay the debt via the Prussian authorities when hostilities ended. But when, after his regiment was disbanded at the end of the war, he claimed reimbursement, the Prussian authorities accused him of having accepted the sum in question as a bribe for extracting the lowest permissible contribution. Thus accused of dishonourable conduct, he abandoned all thought of marrying his fiancée Minna, a Saxon heiress whose love he had gained by his generous act. As the play begins, we find him in a Berlin hostelry, depressed and almost destitute, awaiting the verdict on his case.

Perplexed by Tellheim's silence, Minna travels to Berlin with her maidservant Franziska to claim her fiancé, stopping by chance at the very inn where he is staying. At their first meeting, she is rebuffed on the grounds that, despite his enduring love, Tellheim no longer considers himself worthy of her because of the slur on his honour. When all her advances fail, Minna resorts to an intrigue, claiming that she, too, is disgraced because her rich uncle and guardian has disowned her for refusing the husband of his choice. Galvanized by this new appeal to his magnanimity, Tellheim at once resolves to leave Prussia and marry her regardless of the consequences, whereupon a letter arrives from the king himself, restoring his reputation and finances. But Minna, repaying Tellheim in kind, now reverses their roles and refuses to marry him because of her own supposed dishonour. Only after he offers to tear up the king's letter and shows genuine despair at his apparent rejection does Minna confess her subterfuge, at which point her uncle arrives to give the couple his blessing. Franziska has meanwhile found her own husband in Tellheim's loyal subordinate Werner.

Like Lessing's other plays, *Minna von Barnhelm* incorporates traditional elements and borrowings from other dramas. The subtitle recalls Thomas Otway's *The Soldier's Fortune* (1681), although the two works are otherwise dissimilar.[8] The play's closest affinities are to George Farquar's *The Constant Couple* (1700) and to Nivelle de la Chaussée's *L'Ecole des amis* (1737), which is itself indebted to Farquar's play.[9] In *The Constant Couple*, Colonel Standard, a disbanded officer, no longer feels able to claim the hand of the rich Lady Lurewell, until she recognizes in him the lost beloved of her youth; as in *Minna*, a rediscovered ring confirms and cements their bond. There are minor echoes of other plays such as Farquar's *Sir Harry Wildair*,[10] Regnard's *Le Joueur*,[11] and Goldoni's *La Locandiera*, but in none of them does the heroine take an initiative comparable to Minna's. It is much more likely that Lessing got the basic idea for his play not from literary sources, but from real events. For contemporary events are of central importance to this work, and it is precisely Lessing's attempt to deal with pressing socio-political issues within a traditional dramatic framework that, as in *Die Juden*, *Samuel Henzi*, and *Philotas* (and indeed in the later *Emilia Galotti*), gives rise to the main problems of interpretation.

These and other relevant issues can conveniently be addressed under four headings, corresponding to the four sections into which the remainder of this chapter

[8] See LM XIV, 197–201.
[9] Cf. Hinck 289–90; on Farquar see GEL: *MvB*, ed. Hildebrandt, 148–55.
[10] See Caro 483. [11] See B VI, 807.

is divided. The first will consider the extent to which the drama is based on real events, and examine its political significance. The second will look at the play's dramatic qualities, including its language, structure, and characters, and especially the relationship between the two main figures. The third will discuss the question of genre and the play's relation to new and traditional modes of comedy and tragedy. The final section will deal with the work's reception on stage and in the critical literature.

The following example may illustrate the relevance of historical events to the play—and at the same time reveal what first prompted Lessing to write it. Officers in the Prussian army were not allowed to marry without the king's permission, which was granted rarely and only under strict conditions (as when the proposed bride was wealthy enough to provide for her whole family in the event of her husband's death or disability). Army regulations explicitly stated that the king preferred unmarried officers, and Frederick turned down one unfortunate hussar's request with the cynical pun 'that hussars must make their fortune not by the scabbard [*Scheide*, which also means "vagina"], but by the sword'.[12] But soon after the war ended in February 1763, he issued an extraordinary instruction to his forces in Saxony. In the words of an officer who served under him:[13]

> To make good the great loss of life in his domains, Frederick gave orders that his soldiers should be pressed to marry. The engaging qualities of the female sex in Saxony were in any case an incentive to do so. The commanding officers, whose interests would not be served by a large train of women and who also feared disorder, were consequently very sparing in their encouragement, until the king demanded the lists of newly-weds from the regiments. The commanding officers now gave the soldiers the signal to marry, and they rushed in hordes to the altar. A large body of women left the country with the Prussians, and almost as many girls followed after them. They did their bit to repopulate the ravaged provinces.

This report is confirmed by peremptory letters along these lines from Frederick to his military commanders, reminding those who had failed to meet their targets 'that when I give orders, I have my good reasons to doing so, therefore they must be executed and what I have commanded must come into effect'.[14]

It is not hard to imagine how Lessing, who famously defended Prussia when in Saxony and Saxony when in Prussia, would have reacted to the news that, after bleeding Saxony white, Prussia was commandeering its women as well. He would have reversed the situation, with its imperialistic overtones, and transferred the dominant role to the Saxon women. In *Minna von Barnhelm*, two such women come to Berlin with the declared intention of 'carrying off one of the king's officers';[15] they in fact succeed in carrying off two. It should also be remembered that, when Minna first met Tellheim, it was she who sought him out in order to marry

[12] See Griebel 113–17; GEL: *MvB*, ed. Hildebrandt 167–8; Dyck 111.
[13] Archenholtz (1789) 496.
[14] See Friedrich II, Politische Korrespondenz, Bd. XXII, 334, n.1; 461, n. 2; 474, n.2; also Geest 14–15.
[15] LM II, 194.

him; and it is likewise her maid Franziska who proposes marriage to the former sergeant Werner. Lessing must have had special reasons for making them act as they do, for their behaviour is highly unconventional and out of keeping with his own declaration a few years later that he knew of 'no higher virtue in an unmarried girl than piety and obedience'.[16] In short, this inversion of roles is one of the 'many digs at the Prussian government' which Nicolai and others immediately detected in the play.[17]

The time and place of the action are highly specific, and the play is full of references to contemporary events and even to real individuals. Although Berlin is never mentioned by name, there is no mistaking the location: the inn where Tellheim and Minna are reunited—the 'King of Spain'– is plainly modelled on the 'King of Portugal' in the Burgstrasse,[18] directly across the river from the royal palace and backing on to the street where Lessing lived before his move to Breslau; the military and civilian street noises of which Franziska complains also fit this setting. The date is 23 August 1763, and Minna has arrived on the previous evening; it is therefore just over six months since the Peace of Hubertusburg, and during the time of Lessing's visit to Potsdam with Tauentzien. Various commentators note that 22 August was also the date on which, after a wave of bankruptcies had spread from Amsterdam and Hamburg to Berlin, Frederick set up a commission to regulate debts and stabilize the economy.[19]

Allusions to real individuals include the name of Paul Werner, formerly a sergeant in Tellheim's company of cavalry; as contemporaries noticed, his name echoes that of Paul von Werner, an Austro-Hungarian nobleman who, bypassed for promotion in the Austrian service on account of his Protestant religion, transferred to the Prussian army and rapidly rose to the rank of general;[20] his name serves to underline the military ambitions of Lessing's character. Various models have been suggested for Tellheim, among them Lessing's deceased friend Ewald von Kleist, likewise a major, whose personality Nicolai saw reflected in Lessing's hero.[21] As several critics have noticed, Tellheim's melancholy and pessimism, his wounded arm, his modesty, his generous and honourable character and several other details are indeed reminiscent of Kleist (though not exclusively so).[22]

Most of the allusions so far mentioned serve chiefly to lend the play an authentic atmosphere and setting, but others, some of which have been identified only in recent times, are politically sensitive and at times implicitly critical of the Prussian regime. Among them is Tellheim's generous deed in Saxony, occasioned as it was by Frederick's draconian requisitions, whose justice it implicitly questions;[23] in accepting the minimum permissible contribution instead of pressing for more,

[16] L. to Karl Lessing, 10 February 1772. [17] D 223.
[18] Cf. Dyck 15; Hermsdorf 113.
[19] GEL: *MvB*, ed. Hildebrandt 9; Sasse (1993b) 88; Brenner 126.
[20] See the article 'Johann Paul von Werner' in ADB XLII, 63–6.
[21] D 223; cf. Braun I, 182.
[22] See, for example, E. Schmidt I, 457–8; GEL: *MvB*, ed. Hildebrandt, 15–16 and 129–40; cf. D 133–4.
[23] See Dombrowski 17–23.

Tellheim was contravening his orders to proceed 'with the utmost severity'.[24] His merciful act also reopens an issue over which Frederick had clashed with several of his subordinates, including his own brother, Prince Heinrich, who offered to resign after pleading unsuccessfully for greater leniency towards the Saxons.[25] Other officers, such as Majors Adolf von Baczko and Anton Rudolf Marschall von Bieberstein, advanced money of their own in the way that Tellheim does, and in Baczko's case, the Prussian authorities refused to reimburse him.[26] This sensitive topic is even alluded to in the fictitious letter which Tellheim receives from the king, who, explaining that his brother (Prince Heinrich) has enlightened him on the circumstances, implausibly commends the disbanded Tellheim's attitude and promises full repayment of his outlay. In addition to introducing the Prussian king for the first time into German drama, this reference pushes discretion to the limit: that Lessing escaped a ban on his work may be due simply to Frederick's indifference to German literature.

These critical innuendos are reinforced by a series of references to the plight of ex-soldiers and of the populace at large in post-war Prussia. Foremost among these is the fate of the so-called 'Free Batallions' (*Freibataillone*), over twenty of which, with additional squadrons of cavalry, were recruited during the war to supplement the regular army.[27] These units, to which deserters, convicts, and enemy prisoners were at times enlisted, were used for missions of doubtful legality and, like the punishment batallions of some twentieth-century armies, as frontal assault troops to minimize losses to the regulars whose bayonets goaded them on from behind; their officers, among them many fine soldiers, contained a high proportion of foreigners. Most of these formations, and in particular their officers, were disbanded without compensation in March 1763, and Berlin was soon full of impoverished officers without income or pension, some eventually reduced to menial occupations.[28] The lot of invalids, for whom provision was minimal, was even worse, for they were often unfit for employment.[29] Many were reduced to begging, although begging was officially prohibited, and Minna's reference to begging invalids and Tellheim's own (albeit exaggerated) description of himself as a beggar ensured that audiences were reminded of these unpalatable facts.[30] The inadequate facilities for the wounded are also alluded to: we learn that Tellheim's servant Just would have died in the field hospital if Tellheim had not paid for his medical care and convalescence.[31] And as for dependents of the fallen, all pensions were approved—or more commonly refused—by the king himself;[32] Tellheim's generosity to the widow of his late comrade Marloff illustrates the difficulties of one such family.

As for the populace at large, the topic of money, and financial insecurity, runs right through the play, in keeping with Tellheim's own predicament. Whether or not the date of Minna's arrival alludes to the measures taken by Frederick on that

[24] LM II, 239. [25] See Griebel 77–8; Dyck 74–8; Mehring 300. [26] Griebel 52.
[27] Griebel 134–67; Dyck 83–5; Dombrowski 34–9. [28] Cf. KGL 138.
[29] Griebel 228–37; Dyck 92–7. [30] LM II, 198 and 205.
[31] LM II, 183; cf. Griebel 179–80 and Dyck 89. [32] Griebel 192 and 224–8.

day to shore up the economy is by no means certain, although much critical effort has been put into demonstrating it.[33] Minna's brief reference to the collapse of this or that banking house certainly calls the financial crisis of that year to mind,[34] and the renewed crisis of 1766 would have been fresh in the public mind when the play appeared in 1767. None of this amounts, however, to a critique of the Prussian regime—especially since the crises in question originated outside Prussia. But such criticism is undoubtedly present in the landlord's interrogation of Minna and Franziska on their identities and the duration and purpose of their visit, for hotel landlords were key figures in Frederick's network of police informers.[35]

From all this, a negative picture of post-war Prussia emerges, and it is clear that Tellheim wishes to leave the country as soon as possible. The disbandment of his batallion has not affected his plans, for he had already decided to resign from the service. His motives for serving Frederick can scarcely have included Prussian patriotism, for he is not a Prussian citizen, but a German-speaking native of Courland (part of modern Latvia); like other ethnic Germans from Courland, he presumably supported the Prussian cause because his country's independence was currently threatened by Prussia's enemy Russia.[36] He twice expresses his disillusion in 'the great ones' (Frederick was already known as 'the Great'), and declares: 'Serving the great is dangerous, and not worth the trouble, duress, and humiliation it costs.'[37] One of the main functions of Frederick's letter is in fact to give Tellheim the opportunity of declining his offer of continued employment.

Like the critical allusions to conditions in Prussia, Tellheim's disillusionment has a strong basis in reality, for it reflects Lessing's own attitude in the winter of 1766–67 when he finished the play and prepared to leave for Hamburg. Indeed, Tellheim's character and circumstances are largely modelled on those of Lessing himself:[38] for Lessing, too, had recently left military service, he had endured a long struggle to obtain money owed to him, he faced acute financial difficulties, he was generous to a fault, he was prone to black despondency and cynical outbursts, and he reacted with fury (as in the Lange affair) to any aspersions on his integrity. Like Tellheim, he had come to Prussia by choice and is about to leave in disillusion; and Tellheim's fantasy of escape to a rural idyll, like Werner's plan for a new career in Persia (compare the Breslau *Alcibiades* fragment) is of the same order as Lessing's own dreams, in those years, of retreat from society or flight to the classical south. Even the happy end of the comedy has similar hints of wish-fulfilment. Towards the end of 1762, it will be recalled, Lessing had expressed a wish to marry, and it is a fair inference that Minna approximates to his own ideal of womanhood:[39] all of the women he is known to have admired, from Caroline Neuber to Eva König, Ernestine Reiske, and Elise Reimarus, were energetic and able individuals, with strong personalities and, like Minna, equal to traditionally male responsibilities. And as he

[33] GEL: *MvB*, ed. Hildebrandt, 8–9 and 119–29; Dyck 61–72; Griebel 242–9.
[34] LM II, 239.
[35] GEL: *MvB*, ed. Hildebrandt,171–3; cf. Griebel 249–52 and Dyck 21–4.
[36] See Whiton 97. [37] LM II, 237 and 254.
[38] Cf. GEL: *MvB*. Erläuterungen und Dokumente, ed. Hein, 72; E. Schmidt I, 456.
[39] Cf. Rattner 93.

pondered the fate of Saxony and the dire straits of his own family under the Prussian forces which he himself served, it is inconceivable that he felt no pangs of conscience. Tellheim's father is dead, and he turns away from the Prussian father-substitute (Frederick) to the Saxon Count Bruchsall, who accepts him as his son despite his Prussian uniform; Bruchsall is as much a projection of Lessing's sentiments as of Tellheim's.[40]

Is the play, then, a 'biting satire on the Frederician regime', as the Marxist critic Franz Mehring famously claimed in 1893, and as some others have since suggested?[41] If we consider only the allusions to contemporary events, Mehring's verdict has much to recommend it (although the term 'satire' is much too strong, for the only real satire in the play involves minor figures such as the landlord and the Frenchman Riccaut). Just as *Philotas* impugned Prussian militarism, so does *Minna von Barnhelm* criticize its negative consequences. But to present this criticism as the main substance of the play is to overlook its equally important positive elements. As Karl Lessing points out,[42] one of Lessing's aims was to present the class of soldiers in a more positive light than that in which they had regularly featured in drama since antiquity (as *miles gloriosus*, Bramarbas, Capitano, etc.): in other words, he treats them just as he had treated another marginalized group, the Jews, in his early comedy *The Jews*. Tellheim displays such virtues as bravery, loyalty, self-discipline, and compassion, and like Kleist and numerous other officers known to Lessing, he has developed and exercised them within the Prussian army. Other positive elements include the love and steadfast determination of the Saxon heroine, which enable Tellheim to recover that selfless humanity which drew her to him in the first place. The play's criticism of adverse conditions in Prussia was indeed conspicuous enough for the Prussian authorities to delay the first performances; but it was not these adverse conditions, but the human drama to which they give rise and which in turn rises above them, that delighted the audiences who flocked to see the play in Berlin. Significantly, these audiences included Prince Heinrich and other members of the royal family[43]—though not, of course, the monarch himself. It is with the dramatic qualities which made the play so enduringly successful that the following section will be concerned.

The first thing which struck early audiences and readers of the play was its unprecedented closeness to contemporary reality—in short, its realism;[44] the high degree of illusion which this generated helps to explain its powerful effect. This realism is largely the product of the detailed historical references discussed above, but other equally important factors are also involved. One of these is the individualized characterization: even those minor characters, such as Just and Riccaut, who are derived from comic archetypes are given an individual nuance and psychological depth which make them original and unique. As in all his later dramas, Lessing devotes much attention to motivation and psychological credibility: the causal

[40] Cf. Neumann 53. [41] Mehring 302; Dyck 7–9; Höhle 59; Durrani 645 and 647.
[42] KGL 137–8. [43] Karl Lessing to L., 11 April 1768.
[44] See, for example, B VI, 813, 820, 835–44.

sequence is as fully delineated here as he would shortly require (in the *Hamburg Dramaturgy*) of tragedy,[45] and the few exceptions to this rule are dictated by the conventions of comedy. Groupings, exits, and entrances are all arranged in the most natural possible manner.

The language of the play is also remarkably natural—much more so than in any of Lessing's previous plays. As one reviewer put it: 'The true and unaffected tone of colloquial speech prevails throughout.'[46] The long narratives and soliloquies, rhetorical declamations and set-piece repartee of the earlier plays give way to the spontaneous expression of personal thoughts and feelings; variations of tone and in forms of address reveal the characters' changing inner states and fluctuating relationships with the others, as well as their own position within the social hierarchy.[47] All departures from the standard colloquial register serve a positive function: the official jargon in Tellheim's account of the charges against him evokes the bureaucratic machinery of which he is the victim;[48] the military metaphors in which Minna and Franziska formulate their strategy underline their dominant role;[49] and the frequent metaphors of cards and gambling highlight the shifting fortunes of all the characters in this unstable post-war society.[50] Only rarely does the language of dramatic theory become obtrusive—a recurrent weakness in Lessing's dramas—as in Tellheim's remarks on the role of pity in the fifth act.[51] And as for Just's—by the standards of the time—scandalous use of the word *Hure* ('whore'), Lessing rightly defended it as appropriate to the uncouth character who uses it.[52] These few examples must suffice to illustrate the subtle artistry of Lessing's language, and the high degree of realism it achieves.

The play is tightly constructed. As usual, the unities are closely observed: the action lasts from early morning to late afternoon. The form is analytic, for the king's letter, resolving Tellheim's legal difficulties, is on its way before the action begins, and so too is Minna's guardian Count Bruchsall, who would have arrived in the ladies' company had he not been delayed by an accident on the way. As Goethe noticed,[53] the exposition is masterly. It is masterly in the natural manner in which the dialogue imparts all the essential information without any need for protracted narratives—that is, in its realism. The brilliant opening scene, in which the sleeping Just dreams of a fight with the landlord and wakens to renew the confrontation, tells us much about his master's predicament, whereupon Tellheim himself appears and completes the picture. The exposition is also exceptionally long: it extends well into the third act, and one essential piece of information, namely the nature and gravity of the offence of which Tellheim stands accused, is withheld until late in the fourth act.[54]

Other features of the play's organization are the symmetry, balance, and contrast of its constituent elements; in its preference for symmetrical and antithetical

[45] LM IX, 308, 317, 323; cf. Sasse (1993b) 8. [46] B VI, 821.
[47] See Metzger 196–208, 219, 232–6; also Pütz 213–14. [48] LM II, 239.
[49] LM II, 189. [50] Cf. Martini *passim* and Metzger 211–12.
[51] LM II, 250–1; cf. LM II, 342 (*Miss Sara Sampson*) and II, 450 (*Emilia Galotti*).
[52] LM II, 188 and XV, 61–2. [53] Conversation with Eckermann, 27 March 1831.
[54] See Michelsen (1990e) 248–9.

arrangement, it is akin to the contemporaneous *Laocoön*, in which parallels and contrasts between painting and poetry, space and time, induction and deduction are the main organizational principle. Thus the play's setting is alternately the public sphere of the inn's central hall (Acts I, III, and V) and the private sphere of Minna's adjoining room (Acts II and IV). The first act, which is devoted mainly to Tellheim, is balanced by the second, which deals mainly with Minna, and all five acts follow an alternating pattern of a major scene, or scenes, in the middle (Acts I, III, and V) and major scenes at the beginning and end (Acts II and IV). The two principal characters, both of whom are alluded to in the play's title and subtitle, contrast with and balance one another, and the characters as a whole tend to fall into contrasting pairs, each illuminating the other through their respective differences (e.g. Just and the landlord, Tellheim and Werner, Tellheim and Riccaut, and Minna and Franziska).[55] But few of these relationships are static: such equilibrium as there is is dynamic, and the relationships—not least that between Minna and Tellheim—are frequently adversarial: many scenes consist of argument, in which each party endeavours to modify the other's opinions and behaviour. Yet the conflict between Minna and Tellheim is not just a traditional battle of the sexes. It is also a conflict between opposing principles, between love and honour, private commitment and public legitimacy. Since interpretations of the play have regularly diverged according to which of the two characters is taken more seriously and which of the two principles is considered more valid, these characters and principles will now be examined—beginning with Tellheim, as the first of the two we encounter.

The first act shows us two of Tellheim's essential qualities: his outward rigidity or even gruffness, and his underlying humanity. His gruff demeanour, as it later emerges, is the product both of his harsh self-discipline—military service has taught him to suppress his feelings—and of his dismay at the unjust charge he faces. But a series of magnanimous acts, such as his decision not to dismiss his servant Just and his refusal to let the widow of a fallen comrade repay him a debt, soon confirms that he is basically a man of feeling, a true hero of sensibility whose efforts to conceal his moral sentiments simply throw them into sharper relief. It is a cruel irony that, by acting on his humane sentiments to help the Saxon populace, he has incurred the accusation of corruption and moral turpitude. This slight on his honour, as he sees it, makes his intended marriage impossible; but his fiancée Minna strongly disagrees, thereby initiating the conflict which forms the main action of the play. For Minna, all that matters is that she, her friends in Saxony, and Tellheim himself know that he is innocent, whereas Tellheim's preoccupation with his honour is in her opinion an irrational obsession.

The concept of honour is therefore a fundamental issue for interpreters of the play, and our opinion of the two main figures will vary according to how we assess it. For some, Tellheim's preoccupation with honour is a feudal anachronism, an expression of aristocratic pride with no real moral significance;[56] for others, it is an entirely justifiable concern on Tellheim's part with his good name and unblemished

[55] See Nagel 56.

[56] See, for example, Schlaffer 203; Barner et al. (1987) 261–2.

reputation, without which his—and his future wife's—position in society might well be intolerable. This latter view, first persuasively argued by Peter Michelsen in a seminal essay of 1973, has since been corroborated by historical research, and is now widely accepted.[57] For under the Prussian laws of the time, corrupt officers could reckon with a heavy fine, several years' hard labour, or even life imprisonment; and since a wife's possessions were legally the property of her husband, Tellheim would be putting Minna's own fortune at risk if he married her without first clearing his name. He has, until now, been required to remain in Berlin pending the outcome of his case, and although this restriction is lifted in the course of the play, he knows that leaving the country before his name is cleared would be construed as an admission of guilt, so that the slur on his reputation would remain. It consequently seems as if he has suddenly abandoned his principles when, on hearing Minna's claim that she has been disinherited, he at once proposes to marry her and leave the country. But this is not the case, for the same honour which previously prevented him from marrying Minna now requires him to do precisely that, even if his own reputation is still in doubt: he is obliged to save his fiancée from penury and ostracism, and his first priority must be to seek employment abroad in order to provide for her.[58] None of these considerations is peculiar to the aristocracy or to army officers. The honour which Tellheim seeks to preserve is simply his own good name before the law and in the eyes of society at large. It is also certain that Lessing shared and approved of this concern, given his furious public responses whenever he was accused of dishonourable acts or malicious intentions: significantly, he had himself invoked the concept of honour (*Ehre*) in rebutting Lange's accusation of blackmail.[59]

Such faults as Tellheim has do not therefore include his concern with honour, which is morally justified. It is rather the intensity and exclusivity of this concern, and his consequent neglect of other considerations, which lay him open to criticism. As Minna rightly notices, he takes an extreme and exaggerated view of his plight, describing himself as a cripple when he merely has a stiff arm, and as a beggar when he is short of money; in the same way, he ignores several positive signals that he is likely to be rehabilitated, behaving as if he were not only under suspicion but already condemned.[60] This extreme pessimism leads on two occasions to misanthropic outbursts and indictments of providence,[61] and there is even a hint that he has contemplated suicide.[62] Such attitudes, in the later eighteenth century, were viewed as classic symptoms of melancholy, and at one point, Minna explicitly applies the word *melancholisch* to him.[63] There certainly is an obsessive quality about him, and he is blind and deaf to all evidence which contradicts his delusions. Although he shares this obsessive quality with the heroes of numerous earlier comedies, the one he resembles most closely is that of Molière's *Misanthrope*, who, like Tellheim, is basically a serious and admirable figure.

[57] Michelsen (1990e) 227–8; cf. Sasse (1993a) 44–5; Sasse (1993b); Fick (2010) 291–2.
[58] Michelsen (1990e) 267–8. [59] LM V, 260; cf. XIII, 90, 101–2, 381–6.
[60] LM II, 220, 241, 245. [61] LM II, 240 and 258–9; cf. S. Busch 44.
[62] LM II, 185 ('die Pistolen […] hinter dem Bette'). [63] LM II, 204; cf. Schings (1977) 48.

In so far as Tellheim is a true melancholic, the above faults are rather the symptoms of an illness than inherent moral defects. They are indeed the result of a traumatic experience, of the unfounded accusation of corruption, and the remedy lies outside his control, for it must come from the same source as the accusation. But this does not account for all of Tellheim's weaknesses. His refusal to accept any help not only from his servant, but also from his close friend and former subordinate Werner, is not due, as has been claimed,[64] to the prohibition on borrowing by Prussian officers from lower ranks, for Tellheim is no longer a serving officer. It is of the same order as his refusal to accept help from Minna. Although he is always quick to help others in need, he is unable to accept help from others, however close they are to him, for he seems to regard such acceptance as an admission of weakness; and this in turn implies that he is unable to treat either his old friend or his fiancée as an equal. To this extent at least, Minna is quite right to accuse him of pride: he is happy to give, but too proud to take. Yet even his giving has serious limitations: so preoccupied was he with his own misfortune that he broke off all contact with his fiancée soon after the war ended, and failed to inform her either of his changed circumstances or of his decision not to proceed with their marriage. That very honour of which he so often speaks ought to have prevented him, as Minna rightly reminds him, from leaving in the lurch the honest girl who loved him—and to whom, moreover, he was officially engaged. He ought surely to have explained his problems to her and allowed her to share them, for she knows as well as he does that he is innocent. Instead, he accuses her of 'blind affection' (*blinde Zärtlichkeit*), despite the fact that her affection was inspired by his selfless help to others. For it is he, not she, who is blind to reality, and he rightly admits at the end that his judgement had been clouded by vexation and rage.[65] In sum, Tellheim is an honourable man; but his excessive preoccupation with his own misfortune, and his reluctance to accept any help from others, have caused him to underestimate and neglect the legitimate interests of others, and of Minna in particular.

Minna is the most attractive and memorable female character in all of Lessing's dramas. Her positive qualities are the obverse of the unhappy Tellheim's deficiencies. Her optimism, *joie de vivre* and sociability eventually transcend his pessimism, melancholy, and brooding introspection, and her single-minded defence of their mutual love ultimately prevails over his exclusive preoccupation with honour. What struck Lessing's contemporaries most forcibly about her was her bold self-confidence. Some approved of this—one reviewer described her as 'the finest Amazon'[66]—but it went down less well in conservative Austria,[67] and Herder, writing to his future wife, also had reservations about a woman who (if only in jest) could tell her fiancé: 'I am your commander, Tellheim; you need no other lord and master.'[68] Though she is only twenty, at a time when the age of women's majority in Prussia was twenty-four,[69] she brushes convention aside in her determined quest for her fiancé, and elects to receive him, at their first reunion, *en déshabillé*.[70] All this was

[64] Sasse (1993b) 55. [65] LM II, 250–1. [66] B VI, 813.
[67] B VI, 824–5 (Sonnenfels). [68] B VI, 827; LM II, 238.
[69] LM II, 194; Sasse (1993a) 49. [70] LM II, 201.

mildly shocking, but also refreshing. For although female initiative was familiar enough in comedy, Minna is neither a shrew in need of taming nor a schemer with designs on a rich simpleton—nor does she need to disguise herself as a man in order to attain her ends:[71] like the other figures in the play, she is a realistic character in a realistic contemporary setting. She has even been described as 'the first modern woman in German literature'.[72] But she is not truly emancipated in the modern sense, and she would scarcely be credible if she were: her guardian will shortly rejoin her, and she does not hesitate to play on Tellheim's pity to rekindle his love.[73] With her irresistible combination of playful humour, sharp intelligence, and rococo charm—she is a first cousin of Wieland's Musarion—she is nevertheless a formidable adversary in her battle of wills with the ex-warrior Tellheim. What must now be considered is the extent to which she is justified in her aims and in the means she adopts to attain them—more particularly in the intrigue she employs to defeat Tellheim's opposition.

Minna first conceives of her intrigue at the end of the third act, in response to Tellheim's refusal to accept her help. She does not implement it, however, until she is further provoked at the end of the following act, when Tellheim bursts into cynical laughter and rejects her renewed advances by accusing her of 'blind affection'. She thereupon rushes out in tears, leaving Franziska to relate the preconcerted story that her uncle has disinherited her for refusing to accept the husband of his choice—in short, because of her attachment to Tellheim. As Minna had predicted, this appeal to Tellheim's pity immediately releases his benevolent impulses. Like a man transformed, he urges Minna, at their next meeting, to marry him at once and leave the country, at which point the king's letter of rehabilitation arrives and all his problems appear to be solved. But Minna's intrigue now enters its decisive stage. She throws back at Tellheim his own earlier protestations, saying that their positions are once more unequal, for she is now dishonoured and he no longer is: she therefore cannot marry him. All these manoeuvres are underscored by the complex motif of the rings, the essence of which is that Minna, having secretly redeemed the engagement ring which Tellheim had pawned to pay his debts, returns it to him—thereby renewing their engagement, although he believes she is terminating it by returning her own engagement ring. This plunges him into even greater despair than his loss of honour had done, until Minna at last relents and confesses her subterfuge, whereupon her uncle arrives to complete the reconciliation.

This intrigue fulfils a threefold function. Firstly, it serves to release Tellheim's suppressed feelings by appealing to his pity. Secondly, by precipitating his despair and pushing him to an even greater emotional extremity than the loss of his honour had done, it eventually convinces Minna that he values his love for her at least as much as his public reputation.[74] And thirdly (as she said when she first devised the intrigue), it is designed to punish Tellheim and repay him in kind for his 'unforgivable pride' in refusing to let her help him. The reason why she keeps up

[71] Cf. Werner (1980b) 135–6.
[72] GEL: *MvB*, ed. Hildebrandt, 28.
[73] LM II, 227; cf. Fick (2010) 298–9.
[74] LM II, 260; cf. Eibl (1977) 178.

her deception even after the king's letter has removed all obstacles to their marriage is that the last two objectives have not yet been fully attained.[75]

As critics have long since noted, Minna's intrigue follows a pattern commonly encountered in satirical comedy, especially that of Molière and the Saxon comedy of types which followed his example.[76] It traditionally served, by turning the obsessive hero's delusions against him, to convince him of their absurdity and thereby cure him (as when the hero of Lessing's *The Misogynist* praises the very opinions he had condemned in a woman as soon as she repeats them in the disguise of a man). This led some commentators, including Goethe,[77] to conclude that Tellheim undergoes a radical change of attitude, likened by one critic to the liberation of Adrast, in Lessing's *The Jews*, from his anti-clerical prejudice.[78] But as already noted, far from abandoning his honourable principles, Tellheim sticks to them throughout, even when he offers to marry Minna and leave the country immediately. The change he undergoes is not a moral conversion,[79] but a release of suppressed emotions, an overcoming of melancholic self-immersion, a switch from passivity to activity, made possible by pity—always a key emotion for Lessing. This change of heart is based, of course, on a misapprehension, indeed on a deception, and if the couple were to marry on the strength of it, disaster would surely follow as soon as Tellheim discovered the truth. But that is no part of Minna's intention, and the change in Tellheim is made permanent not by her intrigue, but by the royal letter of rehabilitation which immediately follows her deception.[80] The close proximity of the two events gives the impression that Minna's intrigue, rather than Frederick's letter, is the decisive factor, thereby upholding the traditional function of the comic intrigue in appearance at least, if not in reality.

Not everyone has been convinced by this and other attempts by Lessing to render Minna's intrigue plausible, and some critics have condemned it as artificial and contrived.[81] It is certainly stretching credibility for Tellheim, who has just been informed by Minna that her guardian is on his way to repay the money owing to him and to bless their union, to accept Franziska's story a few minutes later that the same guardian has rejected Minna's choice of husband and completely disowned her. There is also a risk that Minna's deception and punishment of Tellheim may appear excessive and inappropriate for someone who, though perhaps too proud to accept his fiancée's help, is nevertheless the innocent victim of an accusation grave enough to warrant sympathy rather than additional torment. It is no doubt for this reason, as Peter Michelsen has shown,[82] that the gravity of the charges laid against Tellheim is revealed at so late a stage (in the fourth act), and that both Minna and the audience are led to believe, up to this point, that Tellheim's obsession with honour is due only to injured pride at the disbandment of his regiment; the impact of his revelation is also reduced by the technical jargon in which he describes the charges against him. It might, however, be objected that he has already outlined

[75] Cf. Hass 38; Giese (1986) 35.
[76] See, for example, Hinck 291; Michelsen (1990e) 262–3.
[77] Goethe HA IX, 282.
[78] P. Weber (1970) 34.
[79] Cf. Albrecht (1997) 58.
[80] See Harrison 26 and 56.
[81] Cf. E. Schmidt I, 462–3.
[82] Michelsen (1990e) 241–6.

these charges in a letter to Minna which she admits to having read. But even this objection is taken care of: Minna had looked in his letter only for confirmation of his love, and refused to believe that anyone could transform his noble deed into a crime.[83] Besides, no sooner has Tellheim explained how dire his predicament is than we learn that the charges against him have been dropped: that is, we scarcely have time to realize how threatened he is before the threat is removed. All this allows Minna to implement her intrigue without seeming unduly callous; and if she had fully realized how serious his plight was, she would not have implemented her intrigue at all and consequently had no hand in his recovery from depression.

The expedients employed by Lessing to minimize the seriousness of Tellheim's predicament also serve to enhance the parallel between Tellheim's real dishonour and Minna's feigned dishonour when their situations are apparently reversed. But as many commentators have noticed,[84] the two situations are quite different, for Minna's supposed disinheritance and consequent disgrace can easily be rectified by her marriage to Tellheim, whereas Tellheim's real dishonour can be rectified only by the intervention of the king himself. But the function of the apparent parallel is not to mislead us in this way. Its function is, on the one hand, aesthetic: the old comic device of reversed situations retains its dramatic effectiveness, as the response of audiences for over two centuries confirms. But more important, in claiming that her invented predicament is parallel to the real predicament in which Tellheim recently found himself, she is asserting her right to equal treatment: if he was too proud to accept her help, she will not accept his either. And although Tellheim rejects this claim on the grounds that the weaker sex is more in need of help than the stronger, she reaffirms her claim to equality shortly afterwards by declaring: 'Let this be a token, my dear husband, that you shall never play a trick on me without my repaying you in kind.'[85]

Two further points emerge from this analysis of Minna's intrigue and Lessing's elaborate measures to render it plausible. The first is that, as usual, the problems which required such ingenious solutions were of his own making: for once again, he expected his play to perform two quite distinct functions—in this case, to entertain in a morally edifying manner with the help of a traditional comic model, and at the same time to criticize some of the gravest social consequences of the Seven Years War. Secondly, it should be borne in mind that, in this particular drama, many of the problems just discussed have come to light only through close reading by generations of critics: in performance, the structure which contains them has generally proved robust enough to convince audiences of the play's integrity.

To conclude on Minna and her relationship with Tellheim: despite the greater seriousness of Tellheim's initial plight, the two characters are very evenly balanced, and their roles are of equal weight in the play.[86] Neither is faultless, for Tellheim's excessive self-absorption is matched by Minna's readiness to interpret as a flaw in

[83] LM II, 225 and 239.
[84] For example, Michelsen (1990e) 264–5; Sasse (1993b) 111.
[85] LM II, 257 and 261.
[86] Cf. Boa 35; Strohschneider-Kohrs (1999b) 113–14.

Tellheim's character what is largely the result of a traumatic experience: in short, she underestimates the magnitude of his misfortune. She upholds the rights of love, while he upholds the rights of honour and legitimacy. But while each of them is wholly committed to one valid principle, they both tend to overlook the equal importance, and complementarity, of the other.

As for the minor characters, several of them are descended from traditional comic types. Just retains a good deal of Harlequin, Franziska has much in common with Lisette, the soldier of fortune Werner is an updated and more restrained version of Bramarbas, and the French cardsharper Riccaut comes from the same family as the parasites of ancient comedy, Centlivre's Marquess of Hazard, and Holberg's Jean de France, with hints of Capitano thrown in. Early audiences welcomed these well-loved archetypes in their new and more realistic guise, and Werner, after Ackermann's memorable performance of 1767, was especially popular.[87] In Lessing's hands, all of these characters become fully developed individuals; but their chief function is to illuminate the main characters, whether by way of reflection, prefiguration, or contrast. To cite only a few examples: Minna's donation of money to Riccaut echoes Tellheim's generosity to Widow Marloff (thereby indicating that she shares his generous inclinations); Riccaut's attempts to 'correct fortune' by cheating at cards foreshadow Minna's deception of Tellheim shortly afterwards;[88] Just's story of his rescue of a dog prefigures (and influences) Tellheim's decision not to dismiss Just, which in turn prefigures his own change of heart towards Minna; the relationship of Werner and Franziska is a lighthearted counterpart to that of Tellheim and Minna; and Riccaut is a disbanded officer whose condition of dishonourable beggary represents all that Tellheim fears and successfully avoids.[89] This dense network of reflections and contrasts both enriches the play's meaning and strengthens its internal cohesion.

Riccaut has attracted more comment than any of the other minor characters, for critics have disagreed both on the relevance of the Riccaut scene and on the targets of its many satirical allusions. Some early reviewers saw the scene as superfluous, and it was omitted in many early productions (partly because few actors felt able to cope with the strange mixture of French and German in Riccaut's dialogue).[90] Most critics share Franziska's view of him as a rogue, although one at least shares Minna's charitable assumption that his hardluck stories may be true;[91] but since his professed rank in the army and his allegedly intimate contacts with the government are soon shown to be inventions, it would seem that Franziska was right. Suggestions of a real-life model for Riccaut range from Lessing's Berlin acquaintance Prémontval (Riccaut's titles include the name *Prêt-au-val* or *-vol*)[92] to Frederick the Great himself (on account of Riccaut's poor French and even poorer German),[93] but all are speculative and unconvincing: Prémontval had spoken at length in the Berlin Academy against *le faux goût*

[87] See Labus 8 and 16.
[88] Strohschneider-Kohrs (1999b) 103–4.
[89] Cf. Fink (1983) 46.
[90] Cf. Braun I, 184, 192, 199, 207, 324, 328.
[91] Giese (1984), 110 and 113.
[92] Baldensperger *passim*.
[93] Durrani 647; cf. Giese (1984) 109.

français in Germany,[94] and more than a little imagination is required to discern the victor of Rossbach behind the cringing and obsequious Frenchman. Apart from his structural function as a counterpoint to other characters and as the focus of the recurrent motifs of chance, fortune, and gambling, Riccaut adds authentic local colour as a travesty of the many French adventurers in eighteenth-century Germany.[95] He is also one of the many satirical rejoinders by German writers to Dominique Bouhours' notorious pronouncement on the crudity of the German language,[96] and perhaps also a riposte to Voltaire's *Candide* and its dull-witted hero.

Another contentious issue is that of the play's genre. Lessing himself describes it as a comedy (*Lustspiel*), and few have explicitly rejected that designation. But many have discerned elements of tragedy in it, and the form of comedy was itself in transition during Lessing's lifetime. To define the play's generic character is accordingly no straightforward matter.

As already noted, Lessing employed as a structural device the kind of intrigue commonly encountered in the Saxon comedy of types, at the same time abandoning its traditional didactic function whereby a monomaniac hero—and indirectly the public—was converted from vice to virtue.[97] Although *Minna* was sometimes interpreted in the latter sense, such *châtiment de la raideur* was not part of Lessing's purpose: Tellheim is a thoroughly virtuous character; what looks like an irrational obsession turns out to have a genuine basis; and Lessing expressly denied that the punishment or reform of a vicious character is the purpose of comedy.[98] The stock characters he took over from the *commedia dell'arte* were similarly refined and individualized, and apart from the opening scenes with Just and the landlord, the element of farce is virtually absent.

The play nevertheless has strong affinities with mainstream European comedy. The setting at the inn, the verbal duels of master and servant, and the parallel love relationships at higher and lower social levels are all traditional features. More important, the mood and tendency of the play are optimistic from the moment Minna appears at the beginning of the second act: she is confident from the start that her mission will be successful, and there are frequent hints that Tellheim's difficulties will soon be over and that Minna's guardian will shortly lend his support. Even in Tellheim's darkest moments, Minna's optimism and faith in providence remain undiminished; and with characters like herself and Franziska taking the initiative throughout, it is inconceivable that the play can end other than happily. It ends, in fact, with the prospect of two marriages—and marriage, of course, is the definitive telos of comedy, just as death is of tragedy.

Other motifs and themes in the play have a long comic ancestry. The ring motif occurs in Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice* and in comedies by Farquar, La Motte,

[94] Scheffers 260; Herder later included Prémontval's lecture in his *Humanitätsbriefe* (SWS XVIII, 152–7).
[95] See on this Fink (1983) 47; Grimm (1996) 393.
[96] See B VI, 1046; also LM VII, 15 and X, 127.
[97] Cf. Steinmetz (1976) 144–5.
[98] LM X, 200–1.

and numerous others. (Lessing's version, which is unusually complex, looks forward to the parable of the rings in his own *Nathan the Wise*.) The theme of money, which is omnipresent in the play (one critic has counted 102 monetary references),[99] is not, as some have suggested,[100] a manifestation of emergent bourgeois consciousness or of economic determinism, but a recurrent topic in European comedy from Aristophanes' *Plutus* and Plautus' *Trinummus* to Molière's *L'Avare* and Gay's *Beggar's Opera*. In Lessing's *Minna*, its function, on a realistic level, is to underline the dire straits to which ex-soldiers like Tellheim are reduced in the economic chaos of post-war Prussia. But more important, it also serves—as it does again in *Nathan the Wise*—as a symbolic expression of the give and take in human relationships,[101] from Tellheim's initial act of generosity to his acceptance, at the end, of Werner's money to safeguard his improvident friend's interests. Money is also the obvious medium for those contests of magnanimity in which the play abounds.

Such contests of magnanimity are, of course, a regular feature of sentimental comedy, and although the range of that term is too narrow to fit *Minna von Barnhelm*, it does apply to individual scenes and incidents. Just's story of the poodle is a quintessential example of literary sensibility, and the Widow Marloff scene is also a classic of its kind. But the play contains no vestige of the priggish monologues of Gellert or of Sara Sampson's lachrymose effusions: sentimentality is a secondary element, and as such, it is correspondingly more effective.

One essential element of comedy remains to be mentioned, namely laughter. In order to justify her laughter at Tellheim for describing himself as dishonoured, a cripple, and a beggar, Minna invokes the theory, traditionally applied to satirical comedy, that all exaggeration is inherently ridiculous.[102] But her laughter quickly stops when Tellheim explains how serious his position really is, and his own cynical laughter banishes all trace of amusement: in other words, the exaggeration theory does not work when applied to Tellheim. Delusion is another traditional source of amusement, as in the opening scene in which the sleeping Just dreams he is fighting the landlord. But applied to Tellheim, who is repeatedly deluded both by himself and by Minna, it is again no longer amusing: in short, the character of Tellheim is inherently incompatible with the comic structures in which he is placed. Apart from the landlord and Riccaut, none of the characters—not even the rough and ready Just—is intrinsically comic, for all of them are morally admirable individuals. The main source of comedy in this play is rather comedy of situation, beginning with Just's dream and his acceptance of schnapps while simultaneously reviling the donor. Above all, the repeated and ever more rapid reversals of situation generate an increasing comic momentum, from Tellheim's initial rush towards and abrupt retreat from Minna and Minna's switches from pursuit to withdrawal and back again, to their complete reversal of roles towards the end and—perhaps most amusing of all—Tellheim's constant changes of instructions to Werner, from whom he alternately refuses to accept and urgently demands large sums of money. All

[99] Durrani 641. [100] See, for example, Schlaffer 208; Seeba (1973) 78.
[101] See Graham 270–5; Göbel (1971) 179–80. [102] LM II, 238–9.

these examples of volte-face are highly effective on stage, and as their pace and frequency increase towards the end, the effect is both hilarious and surprisingly moving.[103]

To the elements of earlier comedy so far mentioned, Lessing adds two newer ones, namely a variety of realism reminiscent of Diderot, and a concern with threats to happiness more often associated with tragedy than with comedy. The role and provenance of these elements will now be considered.

As at least one early reviewer noted,[104] *Minna von Barnhelm* has affinities with Diderot's *genre sérieux* and with his own two dramas in that genre. As Diderot had recommended, Lessing's play deals with private life in a realistic manner; it portrays its characters in what Diderot calls their 'condition' in society (Tellheim, Werner, and Just are very obviously ex-soldiers); and it is more concerned with the portrayal of virtue than with satirizing vice. The overall effect, in keeping with Diderot's recommendations, is to create a higher degree of illusion than any previous dramatic form had attained, and Lessing employs a whole series of measures in order to achieve it. His realistic characterization and natural and expressive dialogue have already been noted; in performance, their impact is further enhanced by the natural style of acting which he had sought to encourage since the mid-1750s. To this end, he makes much more use of stage directions than in his earlier dramas, almost doubling the number employed in the lengthy *Miss Sara Sampson*. Many of them deal with body language and expressive gesture, to which Diderot had attached great importance, and others offer guidance on dress and personal appearance. In sum, Lessing's new realism is greatly influenced by his study of Diderot.[105]

But there are major differences between Lessing's play and Diderot's dramas. With their tirades of sentimental virtue, *Le Fils naturel* and *Le Père de famille* have much more of the *comédie larmoyante* about them than does Lessing's *Minna*, in which the classic tradition of *comédie gaie* is still very much alive. And besides, Lessing's realism extends beyond the scenes of domestic life with which Diderot is exclusively occupied to include criticism of the public sphere; in this respect, *Minna von Barnhelm* looks forward to the social realism of the Sturm und Drang, and indeed to Beaumarchais' subversive *Mariage de Figaro*.[106]

As for the tragic elements which critics—particularly in Germany—have repeatedly claimed to detect in the play,[107] it does seem at two points that the planned marriage of Tellheim and Minna is doomed (II.9 and IV.6); on the second of these occasions, the full extent of Tellheim's difficulties is finally revealed. But we have already seen the lengths to which Lessing went in order to diminish the impact of the latter. Besides, temporary reverses of this kind, however serious, were considered perfectly acceptable in the comedy of Lessing's age: as one early reviewer put it, 'certain sad [*traurige*] scenes may very well occur in a comedy without the least

[103] Cf. Carroll 155–6 [104] B VI, 814. [105] See Worvill 177–8.
[106] Cf. Hinck 297.
[107] See, for example, Steinmetz (ed.) GELs *MvB*. Dokumente zur Rezeptionsgeschichte, xvi and 204.

prejudice to its essential character'.[108] Nor does it greatly help to call the play a tragi-comedy, for Lessing's own comments on that hybrid form are inconclusive and ambiguous (he describes it as a 'Gothic invention'), and the very term 'tragi-comedy' gives greater prominence to the tragic component than Lessing's play warrants.[109] What, if anything, the play's metaphysical assumptions have in common with tragedy will be discussed below.

The above findings are not incompatible with Lessing's theoretical pronouncements on comedy. As early as 1754, it will be recalled, he had concluded that true comedy should avoid the extremes of satire and sentimentality in the interests of realism.[110] He again rejects satire in the *Hamburg Dramaturgy*, and outlines a part-didactic, part-therapeutic theory of comedy according to which we learn, by cultivating our perception of the ridiculous, to see through and avoid those behavioural excesses which invite ridicule; the act of laughter also helps us to maintain a healthy and rational sense of proportion.[111] He may well have had *Minna von Barnhelm* in mind when he formulated these ideas, for they echo Minna's own words: 'Can we not be very serious even when laughing? Dear Major, laughter does more than vexation to preserve our rationality.'[112]

To conclude on the question of genre: *Minna von Barnhelm* incorporates, develops, and modifies a range of existing tendencies in European comedy. It combines them with serious reflections on contemporary social and political problems, and succeeds in holding its comic and serious elements in a sometimes precarious balance. It is a work of transition, a brilliant but unstable synthesis, and as such, it was and remains unique.

One final aspect of Lessing's comedy is crucial to its interpretation, namely the two *deus ex machina* figures who intervene in the final act to ensure a happy ending. In conjunction with the many references to gaming, contingency, and fortune and with Tellheim's and Minna's reflections on doubt, optimism, and providence, they introduce a metaphysical dimension rarely encountered in comedy. At the same time, their presence in what is otherwise a thoroughly realistic drama raises problems of coherence and credibility.

As Horst Steinmetz points out, the happy endings of comedy regularly pose a dilemma: either they detract from the seriousness of the preceding conflict, or the seriousness of the conflict renders them implausible.[113] The latter criticism is more commonly aimed at *Minna von Barnhelm*.[114] When a dramatic conflict is resolved by an agency which has played no part in the preceding action, that agency—by analogy with ancient drama—is often described as a *deus ex machina*. In modern times, this term has negative associations not just in tragedy (as it already had for Aristotle) but also in comedy, for as soon as realistic conventions are in place, we expect the resolution to develop naturally out of the conflict itself; in other words, we expect the hero and/or heroine to have a hand in their own salvation—especially when, as in Lessing's play, an elaborate intrigue has been set in motion for that very

[108] B VI, 816. [109] LM X, 82; cf. Hinck 259 and 301.
[110] LM VI, 51–2; see also Ch. 2, p. 48 above. [111] LM IX, 302–4. [112] LM II, 238.
[113] Steinmetz (1976) 139–40. [114] Cf., for example, Dyck xxiii; Michelsen (1990e) 269.

purpose. But Lessing was still sufficiently attached to older conventions of comedy not to regard an external resolution as inherently unacceptable (and as will shortly be seen, he was not alone in this view). He is also careful to ensure that the external agents in his play are historically credible figures, namely Frederick the Great and a relative of the Saxon heroine. Their interventions are nevertheless implausible, not so much because they come from outside or from these particular individuals, but because they come in quick succession and at exactly the right moment, and because the form they take is highly improbable. As already noted, the real Frederick would never have applauded Tellheim's action, and it is highly unlikely that the Saxon Estates to whom Tellheim had lent his money would send a personal emissary to reimburse him,[115] given that they had agreed to repay him through the Prussian authorities. In short, these episodes contain a strong element of make-believe.

This is not to deny that they serve important functions. In dramatic terms, the parallel interventions serve to underline the equal status of the two figures to whose aid they come. Besides, Count Bruchsall is Minna's legal guardian: his approval of her match is essential, as is his presence on her journey, which she could not have undertaken on her own without scandal and personal risk. Frederick, however, is more problematic, because his action is so out of character. Lessing no doubt relished the ironic reflection on the real Frederick's policies which this imputed action implied. But more important, the utopian role he is accorded may represent an act of hope on Lessing's part, analogous to Kant's flattering portrait of Frederick in the essay *What is Enlightenment?*, in which the Prussian king is portrayed as tolerance incarnate and the predominant figure of his century.[116] In short, if this is not how Frederick actually was, it is certainly how his most enlightened subjects wished to see him.

This interpretation is borne out by the metaphysical optimism and appeals to providence with which Minna counters Tellheim's loss of faith in a beneficent world order. It is true that Tellheim's doubts derive support from the many references, explicit and implicit, to fortune, chance, and contingency in the play. But these doubts, and the blasphemous laughter in which he expresses them, are a familiar literary topos, encountered in Klopstock's *Messiah* and several other works of the period.[117] Such nihilistic sentiments were associated in particular with melancholy, and it is already plain that Tellheim suffers from that condition. The same condition is responsible for his misanthropic outbursts, as when he declares: 'All goodness is dissimulation, all helpfulness deceit', and 'Bile [*Galle*] is the best thing we have.'[118] This, too, is a topos: Dorval, the hero of Diderot's *Le Fils naturel* and a self-confessed melancholic, likewise exclaims: 'I hate the society of men and feel that peace awaits me far from their company.'[119] In short, Tellheim's misanthropy and doubts concerning providence are not serious propositions: they are characteristic symptoms of mental unbalance.

[115] Cf. Bauer (1993) 169–70.
[116] Kant AA VIII, 40–2.
[117] Cf. S. Busch 27 and 44–7.
[118] LM II, 259.
[119] Diderot, ed. GEL (see 'L's translations' in Bibliography) 57–8 and 60.

Similarly, the omnipresence of chance in the play does not betoken a Kleistian world in which all is uncertainty, as some have claimed.[120] Comedy, in the eighteenth century, is the home of (ultimately beneficent) chance and coincidence; it is a *jeu de l'amour et du hasard*, to quote the title of Marivaux' play. And for the eighteenth-century optimists, chance is nothing more than providence in disguise, as in Pope's memorable lines:[121]

> All Nature is but Art, unknown to thee;
> All Chance, Direction, which thou canst not see;
> All Discord, Harmony not understood;
> All partial Evil, universal Good […]

It is a nice irony to find a recent critic arguing, on the basis not of Leibnizian optimism but of modern chaos theory, that the omnipresence of chance in Lessing's comedies supports rather than undermines his belief in ultimate order, given that what we normally describe as chaos both creates and sustains orderly systems.[122]

The belief in providence in human affairs must nevertheless remain a faith and hope rather than a demonstrable certainty. We may not share this belief today, but Lessing and most of his contemporaries certainly did in the decades before Kant's critical philosophy: as Mendelssohn later recalled, Lessing himself declared, on first encountering Voltaire's *Candide*, that he would write a sequel to show how all the evils Voltaire had enumerated were ultimately for the best.[123] So Minna's prophecy that 'providence […] will always recompense the honest man'[124] is borne out by events—and Frederick and Bruchsall are its agents.

In this conviction, Lessing is speaking for, as well as to, his age. Diderot's Dorval undergoes the same crisis of faith as Tellheim, describing humanity as a plaything of chance, but recovering his belief in providence through his future wife's metaphysical reassurances;[125] and his faith is rewarded when his long-lost father returns to bless his children's double marriage. As these similarities suggest, *Minna von Barnhelm* owes more to Diderot than has hitherto been acknowledged. But there is an important difference: the tension in Diderot's play between the otherwise realistic action and the providential arrival of the father is augmented, in Lessing's case, by the choice of Frederick, at the end of a catastrophic war which he himself had unleashed, as an agent of providence. This choice is ironic, but at the same time irenic: Frederick's beneficent intervention gives the play a conciliatory quality, which Goethe saw as promoting national unity.[126] The metaphors of gaming (*Spiel*) which recur throughout the play—Minna describes 'the king' at one point as a poorer bet than 'the queen' (i.e. herself)—confirm that Lessing, too, was gambling on a better future.

After the play was published at Easter 1767, six months elapsed before its first performance. The delay was caused by the Prussian envoy in Hamburg, Johann

[120] See, for example, S. Busch 47; Pütz 225, 231–2, 240–241.
[121] Pope, *Essay on Man* II, 10; cf. Lamport (1981a) 4–5. [122] Cf. Martinson *passim*.
[123] D 581. [124] LM II, 240. [125] Diderot (as in n. 119 above) 33 and 59–61.
[126] Goethe HA IX, 281–2.

Julius von Hecht, who feared the wrath of the Berlin government and asked the Hamburg Senate to ban the play, which they duly did.[127] Lessing's representations were fruitless, but further enquiries indicated that Finckenstein, the Prussian minister responsible for such matters, had issued no corresponding instruction.[128] Confirmation was eventually received that Berlin would raise no objections, and the Hamburg Senate lifted the ban on 23 September, enabling the first performance to go ahead on the last day of that month.[129]

The first Berlin performance, which was also delayed by the censors, took place on 21 March 1768. As Karl Lessing explained, the problem was that 'it was permissible to reason and write dramas about God, but not about the government and police'.[130] It is likely that the authorities took exception to the landlord's interrogation of Minna and Franziska and to the unjust accusations made against Tellheim by the Prussian government; but they may also have been unhappy at Lessing's generally negative portrait of post-war Prussia. The king's letter may, however, have helped Lessing's case, for although it presents Frederick in an implausibly flattering light, the censor could hardly complain that the king was portrayed too favourably. At all events, no alterations to the text were demanded—although in the Hamburg production, Werner's name was changed to 'Weller' to avoid confusion with the real Paul von Werner.[131]

The play's reception, both by reviewers and the theatre public, was overwhelmingly positive from the start.[132] (Haller's sour and laconic notice is untypical,[133] presumably because he was still smarting from Lessing's critique of his poetry in *Laocoön*.) The Hamburg version was performed on sixteen occasions, some of them in Hanover, in 1767 and 1768,[134] which made it the most frequently performed play in the short-lived National Theatre's repertoire. Ekhof played Tellheim, but even his customary virtuosity could not wholly compensate for his age (he was nearly fifty) and short stature;[135] Ackermann (who would put on a new production with his own company in 1769)[136] stole the show as Werner. Further productions followed before the end of 1767 in Frankfurt am Main, Wetzlar, Vienna, and Leipzig. In Vienna, Minna was played by Christiane Friederike Huber (the former Christiane Lorenz whom Lessing had admired in his student days), and despite shortening and bowdlerization, the play soon established itself in the Viennese repertoire; it was among the first dramas performed by the new German National Theatre which Joseph II inaugurated in 1776.[137]

The most successful of all the early productions was that of Döbbelin's company in Berlin, which gave nineteen performances in March and April 1768.[138] The production saved Döbbelin, who himself played Werner, from financial disaster,[139] for he had been steadily losing his audiences to the *Singspiele* of the French theatre.

[127] See L. to Nicolai, 4 August 1767. [128] See L. to Karl Lessing, 21 September 1767.
[129] D 230–2; GEL: *MvB*. Erläuterungen und Dokumente, ed. Hein, 51. [130] KGL 139.
[131] On the problem of censorship see Labus 12–14; Griebel 277–303.
[132] See B VI, 812–49; GEL: *MvB*. Erläuterungen und Dokumente, ed. Hein, 52–76; Labus 10.
[133] B VI, 823. [134] U. Schulz 18–30. [135] See Labus 18.
[136] E. Schmidt I, 466. [137] Labus 28–33 and 66.
[138] U. Schulz 24. [139] Griebel 271.

Minna played to full houses, with large numbers turned away and successive calls for repeat performances; reports by Döbbelin himself, Karl Lessing, and Anna Luise Karsch confirm that the reception was rapturous.[140] Here, as in other cities most affected by the Seven Years War, the play's topical appeal was especially strong, and in Leipzig, there were concurrent productions by Koch's company and by a group of amateurs, among whom the young Goethe acted the ever-popular part of Werner.[141] Characters from the play were depicted on porcelain, and Chodowiecki's twelve engravings of selected scenes launched his career as a literary illustrator.[142] A spate of dramatic imitations, most of them *Soldatenstücke* (soldier plays), followed over the next few decades.[143]

The play's popularity was not confined to the German-speaking countries. Two French translations appeared during the 1770s, the second of which, a simplified version by Rochon de Chabannes, was performed in Paris in 1774 and repeated in 1778 and 1780.[144] A Danish version was performed in Copenhagen in 1774,[145] and James Johnstone's English translation, *The Disbanded Officer, or the Baroness of Bruchsal*, had a successful run at the London Haymarket Theatre in 1786, becoming the first play by a German author to appear on the English stage.[146] By the end of the century, translations into Dutch, Italian, Polish, Russian, and Swedish had also been published.[147]

In Germany itself, the play's popularity waned in the later 1770s as its topical relevance became less transparent.[148] But in the following century, this very circumstance facilitated its canonization as a classic of German nationalism.[149] As Lessing's criticisms of the Prussian regime became less obvious to later ages, his ironic tribute to Frederick looked increasingly like a real one, just as *Philotas* now passed for a tribute to Prussian patriotism. *Minna* became a standard text in Prussian schools, where it served to reinforce nationalistic values.[150] Franz Mehring's Marxist refutation of these claims in 1893 had little impact at the time, but it did help later readers to rediscover the play's subversive content after 1945.[151]

Minna von Barnhelm flourished throughout the twentieth century as a theatre classic and at times as an object of parody. Memorable productions included those of Max Reinhardt in 1904 and 1916;[152] it functioned as a hypotext and object of allusion in Carl Sternheim's *Das Fossil*;[153] film versions were made in 1940 and 1962;[154] and Friedrich Dürrenmatt produced a parodistic version in 1970, in which the events lose all rationality and historical basis and the characters are motivated purely by financial interest.[155] Remarkably, the play remained equally popular

[140] B VI, 846–8; Labus 42–3; Dvoretzky I, 21–2. [141] U. Schulz 21–2; Labus 20–1.
[142] Labus 44–8; B VI, 849. [143] See Stockmeyer *passim*; Werner (1984d) 68–9.
[144] Labus 57–8. [145] Ibid. 56. [146] Schade (1997) *passim*.
[147] Seifert (L.-Bibliographie) Nos 2294, 2199, 2318, 2403, 2427; Labus 60.
[148] Labus 62; cf. GEL: *MvB*, Erläuterungen und Dokumente, ed. Hein, 39.
[149] Cf. Werner (1984d) 73–5.
[150] Barner et al. (1987) 278; but see Gansel/Siwczyk (eds) (2011) 22–3, who see this interpretation as one-sided and over-simplified.
[151] Cf. Steinmetz (ed.), GELs *MvB*. Dokumente zur Rezeptionsgeschichte 130–41.
[152] Labus 89. [153] Cf. Nölle *passim*. [154] Nagel 49. [155] Raschdau 136–60.

in both halves of the divided Germany, with interpretations ranging from light-hearted comedy to aggressive political satire.[156]

To conclude: the tension between traditional form and critical realism in *Minna von Barnhelm* has in the long run worked to the play's advantage. Although it has created problems for the critics, this tension has also given the drama a breadth and richness of meaning which have enabled generations of readers and theatregoers to respond to it positively, and in very different ways, for well over two centuries. Its structure has proved sufficiently strong and flexible to hold its diverse elements in balance and at the same time to provide a satisfying dramatic experience. It is a monument to its age, and a masterly work of art. Georg Lukács was not far wrong when he described it, with its light and elegant structure, its sombre undertones and serene rationality, as a dramatic equivalent of Mozart's music.[157]

[156] Cf. Piedmont *passim*; Sasse (1993b) 5–7. [157] Lukács 447.

12

Hamburg and the National Theatre

Lessing's Hamburg years mark a decisive turning point in his life. The publication of *Laocoön* in 1766, followed by that of *Minna von Barnhelm* in 1767, set the seal on his literary reputation. Now a nationally recognized figure, he had amply fulfilled one of his two main ambitions. For in 1749, it will be recalled, he had told his father that he hoped to earn the title of a German Molière—and it can safely be assumed that he soon aspired to comparable eminence as a critic and scholar. By the late 1760s, these aims were fully accomplished: he was now the best-known dramatist, the most feared and respected critic, and one of the leading authorities on classical antiquity in Germany. On the other hand, he was still no closer to realizing that second ambition which had prompted his move to Breslau seven years earlier, namely his desire for financial independence. In Hamburg, he would make one last attempt to attain this end, and the result would define the pattern of his remaining years.

As early as 1749, Lessing had named Hamburg—doubtless because of its theatrical associations—as one of the cities to which he might eventually move from Berlin.[1] In 1756, he spent some six weeks there on his journey to Holland with Winckler, meeting Klopstock and the actor Konrad Ekhof in the course of his stay. When, in November 1766, the management of the projected National Theatre in Hamburg approached him, through intermediaries, with an invitation to join in that enterprise, his disillusion with Prussia ensured a favourable response. He made an exploratory visit to Hamburg in the second half of December, and by the time he returned to Berlin in early January, he had resolved to depart from the Prussian capital as soon as *Minna von Barnhelm* was completed.[2] He moved to Hamburg early in April, and remained there, apart from occasional excursions, for the next three years.

In the 1760s, Hamburg was a crowded city, bounded to the south by its thronging harbours on the Elbe estuary and defended on the landward side by the Alster lake and a semicircle of moats and walls, still patrolled by members of an archaic city watch who closed the gates each night.[3] Through the four parishes of the older, eastern quarter ran winding canals and dark, malodorous streets, in which pedestrians were forced to retreat into doorways whenever vehicles passed. The houses, some of stone but most with timber frames of variable regularity, stood from three

[1] To Justina Salome Lessing, 20 January 1749.
[2] To Karl Lessing, 22 December 1766; see also L. to Gleim, 1 February 1767.
[3] Kleine Charakteristik 77–8; cf. Mylius, Tagebuch 5 (1786) 166.

to six storeys high, their gable ends facing the street.[4] The so-called New Town in the western half, developed since the sixteenth century, was more open and airy; it formed the single parish of St Michael, whose great church of that name had only recently been built (its tower, still a landmark today, was not completed until 1786).

Thanks to its strong fortifications, Hamburg escaped the ravages of the Thirty Years War, and its trade continued to flourish. Denmark, which had long claimed sovereignty over it, besieged it unsuccessfully in 1686, but this ancient feud was finally settled in 1768, when Hamburg paid the Danes a substantial sum in return for formal recognition of its status as a free Imperial city. After Vienna and Berlin, it was now the largest city in the Empire, with a population, in the late 1760s, of almost 100,000.[5] The city's government, however, was far from representative, for less than a quarter of the population enjoyed even the basic rights of citizenship; the majority qualified only as temporary residents.[6] Hamburg was in fact ruled by an oligarchy consisting of a Senate or Council of twenty-eight members, most of whom were prosperous merchants, together with a fixed number of qualified lawyers. Since new members were nominated by the Senate itself, they were often drawn from the same group of influential families, although successful newcomers were by no means excluded. But the Senate was also obliged, in taking major decisions, to secure the agreement of a citizens' council elected by representatives of the five parishes, so that the constitution did embody an element of democracy.[7] The citizens were accordingly proud of their 'republican' constitution, under which aristocrats were not entitled to citizenship, but only to temporary residence.[8]

Hamburg embraced the Reformation at a very early date, and remained a stronghold of Lutheranism thereafter. The combined pastorate of the city's churches met as a body of just under thirty members; its chairman or *Senior* (in Lessing's time, the formidable Johann Melchior Goeze) was appointed by the Senate. The Lutheran church guarded its spiritual monopoly—and its secular privileges—jealously, and it was not until 1785 that a law was passed granting freedom of worship to Catholics and Calvinists.[9] In nearby Altona, on the other hand, which was still ruled by Denmark, a high level of tolerance prevailed, and large numbers of Jews, as well as Catholics, Calvinists, Mennonites, and (since 1747) all manner of sects and heretics were free to express their religious beliefs without hindrance.[10]

But the real lifeblood of Hamburg was trade and commerce. Served by its own banking system and stock exchange, and benefiting from liberal trading policies and an enlightened civic consciousness, it was the main commercial centre in Germany; it had also overtaken Amsterdam as an artery of international trade.[11] During 1777, for example, 2,971 ships from numerous countries docked in its port. They brought coffee, indigo, ginger, cotton, wine, spirits, and luxury goods from France, wool, silk, wine, and fruit from Spain, and coal, tin, lead, wheat, beer,

[4] Hess I, 225. [5] Ibid. II, 362; Stoever II, 93. [6] See Lindemann 20–1.
[7] Stoever III, 301; Slessarev 5. [8] R. Krebs 312, 314, 386. [9] Whaley (1985) 145.
[10] Stoever III, 132–3; Whaley (1985) 35.
[11] On the following statistics see Stoever II, 135–63.

rum, cane sugar, tobacco and manufactured goods from Britain; Spain and Portugal, Holland, Scandinavia, and Russia were major trading partners, and the city's exports included linen, copper, brass and ironware, grain, timber, glass, and candles. Ships from Hamburg sailed the Atlantic and as far north as Archangel. The risks were high, and bankruptcies were frequent; but lenient trading regulations made recovery relatively easy.[12] Those with adequate means could eat and drink on a princely scale, as in the Town Hall cellar beneath the medieval Eimbeck House (so called after the Eimbeck beer it originally dispensed); some of the wines on its list were 125 years old.

Although Hamburg had no university, it did have two institutions which prepared pupils for higher education, namely the Johanneum and the Gymnasium. Distinguished scholars served at both institutions: former rectors of the Johanneum included the philosopher and scientist Joachim Jungius and the polyhistor and philologist Johann Albert Fabricius, whose son-in-law Hermann Samuel Reimarus (author of the notorious *Fragments* later published by Lessing) was professor of oriental languages and mathematics at the Gymnasium. These institutions were augmented, in 1767, by the Academy of Commerce, where Alexander von Humboldt would subsequently study. Its foundation was part of a second wave of enlightened civic enterprise in eighteenth-century Hamburg (the first began in the 1720s, with the publication of the moral weekly *Der Patriot*, and the third, with major measures for the welfare of the poor, in the 1780s); related initiatives were the Society for the Promotion of the Arts and Useful Trades (better known as the Patriotic Society), founded in 1765—and, of course, the so-called National Theatre, whose inauguration brought Lessing to Hamburg.

Such was the environment to which Lessing moved in 1767. Its commercial society, free from courtly influences, had much in common with that of Leipzig, and he found it more congenial than that of Berlin—and, indeed, that of Brunswick and Wolfenbüttel in later years. He lodged with Johann Friedrich Schmidt, the Hamburg agent (*Kommissionsrat*) of the Duchy of Weimar and a cultured supporter of the new theatre project. (According to Heinrich Christian Boie, whose friendship with Lessing also dates from this time, it was Schmidt who produced the translation of Dormont de Belloy's tragedy *Zelmire* which Lessing commended in the *Hamburg Dramaturgy*.)[13] Schmidt lived on the Brook, a street of tall houses in the old shipbuilders' quarter close to the harbour.[14] Lessing's relations with him were cordial, and he was happy to move house with him in 1768 to the Neue Strasse (later Neustädter Strasse) in the New Town, which was conveniently close to the new theatre on the Gänsemarkt.[15] But before Lessing's social life in Hamburg is discussed in detail, some account must be given of the origins and development of the National Theatre and of his association with it.

The Hamburg National Theatre marks the culmination of the earlier project, initiated by Gottsched and Caroline Neuber in the 1730s, to reform the German

[12] Stoever II, 139.
[13] A (2003) 142; LM IX, 262–3.
[14] See Hess I, 225–7.
[15] See A (2003) 436; Hess I, 272.

Fig. 25. Hamburg, Der Brook, pencil drawing by Ebba Tesdorpf.

theatre—and with it, the taste and values of the German public—in keeping with Enlightenment principles. From the start, the reformers were painfully conscious that the German theatre lagged far behind that of other countries, whose example was regularly cited as a model. Gottsched explicitly aimed to raise the German theatre to a level comparable with that of ancient Greece and modern France, in both of which the theatre was a major national institution. Johann Elias Schlegel, who sought in the 1740s to promote a national theatre in Denmark[16] (and by implication also in Germany, for his own plays were written in German), looked to the English example, and a further precedent was set in 1756, when the Tsarina Elisabeth, following the French model, established a national theatre in Russia.[17] It would seem that the German term *Nationaltheater* (or *Nationalbühne*) was first used in Vienna in 1766, then promptly taken up by Johann Friedrich Löwen, the moving spirit behind the Hamburg project;[18] but the idea itself had plainly begun to develop several decades earlier.

In the late 1760s, the obstacles to its realization remained much the same as in Gottsched's heyday: there was still no extensive repertoire of plays in German on themes of national significance; the popular, extemporized theatre condemned by Gottsched was far from extinct (the younger Franz Schuch, for example, continued to lead his father's company after the latter's death in 1764); and the widespread prejudice against actors and the theatrical profession—especially the itinerant companies—was almost as strong as before. Some progress had certainly been made, not least by Lessing, whose own development as a dramatist from his early farces to the high comedy and national resonance of *Minna von Barnhelm* far outstripped that of the German theatre at large; he had also done more than any other individual to improve the literary and dramatic tastes of the German public. On the other hand, the aims of the best itinerant companies still differed little from those of Gottsched and Neuber—which is hardly surprising, since most of their directors had trained either with Neuber herself (as had Schönemann, Koch, and Döbbelin) or under her pupils (Ackermann trained with Schönemann); similarly, Löwen of Hamburg, who worked for a time with Schönemann, caught his enthusiasm for the theatre as a student in Göttingen when he encountered Gottsched's ideas on theatrical reform.

Lessing was broadly in sympathy with their efforts, but his own aims differed from theirs in significant respects. His hostility towards the French (with the notable exception of Diderot) and preference for English dramatic models were not shared by the majority; his reluctance, already voiced in the seventeenth *Letter on Literature*, to condemn the older popular theatre out of hand was still untypical; and while he believed, like other leading figures of the European Enlightenment, that the theatre should exert a civilizing influence and promote the cause of moral improvement, he had little time for the narrow didacticism and overt moralizing of Gottsched, which still found favour with many.[19] But one major obstacle

[16] Cf. LM IX, 181–2. [17] See R. Krebs 373.
[18] R. Krebs 353; cf. B VI, 907. [19] Cf. Reed 47.

remained against which all proponents of a national theatre, including Lessing, had hitherto struggled in vain, namely Germany's lack of a national culture of the kind which, in France, England, and even Russia, was facilitated by a common political system and centre of government. Given this fundamental deficit, the Hamburg project was a bold and hazardous undertaking, as the following account of its origins and development will testify.

Despite periodic attacks by the Church, the performing arts had long been cultivated in Hamburg before the National Theatre opened. School dramas, at first only in Latin but later also in German, had been performed at the Johanneum since 1529 and continued to flourish until the 1780s.[20] In 1677, the first permanent opera house in Germany was established on the Gänsemarkt, accommodating up to 2,000 people and equipped with elaborate baroque machinery; performances began in the following year. Like the later theatre, it received no subsidies from the city government, depending entirely on the support of prosperous citizens and members of the diplomatic and other aristocracy resident in the city.[21] George Frederick Handel composed his first operas there, and Telemann, who became Cantor at the Johanneum and Director of Music in the city churches from 1721, contributed further to the repertoire. But as the middle class lost interest and Enlightenment theorists such as Gottsched attacked opera itself as trivial and lacking in verisimilitude, the opera gradually declined. In its place, from as early as 1728, Caroline Neuber's theatre company began to visit the city regularly, performing in the increasingly dilapidated opera house and other makeshift premises until 1740;[22] Johann Friedrich Schönemann's company followed in turn, and Heinrich Gottfried Koch, displaced from Leipzig by the Prussian occupation, made a serious attempt to establish a permanent theatre in Hamburg between 1758 and 1763.[23]

There were several other attempts around this time by the touring companies, none of them successful, to abandon their itinerant existence in favour of settled respectability, including those of Schönemann at Schwerin in 1753 and Karl Theophilus Döbbelin (or Doebelin) at Weimar in 1756, both of which ended with the death of their ducal sponsors.[24] But the Schwerin venture was of more than ephemeral significance, for a subsidy from the Duke of Mecklenburg-Schwerin enabled Konrad Ekhof, at that time a member of Schönemann's troupe, to set up a theatre academy with rules on actors' dress and behaviour, instruction on the conservation of wardrobe and properties, discussion groups, and experiments in the new, more realistic style of acting pioneered by Schönemann and Ekhof himself. Although it ran for only a year, this academy served as a model for later attempts at theatre reform, including that of the Hamburg National Theatre.[25]

The last major initiative in Hamburg before the National Theatre was that of Konrad Ackermann (whose company had staged the first production of Lessing's *Miss Sara Sampson* at Frankfurt an der Oder in 1755). When the old opera house

[20] Cf. Brauneck et al. 18.
[21] R. Krebs 315–16.
[22] See Robertson (1939) 9–10.
[23] R. Krebs 316–18.
[24] Ibid. 32–3 and 39.
[25] Fetting 39–44.

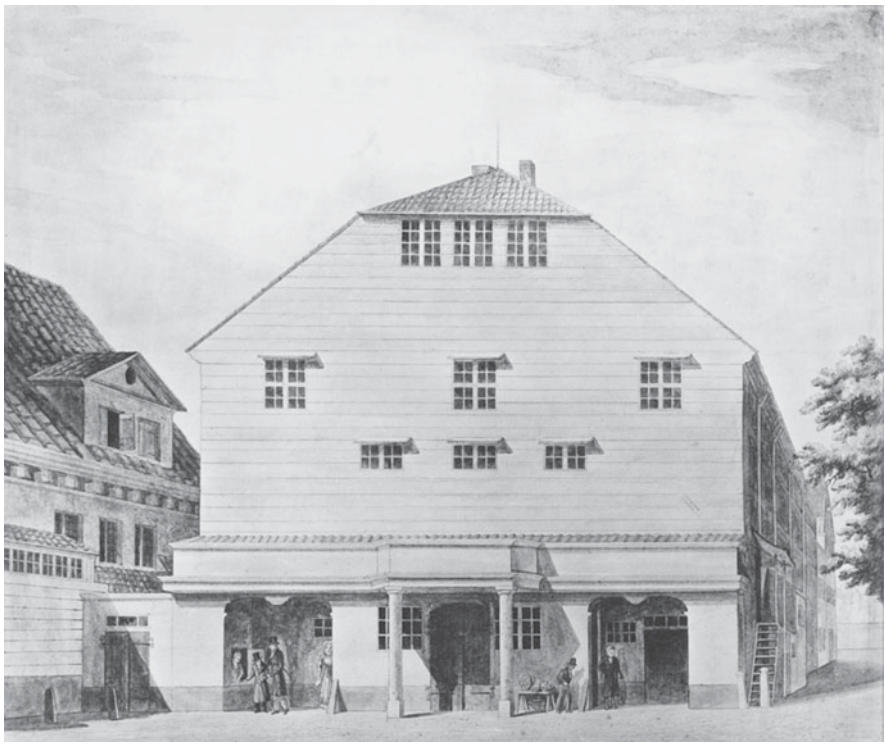

Fig. 26. Hamburg, the 'National Theatre' on the Gänsemarkt.

was finally demolished in 1765, Ackermann, whose company had been performing in Hamburg since the previous year, constructed a purpose-built wooden theatre for 800 people on the vacant site.[26] The new theatre prospered for a time: Ackermann's repertoire included popular as well as classical items, with musical interludes and light afterpieces, pantomimes, or ballets to follow; his elaborate sets and costumes appealed to the public, but put a considerable strain on finances.[27] A way out of these difficulties seemed to present itself when the management was taken over by a consortium which Johann Friedrich Löwen managed to assemble in furtherance of his plans for a new and reformed National Theatre.

Löwen, as already noted, had sympathized since his student days with Gottsched's ideas on theatrical reform. He joined Schönemann's company from 1754 to 1757 and became friendly with Konrad Ekhof, lamenting the demise of the latter's theatre academy and absorbing the ideas which had sustained it.[28] Although he soon left the company and took up an administrative post in Schwerin, simultaneously

[26] On the new building see Schütze 323–5; Robertson (1939) 14–15; Fratzke *passim*.
[27] Schütze 332–3; Devrient I, 360.
[28] See the article 'Johann Friedrich Löwen' in ADB XIX, 312–13.

pursuing a career as a minor poet and dramatist, he remained in regular contact with the Hamburg theatre and married Schönemann's daughter, herself a successful actress. As a result, he was eventually taken on by Ackermann as theatre poet and artistic adviser to the latter's new enterprise, which also allowed him to air his long-cherished plans for theatre reform. He expounded these ideas in his *History of the German Theatre*, published in 1766 in the fourth and final volume of his own collected writings.[29] His key proposal was that theatres should no longer be run by actor-managers—he had witnessed the effects of Schönemann's erratic style of management—but rather, with state support, by an artistic director who might determine policy from an impartial position without involvement in the business of acting.[30]

Löwen's proposal[31]—apart from his quest for state support, which cut no ice with the Hamburg authorities—took on new reality when others discerned in it a means of furthering their own designs. Sophie Friederike Hensel, a tragic actress who had formerly worked for Ackermann, was recalled from Vienna to rejoin his company in 1765. Her admirers in Hamburg included Abel Seyler, a Hamburg businessman of Swiss extraction whom she eventually married, and Adolf Siegmund Bubbers, a tapestry manufacturer and Hamburg citizen who retained a passion for the theatre from his early experience as an actor with Schönemann's troupe.[32] With their help, she contrived to oust Caroline Schulze, her rival as tragic heroine, from the company, and supported the compliant Löwen's candidature to succeed Ackermann as director.[33] A consortium of twelve backers—effectively only Seyler, Bubbers, and Johann Martin Tillemann, a business associate of Seyler—was put together to relaunch the enterprise on 24 October 1766 as the National Theatre; this group took over financial control, leasing the theatre building for ten years and purchasing the wardrobe and properties from Ackermann, who agreed to continue as an occasional actor. In that same month, Löwen published his prospectus (*Vorläufige Nachricht*) on the new venture, incorporating most of the proposals recently advanced in his *History of the German Theatre* and announcing the opening of the National Theatre at Easter 1767.[34]

Löwen's prospectus is the work of a theorist and idealist rather than a practical man of the theatre. It has a certain rhetorical flourish, freely conceding the inadequacies of the present arrangements and the negative image of the acting profession; it then proceeds to outline a series of ambitious reforms which—on top of management salaries, the lease of the building, and the purchase of properties—tacitly assume financial support on a hitherto unprecedented scale. A theatre academy for the training of actors is to be established, with lectures by the director (Löwen himself) on 'bodily eloquence' and tragic declamation, with practical demonstrations by experienced actors. The company's actors will receive a fixed salary in proportion to their merits, with generous provision for superannuation; the need to enforce and maintain impeccable moral standards among them is

[29] Löwen (1905) *passim*. [30] Ibid. 68.
[31] See Robertson (1939) 17–25; R. Krebs 331–71. [32] Schütze 335.
[33] Devrient I, 358–9. [34] Text in B VI, 906–12; Robertson (1939) 20–3.

repeatedly emphasized. Two prizes of fifty ducats (the equivalent of 150 talers) will be offered in an annual competition, explicitly modelled on that organized by Nicolai in 1757, for the best comedy and tragedy submitted. And finally, a number of benefit performances in aid of local charities will be staged every year.

No mention is made in the prospectus of Löwen's plan to recruit a resident dramatist, but he had already discussed the matter with the consortium, and the names of Weisse, with whom Ekhof had long been friendly, and Lessing were considered. There can be little doubt that Löwen favoured Lessing, whose dramas, theatre periodicals, critical writings, and translations of Diderot are regularly cited or alluded to in his writings.[35] Lessing was duly approached, and when he refused to serve as resident dramatist and write plays to fixed deadlines, he was appointed, with the substantial salary of 800 talers per year,[36] to the post of dramatic adviser (*Dramaturg*)—in effect, as house critic. This unusual, indeed unprecedented arrangement reflects Lessing's characteristic determination to retain his independence and identify himself as loosely as possible with an enterprise run by others.

The National Theatre was formally inaugurated on 22 April 1767, with a lavish set and costumes and a major publicity effort. Ackermann publicly wished the enterprise well, specially composed music was performed during the intervals, and a verse prologue and epilogue, composed by Löwen (or possibly by Dusch),[37] were recited by Löwen's wife Elisabeth and Sophie Hensel respectively. The choice of play—Johann Friedrich von Cronegk's unfinished and ponderous martyr tragedy *Olint and Sophronia*, completed by another hand—was less than ideal. But at least it was an original German work, and its demonstratively Christian sentiments—the heathen persecutors are all converted at the end—would serve to reassure the authorities of the theatre's religious respectability (though this did not save the play from Lessing's radical criticism in the first issues of his *Hamburg Dramaturgy*). The prologue paid tribute to Hamburg's republican constitution and concluded with the injunction to the audience: 'And think, o think of this: all Germany looks to you!', while the epilogue re-emphasized the play's Christian virtue and ended with an appeal to the public's patriotic indulgence.

Like drama itself, the art of acting was at this time in a state of transition in Germany, from older, more stylized conventions to a newer, more naturalistic idiom. Lessing, as earlier noted, was among the first to welcome and encourage this development, and he had planned to embody his thoughts on language, gesture, and the natural expression of emotion in a treatise on acting, of which only initial sketches survive. This work would have formed a practical counterpart to the informal style of prose dialogue which he was simultaneously cultivating in his own dramas, especially in *Miss Sara Sampson*. The 'Leipzig style' of acting practised by Caroline Neuber was itself less stiff and formal than the French style on which it was modelled, but in tragedy in particular, the old system of ritualized gestures based on courtly convention was still in operation; in addition, the heavy, monotonous rhythm of German Alexandrine verse with its rhyme and central caesura was

[35] See, for example, Löwen 48–9 and 65. [36] D 222; A (2005) 182.
[37] Cf. B VI, 957 (Löwen) and Schütze 341 (Dusch); text in LM IX, 206–10.

hard to reconcile with individualized characters and natural expression.[38] In comedy likewise, graceful movements derived from dance routines and the figures of ballet were no longer in keeping with the increasingly realistic settings and informal dialogue of mid-century German drama.

By the early 1750s, Schönemann's company, and in particular Ekhof in the short-lived theatre academy at Schwerin, were consciously cultivating a more relaxed and less declamatory style,[39] very much in keeping with Lessing's ideas and possibly influenced by the translations from Riccoboni and Sainte-Albine which he published around that time; as these translations (like Diderot's writings on drama a few years later) showed, the French themselves were by this time moving in a similar direction. Ackermann's company, which Ekhof joined in 1764, continued this development, cultivating the kind of natural expression of emotion which Lessing independently recommended in *Laocoön*. It is therefore not surprising that, in the *Hamburg Dramaturgy*, Lessing repeatedly praises natural expression, criticizes all immoderate effects, and expects the actors to bring out fully the individuality of the characters they represent.[40] But the tendency in Hamburg, explicitly encouraged by Löwen, was also in the direction of heightened (though neither declamatory nor over-demonstrative) emotional expression, for the overriding aim, endorsed by Lessing himself, was to move the audience emotionally.[41] This tendency would shortly culminate in the fully developed 'Hamburg style' of the 1770s—the years of Storm and Stress drama—as typified by the actor-producer and dramatist Friedrich Ludwig Schröder, Ekhof's successor as the leading German actor of his time. But although the young Schröder had recently played minor parts in Ackermann's troupe, he was absent on tour during the opening season of the National Theatre, so that Lessing had no opportunity to comment on his skills in the *Hamburg Dramaturgy*.

Lessing had studied acting closely since his student years, and there are many reports of his practical advice and demonstrations to actors of both sexes. Johann Gottfried Brückner, Therese Bayer, and Johann Christian Brandes gratefully acknowledged his tuition on various occasions,[42] and we know that he assisted Ackermann at the rehearsals of *Miss Sara Sampson* in 1755 and helped Döbbelin and his company with casting and rehearsals for the first performance of *Emilia Galotti* in 1772.[43] There is no evidence that he gave practical help of this kind at Hamburg, however (Löwen reserved this role for himself, only to discover that the actors paid little heed to his advice as a non-specialist);[44] but it was part of his brief as house critic to comment on and criticize the actors in the *Dramaturgy*, and this he accordingly did. His comments are generally positive, above all on Konrad Ekhof, whose reputation in Germany was by now analogous to that of David Garrick in England. Short in stature, physically unprepossessing, and already well into middle age, Ekhof was a superb performer on stage, adapting his expression and behaviour perfectly to his individual roles, from domineering tyrants to youthful

[38] Cf. Maurer-Schmoock 198; Fick (2010) 319.
[39] See Fetting 31 and 39.
[40] Cf. LM IX, 196–8 and 202–5; also Eigenmann 59.
[41] R. Krebs 374–6.
[42] D 100 and 182.
[43] D 87 and 321; cf. Flaherty *passim*.
[44] Schütze 339.

lovers. His voice and presence generated instant respect and a compelling illusion; like Garrick, he conveyed every nuance of the required emotions without himself sharing them.[45] His combination of classical restraint and unaffected realism corresponded, in fact, to Lessing's ideal of histrionic excellence.[46]

Lessing has much less to say on the other main actors, of whom Johann Michael Böck and David Borchers were the most eminent (Ackermann played only on rare occasions, as in his famous performance as Werner in *Minna von Barnhelm*). But he does have a good deal to say, most of it complimentary, on Sophie Hensel. There is, however, guarded criticism of her intemperate gestures and strident tone at an early stage in the *Dramaturgy*, with a suggestion that she might herself have something in common with the 'dragoon of a woman' whose part she played in Cronegk's tragedy;[47] and when Lessing subsequently criticized her as too overwhelming an actress for the role of the demure heroine which she insisted on playing in Graffigny's sentimental comedy *Cénie*, he could not resist returning to military metaphors, declaring: 'It seems to me that I see a giant exercising with the gun of a cadet.'[48] This was too much for the affronted diva, and when Lessing shortly afterwards—only a quarter of the way through the *Dramaturgy*—ceased to comment on the actors altogether, there can be little doubt that Seyler, the company's paymaster, had been called to arms in defence of his mistress. Nevertheless, Lessing later conceded that, although he was himself no friend of Madame Hensel, he had 'not yet met any actress who better understands what she has to say, and conveys a greater feeling that she does so'.[49] His comments on Elisabeth Löwen, née Schönemann, are warm but less than fulsome; she had returned to acting after a nine-year absence, and was probably past her prime. Of the third leading actress, Susanne Mécour, Lessing seems to have thought highly, to judge by his later recommendation of her to Berlin;[50] but at her own insistent request, he refrained in the *Dramaturgy* from all comment on her merits or demerits as an actress.[51] The efforts of these ladies to silence him did not, however, put paid to all criticism, for the *Hamburgische Unterhaltungen*, an independent periodical which had ceased to comment on Hamburg performances in deference to Lessing, now resumed its criticism in a sharper tone than before.[52]

As for the theatre's repertoire, its most striking feature is that only a third of the 120 plays performed were originally written in German (40).[53] The great majority of the rest are translations from the French (70), with a smaller number translated from English, Italian, and Dutch (10); in terms of performances given (522 in all), the corresponding figures are 176, 308, and 38. By far the most-performed dramatist was Voltaire (10 plays and 43 performances), followed by Marivaux (6 plays and 35 performances), C. F. Weisse (7 plays and 34 performances), and Lessing (4 plays and 34 performances); the most-performed play of all was Lessing's *Minna*

[45] See Fetting 181 and 193. [46] Cf. Harris (1992) 229; also Robertson (1939) 31–2.
[47] LM IX, 202–3. [48] LM IX, 266. [49] To Gebler, 25 October 1772.
[50] To Karl Lessing, 26 May 1771. [51] D 227. [52] Cf. E. Schmidt I, 551.
[53] On the following statistics see Robertson (1939) 44–54; full lists in LM XV, 48–59 and B VI, 911–19.

von Barnhelm (16 performances). When one reflects that many of the German plays—by J. E. Schlegel, Luise Gottsched, Ayrenhoff and others—are much influenced by French models, the preponderance of French drama becomes even more apparent. Comedies—as in most repertoires of the time—greatly outnumber tragedies, and the main play of the evening was regularly followed by a one-act comedy, farce, or balletic pantomime.

In most of these respects, the repertoire was pronouncedly traditional. It has been calculated that 43 per cent of the plays were old favourites from Neuber's time, and that a further 32 per cent were taken over directly from Ackermann's repertory; only a handful of plays received their first performance in Hamburg.[54] None of this accords well with the expectations of a radically new departure aroused by Löwen's advance publicity (although the somewhat higher than usual proportion of tragedies no doubt reflects his desire for greater seriousness and higher literary standards).[55] It is true that the domestic tragedy is also represented, with Moore's *The Gamester*, Lillo's *The London Merchant*—and, of course, *Miss Sara Sampson*—as well as both of Diderot's plays in the new *genre sérieux*. There is as yet little sign, however, of those innovations which would shortly transform the German repertoire in the 1770s, such as the *Singspiel* (first introduced in 1752 with *Der Teufel ist los!*, a German version by Weisse of Charles Coffey's *The Devil to Pay*),[56] the plays of Shakespeare (many of which were already available in Wieland's translations of 1762–66), or—for obvious chronological reasons—the turbulent dramas of the Storm and Stress (the first of which, Gerstenberg's *Ugolino*, appeared in 1768). It is a measure of these subsequent changes that only a fifth of the Hamburg repertoire survived in that of Ekhof's company in 1775.[57]

But what really stamps the Hamburg repertoire as conservative is not so much the absence of the new, as the overwhelming presence of the old and increasingly antiquated, especially the Alexandrine plays of French classicism and its German derivatives.[58] By 1772, no fewer than seven French-speaking theatre companies in the German lands, previously cosseted by courtly patrons, had closed down altogether.[59] This was a sign of the times: the future lay with indigenous drama and with English rather than French models. Unfortunately for the Hamburg National Theatre, new and innovative dramas in German were still in short supply in the late 1760s.

The chronology of the short-lived National Theatre is as follows. The initial season ran from 22 April to 4 December 1767. Since no public performances were permitted in Hamburg during Advent and Lent, the company spent most of the next five months in Hanover, where there was no such restriction. The second Hamburg season began on 13 May and ended on 25 November 1768, followed by a second, shorter season in Hanover. The whole enterprise was officially wound up on 3 March 1769, whereupon Ackermann resumed control as director. With various changes of personnel, the company then reverted to an itinerant existence.

[54] Robertson (1939) 50–1. [55] Cf. R. Krebs 429.
[56] See LM V, 184–5 and B II, 1088. [57] R. Krebs 429.
[58] Cf. R. Meyer (1986) 159. [59] R. Krebs 529; Blanning (2002) 265.

The reasons for the theatre's failure are numerous and complex.[60] It certainly did not help that theatres in Hamburg had to close for well over half the year, given that no performances were permitted at weekends or during religious festivals.[61] Far more significant, however, was the lack of any clear management structure. Though nominally in charge, Löwen lacked authority. He had no charisma, and the actors dismissed him as a theorist; at the same time, the leaders of the consortium, who controlled the finances, felt free to intervene in artistic as well as commercial matters. The resultant confusion was apparent to Lessing within a month of the theatre's opening, and it soon became common knowledge.[62] In the absence of effective guidance from the dilettantes who nominally controlled them, the actors went their own way. Intrigues were rife, and Ekhof, who commanded general respect, soon found himself responsible for all practical matters—thereby restoring the old actor-manager system which Löwen had sought above all to abolish. In the interests of harmony, Ekhof complied in his choice of repertoire with the wishes of the majority, whose chief desire was to play once more the roles which they had played successfully in the past. (This option had the added attraction that the original costumes and properties were still available.)

Most seriously of all, the theatre's finances had no solid foundation. None of the twelve members of the consortium belonged to the city's governing circle, which remained aloof and viewed the whole enterprise with scepticism.[63] Among the leading figures, only Bubbers was a Hamburg citizen, whereas Seyler and several other members were Calvinists and immigrants. Seyler and Tillemann had speculated on currency debasement, and both had come close to bankruptcy;[64] but Seyler continued to entertain on a lavish scale, despite steadily waning attendances, until the theatre's capital ran out in September 1767.[65] Frantic efforts were now made to reinterest the public. The traditionally popular ballet had never been outlawed, but it had lost its best practitioners when Ackermann's ballet master, the husband of Caroline Schulze, quit the theatre when his wife was driven out by Sophie Hensel's intrigues, and he took the company's best dancer, the young F. L. Schröder, with him; their mediocre replacements failed to prevent the decline.[66] From early in October, the old harlequinades were reintroduced, making a mockery of the theatre's elevated pretensions, and by November, it was felt necessary to augment the classical repertoire with acrobatic displays; such items were routinely included in the company's second Hamburg season.[67] Even before the company left for Hanover, a French troupe set up in competition, consolidating its position before the National Theatre reopened, and other rival groups put on operettas and farces.[68]

When the theatre reopened, the situation was dire. Even the tolerant Ackermann began to protest when the regular payments for the use of his theatre and

[60] Summary outline in McCarthy (2003) 87–9; further details in Robertson (1939) and R. Krebs.
[61] Cf. Brauneck et al. 9. [62] Cf. L. to Karl Lessing, 22 May 1767; see also D 225.
[63] See Kopitzsch (1975) 59–60. [64] R. Krebs 367–8.
[65] Ibid. 416–17. [66] Schütze 338.
[67] See LM XV, 52–8. [68] Cf. L. to Nicolai, 2 February 1768; Fetting 59.

properties ceased to arrive on time.[69] Löwen and his wife resigned in June, and as things went from bad to worse, the young Schröder, who had rejoined the company on its return from Hanover, was paid only when he threatened to withdraw his services, while Ekhof received his pay in the form of theatre tickets which he was obliged to sell in the street.[70] Hamburg performances ceased for good in November, and the National Theatre was formally dissolved less than two years after it opened.

For those involved in the project, it was tempting to blame the failure on the public. Löwen condemned the public's deplorable taste, and Lessing, in a famous outburst at the end of the *Hamburg Dramaturgy*, saw the public's lack of national sentiment and uncritical admiration of everything French as largely responsible for the fiasco.[71] Though these accusations were not without substance, they took no account of the fact that the public was by no means homogeneous, for it was difficult to please one element without alienating another. There is no doubt that popular entertainments—farces, pantomimes, exotic spectacles, and even acrobats—had a broader public appeal than classical French tragedies and their German imitations. On the other hand, the educated public who read the appeals of the reformers were not for the most part theatre-goers. Many remained alienated by the bad reputation of popular theatre and the itinerant companies, and others, in what was still largely a rural country, had no access to theatres at all: the majority of people still read dramas as literature without ever seeing them in performance. Besides, the moralistic homilies with which reformers from Gottsched to Löwen tried to woo the public increasingly had the opposite effect. Commenting on Pastor Goeze's attacks on the theatre as morally corrupt, Lessing declared: 'The wretched defenders of the theatre who want to make it a school for virtue [he doubtless had Löwen in mind] do it more harm than ten Goezes.'[72] In addition, as the gulf between his own *Dramaturgy*, with its literary emphasis and theoretical sophistication, and the interests of the ordinary citizen grew ever wider—not to mention the fact that the *Dramaturgy* was chiefly concerned to discredit the classical French repertory on which the Hamburg theatre chiefly depended—it became ever more obvious that the public which Lessing addressed was neither the public which the theatre was trying to attract nor that which continued to attend its performances. His main contribution to creating that new and discerning public which still eluded the reformers was not in any case the *Dramaturgy*, but *Minna von Barnhelm*; and the moral effect which he sought to produce through drama depended not on overt moralizing, but on the cultivation and refinement of his audience's sensibilities.

Subsequent developments confirm that neither public attitudes nor existing resources had yet reached the point where a truly national theatre could reasonably be hoped for. For those who still cherished this objective, two courses of action remained open. The first was adopted by Schröder, and the second by Ekhof.

[69] Devrient I, 370. [70] F. L. W. Meyer I, 192; Devrient I, 375.
[71] R. Krebs 422; LM X, 213 and 218. [72] To Nicolai, 11 October 1769.

When Schröder took over the remnants of Ackermann's company in 1771 and established a successful theatre in Hamburg over the next three decades, he appealed unashamedly to popular tastes, with a repertoire consisting mainly of pantomimes, ballets, intermezzos, operas, and *Singspiele*, later augmented by light comedies of his own and by the sentimental family dramas of Iffland and Kotzebue. But during the first decade in particular, he punctuated these productions with works by major dramatists, including Shakespeare, whom he successfully introduced to the German stage, and by the young Storm and Stress writers such as Goethe, Klinger, Lenz, and Leisewitz—not forgetting Lessing's *Emilia Galotti*. All this did not, of course, amount to a national theatre; but by enhancing the public's awareness of great and original drama and by improving the working conditions and social status of his actors, Schröder took significant steps in that direction.[73]

Konrad Ekhof followed a different course. Soon after the National Theatre dissolved in 1769, he parted company with Ackermann and Schröder to join a breakaway troupe under Seyler's direction, taking over himself as director two years later. In that same year (1771), he and his company moved to the court theatre in Weimar, and subsequently to that in Gotha when the Weimar theatre burned down in 1774. With court subsidies, the company was insulated from the vicissitudes of popular taste, and it devoted itself wholeheartedly to serious drama, from the works of Voltaire and Diderot to those of Shakespeare, Lessing, Leisewitz, and Gerstenberg; at the same time, Ekhof—like Schröder—made significant improvements to the working conditions and status of his profession.[74]

This arrangement soon proved congenial to the public and to the courts which subsidized it. Attendance at court theatres, for respectable citizens, was socially more attractive than rubbing shoulders with the common herd in noisy, barn-like premises. And from the princes' point of view, good vernacular theatre, with resident actors, was both cheaper to run and easier to control—and censor—than expensive foreign companies and itinerant troupes who merely drained the country of currency.[75] As so often in the German-speaking lands, the solution was imposed from above rather than emerging from below, and the foundations of a truly national theatre, with government subsidies and direction, were laid in the 1770s in Weimar, Gotha, Mannheim, Munich, and Vienna.[76] The one deficient ingredient, which only the cumulative efforts of the best writers could provide, was a canon of major German dramas with genuinely national appeal[77]—and the process of creating it would extend well into the nineteenth century.

Unfortunately, such developments came too late to benefit Lessing, although he had done more than anyone else to prepare the way for them; for it has rightly been said that the Hamburg National Theatre's greatest achievements were to enable him to write his *Hamburg Dramaturgy* and to launch *Minna von Barnhelm* as a classic of the German stage.[78] But even if he could have foreseen the future, Lessing

[73] Cf. Eigenmann 67–90; article 'Friedrich Ludwig Schröder' in ADB XXXII, 506–12; Slessarev 22–4.
[74] Devrient I, 401–23. [75] See Martens (1983) 130 and 133–4.
[76] Cf. R. Meyer (1980) III, 208. [77] Cf. Reed 50. [78] Devrient I, 375; R. Krebs 310.

would scarcely have approved of the way in which, in the nineteenth and well into the twentieth century, the theatre became a bastion of the national, and nationalistic, establishment.

As things stood, the failure of the National Theatre was the first of a series of major setbacks which preceded and darkened the last decade of his life. The public's failure to support the National Theatre affected him directly, for it is unlikely that he ever received more than his first year's salary; he must consequently have realized that he might himself, before long, have to look to government service rather than the public for a regular income. His growing bitterness and disillusion in response to the theatre's decline can be detected throughout the *Hamburg Dramaturgy*, culminating in his final tirade against public indifference already mentioned above. The same state of mind helps to account for his astonishing failure to respond when Pastor Goeze, with whom he would cross swords in earnest over religion some nine years later, attacked a fellow-clergyman for writing comedies and denounced the immorality of the theatre in words strongly reminiscent of those which Lessing's own father had once used against him.[79] Instead, Lessing endorsed Goeze's views to the extent of declaring that it would be no bad thing to close all German theatres for twenty years, in the hope that more constructive attitudes might emerge when they reopened.[80] For similar reasons, he again began to regret the decline of the older popular theatre, praising Justus Möser's defence of the harlequin in the *Dramaturgy*;[81] and when the collapse of the National Theatre appeared inevitable in September 1768, he asked his brother in Berlin to encourage Schuch, the last major exponent of extempore comedy in North Germany, to take on some of the actors when the Hamburg company disbanded.[82] But perhaps the most far-reaching change in Lessing's attitude after his Hamburg experience was that he ceased thereafter to promote those national aspirations to which he had repeatedly appealed since the time of the *Literaturbriefe*, with his denunciations of the French influence and praise of English culture; instead, he now began to adopt a consistently cosmopolitan perspective.[83] As his hopes for German culture in the present faded, he turned, in his later years, to hopes for humanity at large in the long-term future.

Throughout his stay in Hamburg, Lessing led a varied social life. He patronized the coffee houses, centres of news and conversation since the first of them was opened by an Englishman in 1677.[84] He drank with friends in various hostelries: a nineteenth-century print shows him in a group on the roof terrace of the Baumhaus,[85] which commanded magnificent views of the Elbe and its harbours, and he regularly took wine in the Town Hall cellar beneath the Eimbeck House, a place which he recalled with affection in later years.[86] His addiction to lotteries probably dates from this time, for the Hamburg lottery draws took place in the Eimbeck

[79] See Geffken *passim*; Boehart 207; R. Krebs 354–60. [80] L. to Nicolai, 11 October 1768.
[81] LM IX, 257–8; D 182–3. [82] L. to Karl Lessing, 24 September 1768.
[83] Cf. Nisbet (2002) 50–2. [84] Oehlke II, 14.
[85] Illustration in Drews 100; cf. Hess I, 410. [86] See L. to Eva König, 23 May 1771.

House;[87] he was equally ready to join in pre-dinner gambling over cards, at that time a popular pursuit in Hamburg society.[88]

His circle of friends was wide and numerous, and the surviving evidence permits us to identify many of his regular associates. He saw much of his theatre colleagues, of course, and was particularly close to Ekhof and to the young Schröder after the latter's return to Hamburg in 1768.[89] But much of the city's social life took place in private houses, and Lessing gained early access to this circuit through his landlord Schmidt. The circles in which they moved included merchants, civil servants, journalists, and assorted professionals such as lawyers, clergymen, teachers, and physicians, only a few of whom can be mentioned here.[90] It should, however, be noted that this company differed collectively from the Berlin society to which Lessing had been accustomed, both in its greater variety and in the regular presence of women, who accompanied their husbands to social gatherings and hosted such gatherings themselves.

One of the families with whom the Schmidts and their friends associated was that of Engelbert König, a silk merchant with business interests in Austria and Italy; his wife Eva (whom Lessing later married) was a close friend of Schmidt's wife Christiane.[91] Lessing was soon a frequent guest of the Königs and their young family, and he agreed to act as witness and godfather at the baptism of their youngest son Fritz.[92] In 1768, he referred to König as his 'special friend',[93] and when König left on a business trip to Italy in the following year, Lessing continued to visit and give his support to the family. Other members of the circle were Johann Georg Büsch, professor of mathematics at the Gymnasium and one of the founders of the Academy of Commerce, and his wife Margarete.[94] We have Büsch to thank for assorted reminiscences of Lessing, including a telling anecdote on his habits as a letter writer. When Büsch called on him one New Year's Day, he found Lessing sorting through a large pile of letters, one or two of which he retained while throwing the vast majority on the floor. When Büsch asked him what he was doing, he replied 'I'm answering last year's correspondence', whereupon he swept up all the fallen papers and fed them into the stove.[95]

Another relationship with more far-reaching consequences was that with the Reimarus family. It is indeed possible that Lessing met the elderly Hermann Samuel Reimarus, author of the notorious *Fragments* and a respected figure in Hamburg society, before his death in March 1768—but if so, it can only have been on a formal and occasional basis.[96] His closer association with the latter's son, the physician and scientist Johann Albert Hinrich Reimarus (still remembered for introducing smallpox vaccination and the lightning conductor to Hamburg) seems to date from his final year in the city, when he began to borrow books and

[87] Stoever I, 169–71; Lüdtke 44. [88] D 276; Kleine Charakteristik 89.
[89] Cf. E. Schmidt I, 643; Kopitzsch (1982) 370.
[90] Further details in Danzel/Guhrauer II, 261; E.Schmidt I, 638–43; Kopitzsch (1976) 17; Kopitzsch (1982) 370–6.
[91] Lüdtke 43. [92] A (2005) 554. [93] To Gleim, 24 September 1768.
[94] See Raabe (2005) 30. [95] Danzel/Guhrauer II, 265. [96] Cf. A (2005) 200.

manuscripts from the late Reimarus's library.[97] The younger Reimarus no longer lived in his parental home but with his late wife's parents, while his younger sister Elise still remained in the family house to look after her brother's children after their mother's death in 1762.[98] It may have been Elise who introduced him to her father's clandestine manuscript on his visits to the elder Reimarus's library, but her brother must also have agreed to allow him to take a copy of the manuscript with him when he left for Wolfenbüttel, because Lessing mentions it in a letter to him shortly before his departure and indicates his willingness to return it—or another related manuscript—in due course.[99]

Few details survive concerning Lessing's relations with other members of this circle, such as the mint master Otto Heinrich Knorre, the merchant August Schwalb, and the journalist Barthold Joachim Zinck, one-time associate of the poet Brockes and editor of the latter's work.[100] We do know, however, that he also moved in artistic circles, renewing his friendship, for example, with Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach, who moved from Berlin to Hamburg shortly after Lessing to succeed Telemann as Cantor at the Johanneum and Director of Music in the city's churches.[101] Lessing knew Bach well enough to arrange for the poet Matthias Claudius, himself an amateur musician, to attend one of Bach's private improvisations at the keyboard, and Bach himself, who had earlier set several of Lessing's poems to music, had a portrait of Lessing in his picture gallery.[102] The commonplace book (*Collectanea*) which Lessing began to keep from 1768 also reveals that his interest in visual art, greatly increased since his work on *Laocoön*, prompted visits to Albrecht Balemann's collection of gems, coins, and medals and to the burgomaster Peter Greve's gallery of major German and Dutch masters, as well as to various works of art in the Hamburg churches; the same notes record visits to several private libraries.[103]

Inevitably, Lessing made early contact with literary figures in Hamburg and nearby Denmark. Despite his polemics in the *Letters on Literature*, meetings with Dusch and Basedow in Altona passed off without friction,[104] and his relations with Klopstock, who remained initially wary, grew steadily more cordial after Klopstock came from Copenhagen for a week in 1767 and discussed with him his current work on ancient prosody and the tragedy *Hermann's Battle* (*Hermanns Schlacht*), which Lessing had a hand in publishing.[105] Klopstock later consulted Lessing on his plan to set up a German academy of arts and sciences under the aegis of Joseph II in Vienna, and although nothing came of this project, Lessing at one point planned to visit Copenhagen to discuss the matter further.[106]

Another member of the Copenhagen circle with whom Lessing had friendly relations was the poet and critic Heinrich Wilhelm von Gerstenberg, an early representative of the Storm and Stress movement, who shared and promoted

[97] See L. to J. A. H. Reimarus, 22 August and 30 September 1769.
[98] See Sieveking 88 and 98. [99] L. to J. A. H. Reimarus, 10 April 1770.
[100] See Lüdtke 43–6. [101] D 271 and 659.
[102] Rengstorf 153; Richards 106–8. [103] LM XV, 256–64. [104] D 234.
[105] See L. to Nicolai, 4 August 1767; Klopstock to L., 27 August 1768; Muncker (1880) 178–9.
[106] Muncker (1880) 185–6; D 268–9; B XI/1, 918.

Lessing's enthusiasm for Shakespeare. To Gerstenberg's delight, Lessing responded positively, despite some major reservations, to his gruesome and turbulent tragedy *Ugolino*, and even agreed to publish it; Gerstenberg duly revised the work to meet some of Lessing's objections.[107] Helfrich Peter Sturz, another young writer of the Copenhagen circle, attracted Lessing's favourable attention through his perceptive criticisms of *Laocoön*[108] and through his tragedy *Julie*, a work inspired by Rousseau's *La Nouvelle Héloïse* and Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* and written specifically for the National Theatre.[109] Though most of their correspondence is lost, Lessing plainly enjoyed Sturz's company on the latter's regular visits to Hamburg.[110] Sturz's hostility to French classicism, his enthusiasm for Shakespeare and the mixing of genres in English drama, and above all his outspoken attacks on German absolutism and servility secured him Lessing's friendship, which he renewed on visiting Wolfenbüttel some ten years later.[111] In Hamburg itself, another young writer, already mentioned, who rose to prominence in the early 1770s as the editor and main contributor of the journal *The Wandsbeck Courier* (*Der Wandsbecker Bote*), was Matthias Claudius.[112] With his simple Christian piety, artless folksongs and engagingly popular journalism, Claudius was a very different character from Lessing, whom he nevertheless revered and frequently visited, publishing a delightful review of the Hamburg production of *Minna von Barnhelm* in 1769.[113] Like Sturz, Claudius was one of a number of young men who enjoyed Lessing's confidence in his later years; in such company, he could relax and unburden himself without formal constraints or other social tensions.

As in Berlin, Lessing never let religious differences interfere with his social relations in Hamburg. Through Moses Mendelssohn, whose wife came from Hamburg, Lessing found ready access to the Jewish community in Hamburg and Altona.[114] In Moses Wessely, whose brother Hartwig had first conveyed the National Theatre's interest to him in Berlin, he found a renowned conversationalist and sympathetic friend, whose generous loan would later finance the printing of *Nathan the Wise*.[115] More significant for his later religious controversies, however, was his reaction to a quarrel which for a time agitated and divided the Christian community in Hamburg. Julius Gustav Alberti, a liberal Lutheran and jovial character whom Lessing often encountered at convivial gatherings, was a deacon at the church of St Catharine, whose senior pastor was the redoubtable Johann Melchior Goeze. Alberti and Goeze were constantly at loggerheads. Goeze, whose nicknames included 'the Grand Inquisitor' and 'Melchior Cromwell',[116] was a late representative of the Lutheran church militant, and by now a figure of ridicule in enlightened

[107] See L. to Gerstenberg, 25 February 1768; Gerstenberg to L., May or June 1768 and October–December 1769.
[108] See Sturz to L., 23 September 1767.
[109] See R. Krebs 392–413.
[110] See L. to Gerstenberg, 25 February 1768.
[111] D 446–7; on Sturz see also Fechner *passim*.
[112] See Rengstorf *passim*.
[113] D 257 and 263; text of review in B VI, 835–44.
[114] On this community see Whaley (1985) 92 and 106.
[115] See Lüdtke 57–8 and Danzel/Guhrauer II, 261.
[116] Kleine Charakteristik 55–6; Whaley (1985) 68, 106–7,152.

circles. Alberti, with his progressive views and unbuttoned behaviour, could scarcely have been further removed from his colleague in style and attitude. He publicly identified himself with the liberal theologians (or 'neologists') whom Goeze had expressly attacked; and as a gifted raconteur and mimic, he regularly reduced his companions to helpless laughter with his renditions of Goeze's doom-laden sermons.[117]

The conflict finally came to a head in the latter half of 1769, when Goeze discovered that Alberti had omitted from prayers on the Day of Repentance the verse 'Pour out thy wrath upon the heathen that have not known thee, and upon the kingdoms that have not called upon thy name' (Psalms 79.6) on the grounds that it was incompatible with Christian charity. In the ensuing conflict, which dragged on until the Senate ordered Goeze to desist (whereupon he resigned as *Senior* of the Hamburg churches), Lessing sided not with Alberti but with Goeze, to the amazement and annoyance of his friends. He then composed a conciliatory 'sermon' in the manner of Laurence Sterne's Yorick, the burden of which was that the Psalmist's grim supplication is entirely compatible with Christ's injunction 'Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself': for Yorick sees no contradiction between hating a nation hostile to one's own country and loving individual members of that nation who deserve our sympathy.

Unfortunately, Lessing's sermon does not survive, and all we know of it is from the recollections of Nicolai, who later read it in full.[118] Lessing printed a few copies of the title page and part of the preface, now likewise lost, and showed them to the dismayed Alberti, before reassuring him that the sermon would not be published. The main significance of this episode is that it reveals aspects of Lessing's attitude which bear directly on his later conflict with Goeze. Just as he had rejected Cramer's watered-down Christianity ten years before for retaining only those features of revealed religion which accorded with Cramer's own rationalistic compromise, he was unhappy with Alberti's similar neologistic tendencies. His habitual tendency to side with the losing party also disposed him towards Goeze, whose star was clearly on the wane. He had in fact visited Goeze more than once in 1769,[119] again to his friends' consternation, noting after his first visit: 'I found him very natural in his behaviour and by no means unimpressive as a man of learning.'[120]

But another, stronger motive underlay his sympathy for Goeze. Only a year before, he had published a notice in the Hamburg press commemorating the fiftieth anniversary in office of another Lutheran clergyman, namely his own father;[121] the notice added that Pastor Lessing had delivered a sermon on the text 'Now when I am old and greyheaded, O God, forsake me not until I have shown thy strength unto this generation', from a psalm which also contains the militant sentiment 'Let them be confounded and consumed that are adversaries to my soul' (Psalms 71.17–18 and 13). Both Lessing's unexpected sympathy with Goeze—likewise evident in his failure to react to Goeze's attacks on the theatre—and the

[117] On Alberti see Lüdtke 46–7; E. Schmidt II, 236–7; Boehart 206; Hurlebusch *passim*.
[118] See LM XV, 120–4. [119] KGL 166. [120] LM XV, 259. [121] LM X, 225.

virulence of his later polemics against him have much to do with Goeze's strong affinities with Johann Gottfried Lessing.

One of Lessing's closest friends in the Hamburg years—indeed his closest associate in the literary sphere—has yet to be mentioned, namely Johann Joachim Christoph Bode. Lessing's relationship with Bode calls for separate discussion, for it involved a business partnership whose success or failure would decisively influence his future prospects. Bode was a remarkable individual, an autodidact of manifold abilities. From a humble background—his father was a soldier and tile-maker—he grew up in Brunswick and trained on various wind instruments, subsequently publishing his own settings of popular poems, including some by Lessing;[122] in later years, he played the cello in amateur ensembles. A natural linguist, he acquired several languages with the help of casual contacts, and when he moved to Hamburg in 1757, he set himself up as a teacher of music and languages. He soon turned to journalism, and for a time edited one of the city's newspapers, the *Hamburger unparteiischer Correspondent*; he also began to translate and adapt foreign dramas, including Moore's *The Gamester*, for Koch's theatre company.[123] An advantageous second marriage left him financially independent, and he set up a printing business shortly before Lessing came to Hamburg. A massively built man of coarse features, Bode looked more like an artisan than an artist and man of letters.[124] Of companionable disposition and fond of good living, he was at the same time generous and always ready to help social outcasts and others less fortunate than himself. He acquired Hamburg citizenship and became a well-known figure in Hamburg society, rising to prominence in the Freemasons; he also joined the Illuminati after his move to Weimar in 1778. Herder wrote an admiring obituary on his death in 1793.[125]

Lessing must have met Bode on his initial visit to Hamburg at the end of 1766, for Bode was a friend of Schmidt and one of the backers of the National Theatre project. The two got on well from the start, for they were kindred spirits, and by the time Lessing returned to Berlin in January 1767, he had decided to buy in as an equal partner in Bode's printing enterprise.[126] He saw a great deal of Bode throughout the following years, both in their printing house on the Holzdamm and on social occasions. Bode's encounter with Lessing was decisive for his own career as a literary translator, for with Lessing's help and advice, he began to tackle the major English novelists and soon became one of Germany's most accomplished translators. It was Lessing who persuaded him to translate Sterne's two great novels, and he himself acknowledged that it was Lessing who suggested that he use the term *empfindsam* for 'sentimental' in the title of *A Sentimental Journey*, thereby greatly enriching that term's literary resonance.[127] He also produced translations of Fielding's *Tom Jones*, Goldsmith's *Vicar of Wakefield*, and Smollett's *Humphry Clinker*, at times employing his own Low German dialect to render the speech of common people; in later years, he translated Montaigne's essays. He transmitted

[122] See G. Busch 358. [123] Cf. Wihan 3–11. [124] Lüdtke 38–9.
[125] Herder SWS XVII, 250–2; on Bode's life see Neue Deutsche Biographie II, 348–9.
[126] See L. to Gleim, 1 February 1767. [127] See D 243–4.

his enthusiasm for Grimmelshausen's *Simplicissimus* and other novels to Lessing,[128] whose comments on that genre and its German, French, and English practitioners are particularly frequent in the Hamburg years.[129] Finally, it is rarely noticed that Lessing himself began to translate Noverre's *Lettres sur la dance et les ballets* in 1769, doubtless to boost his ailing finances, but soon lost patience and left Bode to complete the rest.[130]

Lessing's decision to go into partnership with Bode marks his final attempt to gain financial independence, and with it, the freedom to study, write, and travel as he pleased.[131] He had known for many years that it was barely possible to live in Germany on the proceeds of freelance writing, even if this included regular journalistic commitments and translation work, which themselves reduced the time available for scholarly and creative writing. In this respect, his work as critic for the National Theatre differed little from his work as a critic in Berlin, and it was in any case clear that this could never become a permanent occupation. If, on the other hand, he were to accept employment in government service, he knew that few such employees were well enough paid, or enjoyed enough leisure, to sustain a parallel career as a writer (Gleim, with his lucrative sinecure, was a rare exception).[132] With characteristic impulsiveness, he therefore decided to invest in Bode's project all the capital he could raise—primarily by selling a large part of his personal library—in the hope of eventually living off the proceeds.[133]

Bode's enterprise was essentially a printing house, most of whose productions were marketed by existing publishers (notably by J. H. Cramer of Bremen, but also by Nicolai and Voss of Berlin) with their ready access to the national distribution network.[134] The ultimate aim of the partners was to publish in their own right, dealing directly with booksellers and thereby saving the considerable cost of employing separate publishers. (Lessing's *Hamburg Dramaturgy*, appearing in twice-weekly instalments for primarily local sale, was initially published in this way, before the completed work was marketed in book form by Cramer.) Such aims were by no means new. For although printers and publishers were normally distinct businesses in the eighteenth century, printer-publishers had existed as early as the sixteenth century, and others besides Lessing and Bode had launched similar schemes, including authors' collectives, in more recent times.[135] But the Hamburg enterprise was more ambitious than most.[136] Lessing and Bode aimed to recruit only the best and most respected German writers and to publish their works in a periodical series entitled *Deutsches Museum*, several volumes of which would appear each year. These would be marketed not through established publishers or their agents at the two annual Leipzig book fairs, but by direct sale before each fair to one or more major booksellers for retail distribution. Lessing accordingly

[128] D 279.

[129] See, for example, LM X, 78–80 (Wieland); 140–7 (Diderot); XV, 62 (Fielding and Richardson); D 242–4 (Sterne).

[130] D 279.

[131] See Grimm (1992) 53.

[132] Cf. Kiesel/Münch 88.

[133] See L. to J. G. Lessing, 21 December 1767.

[134] Cf. D 279.

[135] See Kundt 44, 59, 69; Ungern/Sternberg 68–9.

[136] For further details see D 237–42.

approached Gleim, with his widespread literary contacts, in the hope that he would set an example by submitting his own works for publication—only to discover that Gleim was already negotiating with a parallel enterprise in Magdeburg, the 'typographical society' of Heinrich Wilhelm Bachmann.[137] Undaunted by this setback, Bode wrote to and visited Bachmann and offered to go into partnership with him; but the Magdeburg enterprise collapsed soon afterwards, and Bachmann's career ended in bankruptcy and suicide in 1769.[138]

Firmer arrangements were, however, made with several authors. Klopstock, Gerstenberg, and Zachariä agreed to submit works for publication, and Gerstenberg's *Ugolino* (1768) and Klopstock's *Hermann's Battle* (*Hermanns Schlacht*, 1769), as well as Lessing's own *Antiquarian Letters* (*Antiquarische Briefe,* 1768–69) were printed while Lessing was still in Hamburg—albeit with the help of external publishers. Bode continued to print, and occasionally publish, further works, including Klopstock's *Odes* (1771) and Herder's and Goethe's *Of German Character and Art* (*Von deutscher Art und Kunst*, 1773), in later years. But nothing ever came of the planned *Deutsches Museum*, whose title was subsequently borrowed by Heinrich Christian Boie for a periodical of his own. Thus Bode and Lessing never established themselves as publishers, and far from becoming financially self-sufficient, Lessing found himself seriously in debt and was obliged to borrow money and sell the remainder of his library to support himself. He announced his withdrawal from the enterprise in September 1768 and formally terminated his contract with Bode in the following year;[139] their friendship remained unaffected.

The reasons for the project's failure are complex, but it is plain that neither Lessing nor Bode possessed the necessary commercial acumen and steady application to establish a successful business.[140] More seriously, they failed to heed and profit from the expert advice of friends such as Nicolai and Voss, both of whom Lessing met when he visited the Leipzig Fair at Easter 1768, presumably to study the market.[141] Though some of his correspondence with Lessing in the crucial winter of 1767 to 1768 is lost, we know from Nicolai's later recollections that he had already drawn Lessing's and Bode's attention to the risks involved, and warned them against several of the errors they nevertheless made.[142] He told them, for example, that the best writers were not always the best commercial prospects; that most booksellers expected to receive their stock from their agents in Leipzig, and that although cash sales had become common in recent years,[143] payments for books were often made in kind (i.e. by exchange for other books); that few booksellers would agree to buy stock outright, as the partners expected, but paid only for the copies they actually sold, reserving the right to return unsold copies (a procedure guaranteed to impede cash flow and generate bad debts); and that the two friends

[137] L. to Gleim, 1 February 1767; Gleim to L., 28 March 1767.
[138] A (2003) 437 and 526.
[139] See L. to Nicolai, 28 September 1768.
[140] Cf. KGL 156; D 264.
[141] See L. to Karl Lessing, 26 April and 9 June 1768; L. to Nicolai, 9 June 1768.
[142] B XI/1, 890–2; D 219–21 and 252–4.
[143] See Kiesel/Münch 130; McCarthy (1989) 534.

were incurring unnecessary costs by using expensive paper, engravings, and an unconventional format.[144]

But apart from the partners' ineptitude, the book market in Germany was inherently unfavourable to this and other comparable ventures which failed in the last decades of the century.[145] The main problem was that the distribution network, centred in Leipzig, was dominated by the major publishers, and those who sought to bypass it did so at their peril. Their sales were small and patchy, and if, like Lessing and Bode, they declined to market their products through the Leipzig fairs, they fell victim to pirate publishers whose illicit reprints cornered the Leipzig market. Such was the fate of Lessing's *Hamburg Dramaturgy*, which sold chiefly through pirate editions like that of E. B. Schwickert of Leipzig, who traded under the name of 'Dodsley & Compagnie'. Adding insult to injury, Schwickert issued a statement—reproduced by Lessing at the end of the *Dramaturgy*[146]—to the effect that, in order to drive out of business all private publishers who sought to bypass the established houses, he and his allies would continue to reprint and undersell the offending publications.

Such behaviour was possible, of course, only in the absence of effective copyright legislation. Those provisions which did exist, like the granting of an exclusive 'privilege' to publish a work in a given state, were routinely ignored or flouted, and it was in any case easy to circumvent such restrictions by publishing in another state within the Holy Roman Empire.[147] Besides, the mercantilist policies of many governments actively encouraged piracy, especially in southern states such as Baden, Württemberg, and Austria whose trade balances with the north were unfavourable;[148] but as late as 1765, pirate editions of Gellert's immensely popular works were officially sanctioned in Prussia in order to prevent costly imports from Saxony.[149] The first effective measures against piracy were taken by Saxony in 1773, when the sale or transit of pirate editions at the Leipzig fairs was prohibited,[150] and the Prussian legal code of 1794 introduced new safeguards for publishers. But it was not until 1835 that piracy was finally outlawed throughout the German Federation.[151]

These measures were unfortunately too late to help Lessing, and when he and Bode appealed in 1767 to the Aulic Council in Vienna (the supreme legal authority in the Empire) for an imperial 'privilege' and freedom from censorship for their publications, their request was bluntly refused. It served merely to alert the imperial authorities to the fact that the Hamburg Senate, which was duly admonished, was failing to implement the imperial regulations on censorship correctly.[152] This was the second occasion, after the Prussian objections to *Minna von Barnhelm* a few months earlier, on which Lessing's name came before the Senate in unfortunate circumstances.

[144] Cf. Nicolai to L., 14 June 1768.
[145] See Kundt 59; Kiesel/Münch 149–50.
[146] LM X, 219–20; cf. B VI, 927–9.
[147] Kundt 4–6.
[148] See Kiesel/Münch 132–3.
[149] B X, 994.
[150] Kiesel/Münch 136–7; Kundt 81.
[151] Kundt 27 and 83; Kiesel/Münch 139.
[152] KGL 155–6; Kopitzsch (1975) 69.

In the last resort, the small print runs of even the most successful German works, the relatively high price of books, and the poor remuneration of authors were due to the fact that the educated public which read such works was still tiny in comparison with that of France or Britain. The most influential literary journals, Nicolai's *Allgemeine Deutsche Bibliothek* and Wieland's *Teutsche Merkur*, sold only 1,800 and 2,000 copies respectively, and Lessing's most remunerative publication, *Nathan the Wise*, secured around 2,000 subscribers. It has also been calculated that, by the 1780s, no more than one per cent of the public read works of this kind, and reading societies and informal exchanges ensured that most copies were shared by numerous readers; the German market was also constricted by the fact that the aristocracy and urban patriciate still favoured French literature. This situation would not change substantially until, in the early nineteenth century, the growing prestige of German literature, improved copyright provisions, and mass production on fast iron presses led to larger sales and better remuneration for authors.[153]

It is against this background that Lessing's injunction—despite his usual reluctance to give advice to others—to his brother Karl in 1768 should be interpreted: 'Take my brotherly advice and give up all thought of living by your writing', and his later comment, when he was himself in government service: 'The tame horse is fed in its stable, and must serve; the wild horse in its desert is free, but is ravaged by hunger and privation.'[154] That the failure of his Hamburg investment became obvious at the very time (late in the summer of 1768) when the collapse of the National Theatre became inevitable cannot have softened the blow, nor can it have been of much consolation that Bode's business recovered somewhat in the following years when his third wife put it on a sounder footing. Chance, fortune, and providence, to which Lessing was so fond of appealing, scarcely seemed to be on his side.

Lessing's bitterness at the miserable lot of German writers found more constructive expression in a remarkable little essay, which survives only as a fragment, entitled *Live and Let Live* (*Leben und leben lassen*).[155] Although it was probably written in 1774 or 1775,[156] it so obviously reflects his Hamburg experiences and the lessons he derived from them that it can appropriately be discussed here. It addresses the familiar problem of how an author can gain a fair return for his writing in the absence of a proper copyright system and in a market dominated by the major publishing houses. Lessing first attacks the widespread prejudice that writers need no significant remuneration because most of them are in gainful employment; to this, he rightly replies that many authors have to write in order to supplement their inadequate income as employees. He then turns to the question of intellectual property, and rejects the traditional claim of German publishers, recently reaffirmed by his old acquaintance P. E. Reich and others, that an author's work, once sold to a publisher, becomes the latter's inviolable property.[157] In response to this,

[153] Further details in Kiesel/Münch 78, 148, 160–2, 180–208.
[154] To Karl Lessing, 26 April 1768; also 30 April 1774.
[155] LM XVI, 464–9.
[156] See B X, 993–4; Ungern-Sternberg 66.
[157] Cf. Rosenstrauch (1986) 77 and 109–12; also B X, 994 and McCarthy (1989) 538.

Lessing draws the vital distinction between property and the use of property, arguing that the substance of a work remains the property of the author even if the author sanctions its use by the publisher; he also indicates that the author is entitled to a share in the profits of such use. This distinction, later elaborated by Kant and Fichte, underlies the distinction between author's copyright and publisher's copyright on which modern copyright law depends.[158] Lessing then attacks the abuse of piracy and the dire effects of mercantilism on the book trade, rightly concluding that only uniform legislation throughout Germany can remedy such evils. Finally, in the most substantial section of the fragment, he outlines a scheme for self-publication by authors, combining advance subscription by the public and sale through the existing distribution network. Under this scheme, the printer, author, and bookseller would each receive one third of the takings; in all three cases—particularly that of the author—the proposed income is significantly higher than under the prevailing system, which gave the lion's share to the publisher.[159]

For reasons which should by now be obvious, sale by subscription was widely practised in the last decades of the eighteenth century.[160] The novelty of Lessing's proposal is that he does not simply rely on the author's circle of friends and contacts to recruit subscribers, but allots a major role to the booksellers in publicizing the works on offer, collecting subscriptions, and distributing the published works. To overcome the distrust of subscription which arose in 1774 when Klopstock's heavily subscribed *The Republic of Letters* (*Gelehrtenrepublik*), a rambling utopian fantasy, disappointed most readers' expectations,[161] Lessing proposes that a journal giving advance information on the works on offer should be published. His own successful publication of *Nathan the Wise* by subscription in 1779 embodied an element of these proposals, for subscriptions were collected by Voss and other booksellers as well as by numerous friends and associates.[162] That Lessing had, if only belatedly, taken to heart much of Nicolai's advice of the Hamburg years is evident not only from his proposal to involve the bookselling network more fully and to reward it more generously than he and Bode had originally intended, but also in his plan to deliver books to the retail trade by way of the Leipzig fairs and the booksellers and their agents who attended them.

Lessing felt strongly enough about the issues raised in this fragment—above all in his support for the rights of the independent author—to return to it in the last year of his life and offer to publish it in Lichtenberg's *Göttingisches Magazin*.[163] It is unfortunate that he failed to do so, probably because of his failing health.[164] For although he pays insufficient attention to the role of established publishers, who were often themselves retail booksellers and whose entrepreneurial skills and encouragement of authorial initiative are nowhere mentioned,[165] his proposals were timely and in some respects original. As it is, the fragment survives as a monument to his unfulfilled ambitions as an independent writer.

[158] Ungern-Sternberg 102 and 112; McCarthy (1989) 539–46.
[159] Cf. Ungern-Sternberg 109.
[160] Ibid. 117–18.
[161] Ibid. 65 and 68–9; Kiesel/Münch 151–2.
[162] See Wessels 17–18.
[163] See L. to Lichtenberg, 23 January 1780.
[164] Cf. Ungern-Sternberg 58.
[165] Ibid. 124–6.

Lessing's Hamburg years were marred by financial worries, which partly account for his growing restlessness and depression towards the end of his stay. The sale of his personal library of around 6,000 books has already been mentioned: it was in fact dispersed in three successive auctions. When he moved to Hamburg in 1767, his brother Karl sent the greater part of his library after him, and agreed to prepare as soon as possible a printed catalogue of most of the remaining books for auction in Berlin.[166] Lessing's erratic correspondence and other delays held up the sale until June or July of the following year,[167] by which time he had been obliged to borrow the substantial sum of 500 talers from his publisher Voss in order to buy his share in Bode's business; the proceeds of the auction were therefore already earmarked for the repayment of his debts.[168] The second and largest sale took place on 1 February 1769 and subsequent days in the Eimbeck House in Hamburg,[169] and with no salary from the theatre and no return on his business investment, Lessing had to treat the takings from the sale as income. A few months later, he was still—or again—heavily in debt.[170] He now had no choice but to send for the remaining books in Berlin, which were duly auctioned in Hamburg on 14 May 1770, soon after his departure for Wolfenbüttel.[171]

It is regrettable that Lessing had to disperse his working library. It is no less regrettable that very little is known about its contents and their eventual fate. Printed catalogues were produced for all three auctions and sent to many of his friends and associates, but ephemera of this kind rarely survive, and these catalogues are no exception.[172] Only a handful of titles from the third sale, including long runs of the periodicals *Mercure de France* (1721–58) and *Journal des sçavans* (1665–1764), together with a few books purchased by the Wolfenbüttel library, can now be identified with certainty.[173] We also know that a large consignment of books from the first auction, including early editions of classical authors and possibly two further periodicals mentioned by Lessing, went to the brothers Zaluski in Warsaw, founders of the Warsaw public library.[174] This extensive library was plundered in 1795 by Russian troops, and those parts of it which survived chaotic transport to St Petersburg became the nucleus of the Imperial public library;[175] only a laborious search for Lessing's marginalia might now identify some of his books in that library's holdings. Perhaps the most positive result of the three auctions—apart from the temporary relief of Lessing's debts—was his decision to compile the large commonplace book which he kept from 1768 as a permanent record of his reading.[176]

[166] KGL 154; L. to Karl Lessing, 21 April 1767.
[167] See L. to Karl Lessing, 9 June 1768.
[168] L. to Karl Lessing, 21 September 1767; see also L. to J. G. Lessing, 20 March 1768.
[169] D 273–4.
[170] L. to Karl Lessing, 6 July 1769.
[171] See L. to Ebert, 7 May 1770.
[172] See on this Selz *passim*; also A (2005) 219 and 238–9.
[173] See R/S (2004) 219–24.
[174] On the sale of L's books, see KGL 154; L. to Gleim, 1 February 1767.
[175] See Lauer (1984) 326–7.
[176] LM XV, 125–423.

Inflation had been rampant since the Seven Years War, and many salaries, among them that of Pastor Lessing in Kamenz, had failed to keep pace with it. To add to Lessing's problems at a critical time, increasingly urgent letters from his father and brother Theophilus pressed him throughout 1768 for a subvention of 100 talers. (Theophilus, it later emerged, had read a false newspaper report that Lessing was earning 1,000 talers per year in Hamburg.) Lessing promised to deliver, but was subsequently unable to do so;[177] instead, he continued to borrow money, and was still in debt to his landlord Schmidt over seven years later.[178] He was also embroiled, by this time, in increasingly acerbic polemics with the classical scholar and antiquarian Christian Adolf Klotz. In short, his life was approaching a crisis.

Signs of depression and even cynicism, traditionally associated with his Wolfenbüttel years, can be detected in his behaviour and utterances from the summer of 1768 onwards. Karl Lessing, who visited him around the beginning of August—no doubt to report on and deliver the proceeds of the Berlin auction—was dismayed at his brother's despondent state throughout the visit,[179] and there are hints of cynicism, if not of despair, in some of Lessing's letters of that autumn.[180] The collapse of the National Theatre and the failure of his partnership with Bode also became inevitable during that period. As usual in such situations, his primary impulse was to flee, and he announced on 24 September that he planned to sell his remaining possessions and sail to Livorno in the following February, proceeding from there to Rome.[181]

He had, of course, already expressed a desire to visit Italy during his time in Breslau.[182] He had also been greatly shaken two months previously on hearing of Winckelmann's murder, declaring that he would gladly have given a few years of his own life to preserve that of Winckelmann.[183] Many who knew him concluded that his real aim in going to Italy was to succeed Winckelmann in Rome, a suggestion which he vehemently repudiated.[184] It is nevertheless curious that he nowhere gives positive reasons for choosing that particular destination, except to say that he could live more cheaply in Italy than in Germany.[185] It may well be that, as on similar occasions in the past, his overwhelming desire was not to go to any particular place, but to get away from the place he was currently in.[186]

His letters also contain a clue to another, deeper motivation. From his first announcement in September, he repeatedly declares that he plans to leave in February, although it is clear from a subsequent letter that he does not have any

[177] L. to J. G. Lessing, 20 March 1768; also J. G. Lessing to L., 12 July 1768 and Theophilus Lessing to L., 13 October and 12 December 1768.

[178] See Eva König to L., 5 November 1775 and L. to Eva König, 10 March 1776.

[179] Karl Lessing to L., 6 August 1768.

[180] Cf. L. to Mendelssohn, 5 November 1768 and L. to Ramler, 6 November 1768.

[181] L. to Gleim, 24 September 1768 and L. to Karl Lessing, 24 September 1768; cf. L. to Nicolai, 28 September 1768.

[182] See KGL 143.

[183] L. to Nicolai, 5 July 1768; cf. B XI/1, 905.

[184] See L. to Ebert, 18 October 1768; Gleim to L., 9 March 1769.

[185] L. to Nicolai, 28 September 1768.

[186] Cf. L. to Ramler, 6 November 1768.

particular sailing in mind:[187] he wishes only to leave when favourable winds permit. What he did have in mind was that, towards the end of January, he would reach the age of forty, and it is clear from his sombre reflections at the ages of thirty and thirty-five that he took such anniversaries seriously;[188] his friend Büsch later recalled him declaring, in a moment of depression, 'When the grim forties come along, a man is finished.'[189] He clearly felt the need for a new beginning after this critical threshold was crossed.[190]

But the months went past, and no firm arrangements were made—perhaps because it had by now become financially impossible for him to move without a guaranteed income to go to. He nevertheless continued to affirm his intention of going to Italy, perhaps overland by way of Göttingen and Kassel.[191] This plan was in turn modified in the light of Klopstock's talk of a German academy in Vienna, reinforced by an offer from the Viennese authorities of a well-paid theatrical appointment, the only condition being that Lessing write two plays per annum for the Austrian theatre.[192] But after his recent experiences, Lessing was in no mood to associate himself with another theatrical enterprise, although he continued to reflect on the prospect of an appointment in Vienna for some months to come.[193] Amidst all this uncertainty and indecision, he did, however, gain one important insight into his own psychology. He began to realize that, wherever he might go, he was unlikely to overcome his chronic restlessness for long, writing to Ramler 'I doubt whether Rome will appeal to me for longer than anywhere else so far', and telling Bode that he 'would certainly not be content for long anywhere'.[194] This existential insight, which eventually extended to all his activities, including his intellectual pursuits, would profoundly affect his theory of knowledge in later years.

Lessing might well have prevaricated for even longer if external pressures had not finally impelled him to act. For despite all his setbacks, he had developed strong attachments to Hamburg, telling Ebert 'I am unfortunately so firmly ensconced here that I shall have to tear myself away gently if I am not to leave a piece of skin behind here and there.'[195] Ebert, whom he had met in Brunswick in 1766, had sought his company on his visits to Hamburg (of which he was a native), and he now attempted to dissuade him from leaving Germany.[196] Ebert's younger colleague in Brunswick, Johann Joachim Eschenburg (who also came from Hamburg), had likewise visited him, and he no doubt supported the efforts which Ebert began to make to attract Lessing to Brunswick.[197] The Crown Prince (*Erbprinz*) of that duchy, Karl Wilhelm Ferdinand, like his mother the duchess and his sister

[187] L. to Karl Lessing, 28 October 1768.
[188] Cf. Ch. 9, pp. 279 and 294 above.
[189] D 272; see also L. to Büsch, 20 December 1771 and Jahnn *passim*.
[190] Cf. LM X, 425.
[191] See L. to Ebert, 3 January 1769; L. to Dietze, 5 January 1769; L. to Nicolai, 13 April 1769.
[192] D 276–7; L. to Nicolai, 13 April 1769.
[193] See L. to Nicolai, 30 June 1769.
[194] To Ramler, 6 November 1768; D 276; see also Ebert to L., 12 November 1769 and L. to Ebert, 28 December 1769.
[195] To Ebert, 7 November 1769.
[196] Ebert to L., 26 and 27 January 1769.
[197] D 262; also Ebert to L., 4 October 1768.

Anna Amalia, Duchess of Weimar, was sympathetic to German literature; it will also be remembered that his younger brother had translated Lessing's *Miss Sara Sampson* into French, in which version it was performed on Lessing's visit to Brunswick in 1766. Ebert now began to regale the Crown Prince with extracts from Lessing's personal letters, thereby bringing out his human side to counterbalance the combative image which he had once more acquired as a result of the *Antiquarian Letters*. He was soon able to report to Lessing that the Crown Prince was anxious to meet him, and given that he doubtless knew of Lessing's earlier disappointment over the post of royal librarian in Berlin, he also managed to secure a provisional offer to him in September 1769 of the post of ducal librarian in Wolfenbüttel; as a further incentive, Lessing was promised leave to visit Italy at a later date.[198] The offer was duly accepted, and Lessing paid an extended visit to Brunswick in November and December, visiting his old associate Seyler in Celle on the way. He was well received by the Crown Prince, and he went on to discuss with Ebert and others the duties and privileges of his new post and the practicalities of his move to Wolfenbüttel.

As he prepared for the move on his return to Hamburg, a series of unforeseen events, including illness and bad weather, delayed him for several more months. But the main factor, which he did not mention in his letters to Brunswick, was the report he received early in the new year that his friend Engelbert König, on a business trip to Italy, had died suddenly in Venice. His relationship with König's widow Eva and her family, already close, precluded an early departure, and the longer he stayed, the closer that relationship became. A second retarding circumstance arose when the young Johann Gottfried Herder, then on his way to and from a new appointment in nearby Eutin, visited him twice in February and April. Herder, already one of Lessing's most fervent literary admirers, had modelled his first major work, the *Fragments on Recent German Literature*, on the *Letters on Literature* of Lessing and his associates, and his second important work, the *Critical Silvae*, began with an appreciative critique of *Laocoön*, which Lessing considered the most substantial response that work had generated.[199] By this time, Herder was also his main ally in the antiquarian feud with Klotz. The two, sometimes joined by Matthias Claudius, accordingly had a great deal to talk about, and Herder spent some two weeks in Lessing's company on his second visit to Hamburg.[200] Lessing at last set off for Brunswick shortly afterwards, arriving there around 21 April 1770.

Thus ended Lessing's three years in Hamburg. Despite his successive misfortunes, he was in the end reluctant to leave, for he knew that he was finally renouncing his career as an independent writer and leaving behind a circle of friends to whom he had formed enduring attachments. His continued affection for that community is testified by his later correspondence, and by his repeated return

[198] Cf. L. to Nicolai, 11 October 1769; to Ebert, 11 October 1769; to Nicolai, 2 January 1770; also B XI/1, 950.

[199] Cf. to Nicolai, 13 April 1769.

[200] See Herder, Briefe I, 186.

visits to Hamburg (in 1771, twice in 1776, in 1778, and again in 1780). Of the many contacts he had made there, three would profoundly influence his later life: those with Eva König, whom he in due course married; with the Reimarus family, from whom he had received the explosive manuscript he would later publish; and with Johann Melchior Goeze, his adversary in the last and most furious of his polemical encounters.

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Hamburg Writings 1767–1770: *Hamburg Dramaturgy;* Dramatic Fragments; *Antiquarian Letters*; *How the Ancients Portrayed Death*

The relationship between Lessing's *Hamburg Dramaturgy* and the plays and performances it purports to discuss is erratic and tenuous. The work, which consists of 104 numbered instalments of roughly equal length (the last four forming a single double-length instalment), deals only with the first fourteen weeks of the National Theatre's opening season—that is, with less than a third of its repertoire. Much of it is devoted to dramatic theory and to plays which were never performed by the company. The dates and sequence of publication are particularly complicated. As a result of various delays—including two lengthy interruptions designed to frustrate pirate publishers—the dates of performances, those attached to the (originally twice weekly) instalments, and the true dates of publication became ever more widely separated. The least confusing way to describe the history of the work's publication is to say that the first thirty-one instalments appeared at intervals between May and August 1767, the next fifty-one (nos. 32 to 82) between December 1767 and April 1768, and the remainder (nos. 83 to 104) at Easter 1769 in the second volume of the completed work, which was published in book form on that occasion. The links between the text and the activities of the National Theatre also grew ever more remote, given that Lessing was first obliged to stop commenting on the acting, that the second batch of instalments was written after the company had departed for Hanover, and that the final batch was composed when the theatre's collapse was inevitable or already a reality. In short, despite its declared aim of furnishing a critical commentary on the National Theatre's repertoire and performances,[1] these soon became no more than a pretext for Lessing to develop his thoughts on world drama in theory and practice—and the work is none the worse for that.

As with most of Lessing's critical writings, the *Dramaturgy* is unsystematic in approach, and the short numbered sections recall the letter form of the *Letters on Literature*. Here, too, Lessing is able to change tack at will, with polemical sallies, theoretical reflections, textual analysis, plot summaries, scholarly digressions, translated extracts, and unresolved questions ensuring constant variety and underlining the provisional nature of whatever conclusions are reached. Though employed

[1] LM IX, 183.

by the National Theatre, Lessing is at pains from the start to underline his independent stance: his harsh criticism of the first play performed, Cronegk's *Olint and Sophronia* (whose protagonists, he declares, die only of the fifth act),[2] or of Heufeld's *Julie* shortly afterwards (the hero of which he describes as 'a conceited little pedant' whose 'entire activity amounts to a couple of monumental follies'),[3] is an implicit indictment of the theatre's choice of repertoire. Casual criticism of this kind—especially from a writer as mercurial as Lessing—is inevitably uneven, and the *Dramaturgy* is no exception. The second batch in particular (nos. 32 to 82), much of which was published at the rate of three or four instead of two instalments per week as Lessing struggled to reduce his backlog, shows distinct signs of padding. No fewer than fifteen sections are devoted to Voltaire's tragedy *Mérope* and its Italian model, and even more to Thomas Corneille's *Le Comte d'Essex* and its English and Spanish counterparts; in the latter case, the plot summary of the Spanish play occupies almost nine sections. And towards the end of the work, Lessing's antiquarian and classical studies of 1768 and 1769 intrude ever more conspicuously.

Many of the themes and opinions put forward in the *Dramaturgy* are familiar from Lessing's earlier writings, but they are modified and amplified in sufficiently distinct ways, and with sufficient public resonance, to warrant further discussion here. The topics in question include his attacks on French classicism and their positive counterpart, his praise of alternative dramatic traditions such as those of England and Spain; his own opinions on the nature of dramatic illusion and the kind of drama he wishes to promote in Germany; and his views on the nature of tragedy and comedy as sanctioned by the Greeks, above all by Aristotle, whose continued relevance to modern drama he consistently seeks to demonstrate. These topics will now be examined in turn.

In the *Dramaturgy*, Lessing's long-standing opposition to French dramatic conventions takes the form of a sustained polemic. His choice of the polemical method is familiar enough from his earlier works, but in the present case, he explicitly commends it as a heuristic strategy, advising the critic: 'Let him first seek someone to quarrel with, so that he will gradually get inside the material, and the rest will take care of itself.' To this end, he adds, he has chosen the French writers, and Voltaire in particular, as his targets.[4] His motivation was no doubt in some measure personal: his resentment of the Francophile establishment in Prussia was at that time intense, and he was certainly unhappy that the majority of plays performed in Hamburg were French in origin or inspiration and that Voltaire was by far the most-performed dramatist. But his animus against French classicism and the courtly ethos behind it is also part of a wider reaction in Germany around that time. Even the historical relativist Herder, who argued a few years later that every culture has its own unique value and should be judged on its own terms, could find no good word to say about the culture of France, which for him epitomized all that was wrong with modern Europe.[5] But much of what Herder says echoes criticisms

[2] LM IX, 190. [3] LM IX, 218. [4] LM X, 84.

[5] See, for example, Herder SWS V, 541, 546, 549, 551–3, 581–3 (*Auch eine Philosophie der Geschichte*, 1774).

which had already been aired in France itself, above all by Rousseau. What all of these writers deprecate is not the French nation as such, but the social and cultural legacy of the age of Louis XIV, which lived on among the aristocracy of the *ancien régime* and still commanded disproportionate respect among the ruling classes of continental Europe.

At the time when Lessing wrote, Voltaire's literary works, especially his tragedies, were greatly admired in Germany, whereas his philosophical writings, with their irreverent treatment of religion, were widely deplored. Lessing's reaction is precisely the opposite: he has no sympathy with Voltaire's tragedies or with much of his poetry, but he does respect his philosophical writings for defending Enlightenment values against bigotry and intolerance.[6] In the first half of the *Dramaturgy*, he successively attacks three of Voltaire's tragedies, accusing them of artificiality, implausibility, and other inadequacies, and invokes Shakespeare, Spanish drama, the authority of Aristotle, and his own conception of dramatic illusion in order to discredit them. Thus in *Sémiramis*, the appearance of a ghost at a public assembly in daylight is contrasted unfavourably with its Shakespearean model, the ghost in *Hamlet*: whereas Voltaire's ghost is implausible, Shakespeare's ghost generates a successful illusion, for it is psychologically convincing.[7] Secondly, the positive merits of Voltaire's most successful tragedy, *Zaïre*, are ignored, and its portrayal of jealousy and passion is weighed against its equivalents in *Othello* and *Romeo and Juliet* and found wanting: Voltaire's play, we are told, depicts not love, but gallantry.[8] And in his third and climactic assault, on *Mérope* (a play much admired by the Prussian monarch), Lessing convicts Voltaire of similar faults to those already mentioned, and others besides. The actions of the protagonists, and even their exits and entrances, are insufficiently motivated; an improbable number of actions are crammed into a single day, in a superficial gesture to the unity of time; the plot is less credible than that of the ancient fable from which it is derived; and it is inferior not only to Greek tragedy, but also to the play by Maffei on which it is modelled (in what Lessing regards, despite Voltaire's acknowledgement of this source, as an act of plagiarism).[9] In making these criticisms, Lessing is often able to cite Voltaire's own comments and turn them against him. For Voltaire was not renowned for his modesty, and his claims to have emulated and even improved upon the Greeks—especially when quoted out of context—allow Lessing to present him as an insufferably arrogant character as well as an incompetent dramatist.

It is tempting, but hardly justified, to ascribe Lessing's hostility to his early contretemps with Voltaire in Berlin.[10] He is simply employing his familiar polemical tactic of countering a prevailing exaggeration—in this case, the adulation of Voltaire's dramas—with an equal and opposite exaggeration. Even in Voltaire's dramas, there was much with which he could and did sympathize—the republican sentiments of *Brutus* and *La Mort de César*, for example, or the enlightened attitudes of *Les Guèbres ou la tolérance* and even *Zaïre*, both of which plays would later influence *Nathan the Wise*.[11] But to have acknowledged such positive features in

[6] Cf. his epitaph for Voltaire (LM I, 49). [7] LM IX, 227–31. [8] LM IX, 243–5.
[9] LM IX, 335–99. [10] See Runset 261–2. [11] See B IX, 1144 and E. Schmidt I, 581.

the *Dramaturgy* would only have undermined Lessing's ultimate purpose, namely to discredit the dramatic conventions of an earlier age, of which he rightly saw Voltaire's tragedies, for all their innovations of detail, as belated manifestations.[12]

Pierre Corneille, like his brother Thomas, is dealt with no less harshly than Voltaire. The tragedy *Rodogune*, of which Corneille was especially proud, is faulted on numerous grounds.[13] The heroine Cleopatra in particular, as the epitome of evil, is no more credible than Corneille's other hero Polyeucte, who dies an innocent martyr.[14] Not only are such characters psychologically implausible: they also violate Aristotle's requirement that the hero should be neither wholly good nor wholly bad. Lessing chooses Aristotle rather than Shakespeare as his chief weapon against Corneille because Corneille had himself commented on Aristotle's rules, especially that of the three unities, in his discourses on tragedy. Lessing accordingly argues that, in his own dramas, Corneille stretches the unity of place to include whole cities, thereby observing the letter of the rule but not its spirit.[15] His final thrust at Corneille is delivered in the concluding section of the *Dramaturgy*, with the audacious challenge 'Name me the play of the great Corneille which I could not do better. What am I wagered?' This is no outburst of vanity, for Lessing adds that no merit attaches to lending Corneille's plots a more rigorous causality and his characters a more realistic psychology, given that they are so implausible in the first place.

It cannot be denied that Lessing's critique of French classical tragedy, which was created in an era and for an audience whose values were remote from his own, is unfair and one-sided.[16] To apply the criteria of contemporary realism to an art whose essence is ceremonial formality, lyrical solemnity, formulaic expression and rhetorical pathos cannot fail to expose it to ridicule, as Lessing very well knew. Nietzsche, with his classical training, defends French tragedy against Lessing's attacks, pointing out that to attack formal discipline in art is to open the way to anarchic naturalism;[17] and although Lessing held no brief for the latter, his assault on French classicism lent unintended legitimacy to the unruly and vociferous productions of the young dramatists of the 1770s. But in assessing his treatment of French classicism, it must be remembered that his aim was not to write objective literary history or the kind of appreciative commentary he reserved for the writers of antiquity. His aim was purely practical, namely to promote a new kind of non-heroic drama in Germany. And when he does encounter French models which help him to do so (Diderot is the obvious example), he does not hesitate to commend them.

A striking feature of the models of tragedy which Lessing presents as alternatives to the French—notably Shakespeare and the Spanish—is how little he has to say about them. No play of Shakespeare is analysed in detail, and Lessing's fullest account of a single scene (the ghost scene in *Hamlet*) amounts in all to less than a page, reiterating a point already made by Mendelssohn and Addison.[18] As in the

[12] See Friedrich 603. [13] LM IX, 305–19. [14] LM X, 131–4 (*Polyeucte*).
[15] LM IX, 371–2; cf. IX, 377–9. [16] See Friedrich *passim*.
[17] Nietzsche I, 577–8 (*Menschliches, Allzumenschliches* § 221).
[18] LM IX, 229–31; cf. Robertson (1939) 252–3.

seventeenth *Letter on Literature* ten years earlier, Lessing's contention that Shakespeare's tragedies fulfil all his expectations with regard to illusion, causality, conformity with Aristotle's rules, etc., remains little more than assertion; for Shakespeare's role in the *Dramaturgy* is again essentially negative, as a stick to beat the French with. This lack of detailed analysis also allows Lessing to avoid confronting the problem of reconciling Shakespeare with his own, profoundly un-Shakespearean conception of tragedy. For example, Weisse's *Richard III*, like Corneille's *Rodogune*, is dismissed because its hero is a monster of evil; but Shakespeare's Richard, who is no less monstrous, escapes all criticism.[19] The fact is that, despite his genuine admiration for Shakespeare, Lessing has little practical use for him: his broad historical canvas, his exuberant fantasy, his raw passions and lyrical intensity have no more place in the kind of drama Lessing seeks to promote than does the stylized formality of French classicism. The same is true of his praise of Calderón, Lope de Vega, and the Spanish: though he is intrigued by their fantastic situations, baroque ebulliance, and mingling of the comic and the tragic, these qualities are likewise alien to his own dramatic theory and practice.[20]

The true alternative to French classical tragedy, for Lessing, lies neither in Shakespeare nor in the Spanish theatre. It lies in his own conception of tragedy for the modern age, more realistic and at the same time more philosophical than any of the models so far discussed. But he has too much respect for the classical tradition to present his own ideas as a radical break with the past. They are accordingly reinforced by an ingenious reinterpretation of Aristotle, which has exercised commentators ever since. The *Dramaturgy*, like *Laocoön*, does not overtly abandon the traditional conception of art as an imitation of nature.[21] But more emphatically than before, Lessing denies that this imitation entails any direct representation of reality. The latter leads, in his view, to an arbitrary kind of naturalism, for the events and characters it depicts may well be unrepresentative of those laws and regularities on which a true understanding of nature depends.[22] Straightforward depiction of external reality, he declares, also neglects the other half of nature, namely our subjective reaction, which legitimately expects to make coherent sense of what the dramatist presents it with. By thus including subjectivity as well as external objects in his definition of nature, Lessing succeeds, at least in name, in salvaging the mimetic theory of art—no doubt in deference to Aristotle, his main theoretical ally in the *Dramaturgy*. But strictly speaking, the mimetic theory applies only to the first, objective half of his theory of tragedy, namely his account of the objective reality which tragedy represents, and which he describes with the help of Leibniz's metaphysics of nature. The second, and more important half, his account of the subjective response of the spectator—in particular the dramatic illusion and the process of catharsis—cannot adequately be accommodated within the old mimetic theory. It is based rather on the premise—already implicit in *Miss Sara Sampson* and in his early theorising on tragedy, and partially

[19] LM X, 98; cf. Steinmetz (1968) 40. [20] LM X, 75–83.
[21] See LM X, 78 and 81; cf. Ch. 10 p. 324 above.
[22] LM IX, 202 and X, 81–2; cf. Barner et al. (1987) 194.

developed in *Laocoön*—that the chief function of poetry is not to represent reality, but to express and arouse feelings. These two halves of his theory will now be examined.

Lessing had long believed that every true work of art should constitute an organic whole, and he duly declares in the *Dramaturgy* that the tragedian should create 'a completely rounded whole, where one thing is fully explained by another'. But he now claims in addition that this whole should be a reflection or analogy of the universe, of nature in its entirety. 'The whole of this mortal creator [i.e. the tragedian] should be a silhouette of the whole of the eternal creator.'[23] The 'mortal creator' is plainly a reference, in the manner of Shaftesbury and Young, to the artistic genius, a concept which occurs frequently in the *Dramaturgy* and towards which Lessing's attitude changed considerably in the course of writing the work. The genius, in his view, is one who creates spontaneously and intuitively, and who does not so much apply the existing rules of art as create the kind of art from which all such rules are derived, or which may require the existing rules to be modified.[24] This does not mean, as it did for some of the Storm and Stress writers, that all so-called rules for art are meaningless and that the so-called 'original genius' is a law unto itself. It means rather, for Lessing, that the genius has an intuitive insight into the laws of nature and of human psychology, and creates works which do justice to both: that is, the works in question are purposive wholes, like nature itself,[25] and in the case of drama, all the events depicted have a necessary and sufficient reason. But as the cult of the 'original genius' gathered momentum in the late 1760s—Gerstenberg was among its devotees—Lessing began to lose patience and eventually declared: 'If anyone calls me a genius, I shall box his ears.'[26] It is in this spirit that we should interpret his famous declaration at the end of the *Dramaturgy* that he himself relies on conscious effort and critical reflection, rather than natural genius, to create his literary works.[27] For since the term 'genius', which he now reserved only for a handful of artists such as Shakespeare, was rapidly being debased by the self-styled geniuses of the younger generation, he no longer wished to be associated with it. This had the unfortunate effect that his genuinely modest disclaimer about his own creative abilities was taken literally by later generations, and held against him as a supposedly uninspired or 'unpoetic' artist.[28]

As for the organic whole which the tragic dramatist creates by analogy with the natural universe, its most essential feature is that the events portrayed, however extreme or extraordinary, must follow a rigorous causal sequence:[29]

> The genius can only deal with events which are grounded in one another, with chains of causes and effects. To trace the latter back to the former, to weigh the former against the latter, to eliminate contingency throughout, to make everything that happens happen in such a way that it could not happen otherwise: *that* is his business when he deals with the field of history.

[23] LM X, 120; cf. Ch. 8 p. 262 above.
[24] LM X, 190; also IX, 210 and 272; cf. Fick (2010) 352.
[25] LM IX, 327. [26] D 386. [27] LM X, 209–10.
[28] See Steinmetz (ed.) (1969) 24–6. [29] LM IX, 308; cf. IX, 188 and 316–17.

The events in question are driven by human passions, and these above all must adequately account for them; all historical accidents and indeterminate causes must be excluded. Only in this way can the workings of tragedy attain an internal necessity analogous to that of nature as a whole. But nature as a whole, as Lessing envisages it, is neither the reality we observe around us nor that of Newtonian science. It is rather the universe of Leibnizian metaphysics. In this universe of optimism, all is ultimately for the best, and the dramatist should duly avoid presenting us with 'confusing examples of […] terrible unmerited disasters'.[30] For these are the exception rather than the rule in the providentially determined whole, and their ultimately positive significance may well be beyond our comprehension.[31] This does not, however, mean that tragedy has to justify the ways of God to man, for what it offers is no more than an analogy of creation as a whole. It should merely encourage our belief in the wisdom of that whole, and 'accustom us to the thought that […] everything is resolved for the best'.[32] The Leibnizian theodicy is grounded not in supernatural insight, but in purely natural causes: destructive passions, for example, cause the downfall of those who yield to them, and goodness and rationality must ultimately prevail. It is nevertheless a striking fact that, although this metaphysical theory is formulated with reference to tragedy, Lessing gives no example of a tragedy in which it is self-evidently reflected; and in his own dramatic work, it applies much more accurately to the comedy *Minna von Barnhelm* and the non-tragic 'dramatic poem' *Nathan the Wise* than to the tragedy *Emilia Galotti*. The reason for this is, of course, that the Leibnizian theodicy is not so much an endorsement as an implicit negation of tragedy.

There are therefore two philosophical reasons why Lessing so often dismisses wholly good and wholly evil characters as tragic protagonists. The first, as already mentioned, is that Aristotle excludes them as unsuitable; and the second is that they have no place in the universe of optimism. For 'the thought that there can be people who are unfortunate through no fault of their own is inherently abhorrent'[33] and can lead to 'grumbling against providence';[34] in addition, 'the poet must never think so unphilosophically as to assume that someone can will evil for the sake of evil', for human beings, though certainly imperfect, are not fundamentally wicked.

Notwithstanding its Leibnizian antecedents, Lessing has little difficulty in reconciling the above theory with Aristotle's concept of *hamartia* or tragic error. For although Aristotle does not rule out conscious and deliberate crime on the part of the hero as the source of tragic misfortune (as in Euripedes' *Medea*), he also declares that the hero's misfortune should be undeserved, and he explicitly favours an unwitting error of judgement, rather than vice or depravity, as the cause of the hero's undoing.[35] Lessing shares this view—not least because it precludes the kind of moralizing which he castigates in Corneille's and Gottsched's theories of tragedy. He had already declared in 1756 that an error of the kind Aristotle postulates is

[30] LM IX, 121. [31] See vom Hofe 388; also Lohmeier 92–8. [32] LM X, 120.
[33] LM X, 134. [34] LM X, 120; cf. Pantis 411. [35] Aristotle, *Poetics* Ch. 13–14.

necessary as a causal link between the hero's character and the catastrophe, in order to ensure that the action forms a coherent whole.[36] But as in his own *Miss Sara Sampson*, all such errors—in keeping with Leibnizian optimism—must be venial, for they are a necessary consequence of the limited, and therefore imperfect, nature of human beings.[37] In other words, both Lessing's philosophical optimism and his own interpretation of Aristotle's *hamartia* mean that he cannot accept any grave and capital tragic guilt of the kind we encounter in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, or again in Schiller and numerous nineteenth-century theorists.

Although Lessing agrees with Aristotle that characters are less important in tragedy than plot or situation (whereas the reverse is true in comedy),[38] the amount of attention he devotes to characters in the *Dramaturgy* suggests that he regards them as at least of equal importance. His typically modern interest in individual character means that, like Diderot, he treats character as an essential, or indeed the main, determinant of plot.[39] His first requirement is consequently that the characters must be internally consistent, for if they are not, the plot will not be consistent either.[40] His second requirement is that they must be neither completely good nor completely bad, not just on the metaphysical grounds already noted, but also because they must be representative of humanity at large, of qualities which all of us can recognize in ourselves.[41] This need for representative characters leads Lessing into a difficulty with which he wrestles at length, for it is potentially at odds with his aversion to stereotypes and his strong belief in individual uniqueness. It also leads him into disagreement with Diderot, for although he continues to comment favourably on Diderot's works, he also takes issue with Diderot's approval of fixed character types in comedy and tragedy.[42] In order to do so, he distinguishes between 'typical' and 'universal' qualities of personality, declaring that the former tend to reduce individuals to types, whereas the latter merely bring out their common humanity without prejudice to their individual distinctness;[43] only characters of the latter variety are therefore acceptable in drama. Lessing is particularly dissatisfied with Diderot's recommendation that drama should depict the different 'conditions' of human beings, by which he means not only social occupations or professions, but also family roles such as fathers and sons (both of which figure in the titles of his dramas). For although this recommendation may appear at first sight to encourage realism, it in fact risks restoring the satirical types and idealized paragons of the past.[44]

The philosophical basis of Lessing's realism, his metaphysics of nature, requires the dramatist to avoid extremes of character and bring out the common humanity of the protagonists. But so, too, does his theory of illusion, his concern with the subjective aspect of human nature as present in the reader or spectator of the drama. For only if we recognize that the characters are of the same substance (*von gleichem Schrot und Korne*)[45] as ourselves can we properly sympathize with them

[36] To Mendelssohn, 18 December 1756.
[37] LM X, 135; cf. Lohmeier 98; Pantis 416–18; George 305.
[38] LM IX, 402–3.
[39] LM IX, 386–8.
[40] LM IX, 323–5.
[41] LM IX, 239.
[42] LM X, 148.
[43] LM X, 171 and 187.
[44] LM X, 148–50; cf. Buck 209.
[45] LM X, 104.

and, in the case of tragedy, become receptive to the cathartic effect which tragedy aims to produce. This same concern with subjectivity is present in the last of Lessing's central doctrines on drama as a representation of objective nature, his interpretation of the three unities. Like several theorists before him,[46] he regards the unities of Greek drama as a natural consequence of the constant presence of the chorus on stage, which ruled out any sudden changes of place or time.[47] In modern drama, however, which has no chorus, only the unity of action remains essential, given that the action as a whole, in Lessing's opinion, must consist of a unified series of causes and effects. But he also recognizes what is virtually a fourth unity, namely the unity of character, because the action depends above all on the characters who perform it. If they are consistent and credible, the action itself will be credible and the illusion complete. The unities of time and place, however, are relatively inessential, for so long as the action is credible, the subjective imagination can take changes of time and place in its stride.[48]

In his correspondence on tragedy of 1756–57, Lessing had declared that the concept of aesthetic illusion has no real relevance to drama (as distinct from acting), and that tragedy has no more need to generate an illusion of reality than does any other account of human actions.[49] By the time of the *Dramaturgy*, his views on this matter had changed fundamentally (largely thanks to Diderot), for he now declares of the tragedian's aim: 'He seeks to put us under an illusion [*er will uns täuschen*] and thereby to move us';[50] the example he gives it that of the ghost in *Hamlet*. This is in keeping with his contention that the dramatist's aim is to convince us of the 'inner verisimilitude' (*innere Wahrscheinlichkeit*) of whatever is depicted[51]—that is, its verisimilitude as measured by subjective rather than objective standards. The successful illusion also depends, of course, on respecting those objective laws already mentioned, especially that of causal necessity. But to an even greater extent, it depends on the credibility of the dramatic characters as human beings,[52] which in turn depends on the dramatist's insight into human psychology and his skill in bringing out those qualities which most readily engage our feelings and imagination.

The core of Lessing's theory of tragedy is his analysis of the passions it arouses and the cathartic effect they supposedly produce. He had, of course, discussed such matters at length in his correspondence on tragedy of 1756–57, but he now sets out to bring his own theories into line with those of Aristotle; for although he had always held Aristotle's *Poetics* in the highest esteem, this had not prevented him from diverging considerably from its principles in the correspondence on tragedy. In the *Dramaturgy*, however, he had an additional reason for claiming the authority of Aristotle for his own theories, for he now wished to demonstrate that French classical tragedy has little in common with that of antiquity. To this end, he studied Aristotle's *Poetics* intensively in 1768, and even planned to write a commentary on it.[53] On the

[46] See E. Schmidt I, 585; Robertson (1939) 383. [47] LM IX, 377–9.
[48] Cf. Diderot, ed. GEL, 353 (see 'L's translations' in Bibliography).
[49] To Mendelssohn, 18 December 1756. [50] LM IX, 227. [51] LM IX, 261.
[52] LM IX, 239. [53] See L. to Mendelssohn, 5 November 1768; cf. D 290.

strength of these studies, he felt able to declare at the end of the *Dramaturgy*, in characteristically provocative style, that Aristotle's *Poetics* is no less infallible a work than the *Elements* of Euclid, and that any tragedy which deviates from its principles is by definition inferior.[54]

Lessing had always believed, like Aristotle, that tragedy attains its effect primarily by emotional rather than rational means. But in his correspondence on tragedy, he had attributed this effect above all to pity, attaching much less importance than Aristotle to the emotion of fear and virtually ignoring the concept of catharsis. He now attempts, in the *Dramaturgy*, to eliminate these disparities. The modifications he made for this purpose to his earlier theories will now be examined under the headings of pity, fear, and catharsis.

In his correspondence of 1756, after the lachrymose success of *Miss Sara Sampson*, Lessing had acclaimed pity or compassion as the sole tragic emotion, declaring: 'The most compassionate human being is the best human being.'[55] He therefore took issue with Aristotle's contention that the suffering of a highly virtuous person arouses horror and revulsion, believing instead that we feel pity for all sufferers, provided some causal link—not necessarily an unvirtuous act—can be found between their character and their misfortune.[56] In the *Dramaturgy*, where he at one point defines tragedy simply as 'a poem which arouses pity',[57] it would seem at first sight that nothing has changed. But in his new theory of catharsis, he argues that the moral effect of tragedy depends on us feeling not the highest possible degree of pity, as he had formerly maintained, but an intermediate degree between the extremes of excess and deficiency.[58] The reason for this change is that he now gives increased importance to fear and its moderating effect on pity. This brings his theory of tragedy closer to Aristotle, and indeed lends it greater credibility by reducing the excessive emphasis on pity in the earlier version. But while the concept of pity or compassion is no longer overstretched to the same extent as before, the word which denotes it, namely *Mitleid* (which can mean sympathy or empathy as well as pity) most certainly is. In order to explain why Aristotle names fear alone as a tragic emotion in conjunction with pity, Lessing argues (with acknowledgement of Mendelssohn's cognate theory) that all the emotions we share with the tragic hero are secondary emotions which we experience through our sympathy (*Mitleid*) with him, and which therefore come under the heading of *Mitleid*.[59] Used in this sense, *Mitleid* denotes not an emotion in its own right, but merely a quality shared by all vicariously experienced emotions, such as the terror (*Schrecken*) which Lessing at this point wishes to disqualify as a primary tragic emotion. But when he wishes to denote the primary emotion of pity we ourselves feel for the suffering hero, he again uses the term *Mitleid*—thereby shifting the term's meaning without acknowledgement to suit the exigencies of his argument, conflating disparates, and effacing a vital distinction:[60] for what purports to be a distinct emotion cannot at the same time be a purely relational quality common to numerous other emotions.

[54] LM X, 214. [55] To Nicolai, November 1756. [56] To Mendelssohn, 18 December 1756.
[57] LM X, 111. [58] LM X, 117. [59] LM X, 100–2.
[60] Cf. Heitner (1982) 126; Martinec (2003) 86–7 and 96–7.

Fear, like admiration, is not an element Lessing wishes to emphasize in the universe of optimism, and he rightly argues that Aristotle's *phobos* should be translated not as 'terror' (*Schrecken*), which is a sudden and overwhelming fear aroused by some actual or imminent catastrophe, but as 'fear' (*Furcht*), a less immediate apprehension of possible catastrophe in the future.[61] But whereas, in the earlier correspondence on tragedy, he had treated this fear as a sympathetic emotion which we may—or may not—feel for the hero,[62] he now maintains, in the *Dramaturgy*, that it is felt by the spectator for himself, and is therefore an inseparable complement to tragic pity: in other words, what we pity in others, we necessarily fear for ourselves, so that our fear is, so to speak, a 'self-related pity'.[63] This neat and plausible explanation of why Aristotle presents these two emotions in conjunction is reinforced, in Lessing's interpretation, by the suggestion that our tragic fear increases our sense of identification with the suffering hero, and thereby intensifies our pity for him.[64]

So far, this revised account of fear is a distinct improvement on the version in the earlier correspondence. But Lessing goes on to say that, once the tragedy is over, our pity for the suffering hero ceases, whereas our fear for ourselves lingers on and furthers the cathartic process.[65] He thereby introduces a parallel inconsistency to that already noted in connection with pity: our tragic fear, it would seem, is both an inseparable ingredient of pity and a distinct and independent emotion. This inconsistency is compounded when Lessing goes on to argue that our tragic fear, as a cathartic agent, serves to temper our pity and reduce it to a mean between extremes, whereas he had previously maintained that its chief function was to intensify our pity.[66] Whether these inconsistencies are remediable or not remains uncertain. For like Lessing's discussion of catharsis as a whole, his discussion of tragic fear raises as many questions as it answers.

Aristotle's theory of catharsis is perhaps the most intensely debated problem in the history of literary criticism, and it is unlikely that its precise meaning will ever be unanimously agreed.[67] In Lessing's case, the difficulty is even greater: to the problem of what Aristotle meant is added the problem of what Lessing's own less than transparent interpretation means. In the correspondence on tragedy, Lessing had no use for catharsis, sharing the view of Du Bos that all passions, including those roused by tragedy, are inherently agreeable, and maintaining that pity alone is essential to tragedy.[68] His dismissal of catharsis was due primarily to the fact that Corneille and later the rationalists had interpreted it in a didactic sense, as a means of deterring the spectator, primarily through fear, from yielding to the passions which led to the hero's downfall.[69] As for the meaning of the term itself, as a 'purging' or 'purification' of (German *Reinigung von*) the tragic passions, the majority of critics have long preferred the former sense, namely the separative genitive:[70] as

[61] LM X, 98–9; cf. Kommerell 98–9. [62] To Nicolai, 2 April 1757; Martinec (2003) 106.
[63] LM X, 102. [64] LM X, 104; cf. Fick (2010) 348–9. [65] LM X,110.
[66] LM X, 117–18; cf. Martinec (2005) 84–98. [67] Cf. Luserke *passim*.
[68] To Mendelssohn, 2 February 1757; cf. LM VI, 187–8 (1754).
[69] See Golawski-Braungart (1999) 401; Nisbet (1993a) 9; cf. LM X, 113 and 115.
[70] See Luserke 387 and 391; Fick (2010) 339; Martinec (2003) 119 and 125.

potentially harmful passions, pity and fear are aroused, and harmlessly and pleasurably purged or discharged, by the tragic spectacle. Lessing, however, has little use for this interpretation, except in the attenuated sense that the cathartic process allegedly frees or purges us from an excess or deficiency of the emotions in question.[71] The sense which he really favours is the objective genitive: catharsis is a purification of the passions themselves, which thereby acquire a morally constructive significance. As Lessing puts it:[72]

> this purification [*Reinigung*] consists in nothing other than the transformation of the passions into virtuous capacities. But since every virtue, according to our philosopher [i.e. Aristotle], has extremes on either side of it between which it lies, tragedy must be able to purge [*reinigen*] us of both extremes of pity if it is to transform pity into a virtue; and the same must also apply to fear.

Lessing is not alone in opting for the objective genitive here. Heinsius, Dacier, and Batteux had all done so before him,[73] and others have argued more recently that the process of catharsis leads to an 'intellectual clarification' or even 'ethical enlightenment'.[74] As Lessing also indicates, the notion that moral virtue represents a mean between emotional extremes is also to be found in Aristotle himself, and the doctrine that moderation in all things is the essence of wisdom is a commonplace in European thought.[75] But the elaborate mechanism whereby, according to Lessing, pity and fear cancel out their own and each other's extremes, in eight possible combinations, and thereby generate 'virtuous capacities' is by no means transparent;[76] nor is it clear how tragedy, whose basic function was to arouse the emotions of pity and fear, can subsequently also temper and moderate them. Lessing's earlier theory that the exercise of pity disposes us to benevolence was both simpler and clearer; and even in the *Dramaturgy*, it is rather the arousal of pity than its supposed 'purification' which remains central. It is at any rate certain that the moral slant of his interpretation, doubtless derived from his earlier theory and from the ethics of sensibility, takes him well beyond Aristotle, for whom virtue lies not in the emotions or their cultivation, but rather in their management.[77]

Two further topics on which Lessing has surprisingly little to say deserve to be mentioned here. In the first place, he touches only briefly on the pleasure which tragedy arouses, perhaps because he had now distanced himself from the effusions of sentiment which *Miss Sara Sampson* had encouraged, and on which he had commented approvingly in 1756: the humanizing consequences of tragic pity were now more important to him than the pleasure it afforded. But what little he does say, especially in his long discussion of Weisse's *Richard III*, contains one remarkable insight. His perception that even our revulsion at Richard's crimes affords a paradoxical aesthetic pleasure, a pleasure which derives from the purposiveness (*Zweckmässigkeit*) of his actions, anticipates the central thesis of Schiller's essay of

[71] LM X, 117–18; cf. B VI, 1042 and Dressler 95–6. [72] LM X, 117.
[73] Robertson (1939) 373–6. [74] Luserke 393 and 443; cf. ibid. 232–45 and 352–85.
[75] See, for example, Shaftesbury (1999) 200.
[76] LM X, 117–18; cf. Kommerell 211–12 and 274–6.
[77] Cf. Riedel (1990) 1336; also Martinec (2006) 751–4.

1792 on the source of tragic pleasure.[78] Secondly, his discussion of the tragic emotions and of catharsis makes no use of the mimetic theory of art which is fundamental to Aristotle's *Poetics*. Apart from the fact that Lessing no longer has any use for it in his account of dramatic illusion and the subjective response to tragedy, he also makes no distinction between the emotions aroused by tragedy itself (especially pity) and the same emotions aroused by real-life situations.[79] In this instance, his earlier theory of tragedy, inspired by literary sensibility with its undifferentiated cultivation of pity, takes precedence over Aristotle; he remains more concerned with the moral consequences of pity than with its aesthetic origin, in keeping with his belief—despite his rejection of rationalistic moralizing and didacticism—that the ultimate purpose of tragedy is to advance the cause of enlightenment and make us better citizens.

Ingenious and influential though it was, Lessing's theory of tragedy now seems somewhat contrived and dated, especially in its metaphysical optimism. It contains few original insights, and most of its ideas can be found among earlier writers.[80] But just as in *Laocoön*, its combination and reformulation of existing ideas, and its grasp of the rationale behind them, is frequently brilliant: it is to these qualities that Ernst Cassirer pays generous tribute in the concluding pages of *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment*. That the *Dramaturgy* contains contradictions and inconsistencies is also undeniable, as Lessing himself acknowledges towards the end of the work.[81] These are a natural consequence of his unsystematic and experimental approach, of the work's intermittent and often hasty composition, and not least, of its polemical purpose: in order to discredit French tragedy, Lessing uses every conceivable expedient to harness Aristotle to his cause. In this polemical purpose, he was all too successful. As Ernst Gombrich recalled of his own schooldays in Germany, generations of German schoolchildren continued to be taught 'that French tragedies are frigid and contrived and only of interest to specialists'.[82]

Like Aristotle, Lessing has relatively little to say on comedy. Here again, he has no systematic theory. But he is markedly less prescriptive, and more tolerant of different varieties of comedy, than he was in the case of tragedy. He speaks positively of the French, especially Marivaux and Molière; he comments favourably on a farce by Regnard, and defends the much maligned harlequin; and he has high praise for Diderot's serious comedy *Le Père de famille*.[83] It is unfortunate that his earlier plan, outlined in letters of the 1750s, to write one or more treatises on comedy never came to fruition, for he plainly had interesting things to say on the psycho-physical basis and close affinity of laughter and tears, and on the underlying continuity between comedy and tragedy which makes it possible to move naturally from one to the other.[84] He remains opposed to the satirical comedy of types,

[78] LM X, 121–2; Schiller V, 358–72.
[79] Cf. Hamburger 257–9.
[80] See Robertson (1939) 349; Nivelle 96–7.
[81] LM X, 187–8.
[82] Gombrich 134.
[83] LM IX, 299–300 and 303; X, 6–7(Molière); IX, 301–3 (Regnard); IX, 257–8 (harlequin); X, 140 (Diderot).
[84] To Nicolai, November 1756; to Mendelssohn, 13 November 1756 and 14 September 1757; cf. Böhler 255.

and to ridicule (*Verlachen*) as opposed to sympathetic laughter (*Lachen*); for the former reinforces prejudice and intolerance, whereas laughter at human weakness in general—including our own—is morally constructive. And just as with tragedy, he clings to the belief that comedy has a moral purpose. But while this may be furthered by observing the specific foibles depicted and learning to avoid them, he does not believe that comedy's main function is to satirize vice. Its main function, he now declares—and this is his main addition to his earlier pronouncements on comedy—is therapeutic:[85]

> Its true general usefulness lies in laughter itself, in exercising our ability to detect the ridiculous [...]. If it cannot cure any desperate illnesses, it is enough for it to reinforce the healthy in their health [...]. A prophylactic, too, is a valuable medicine [...]

(The medical imagery of this passage may well be designed to echo the medical associations of the concept of catharsis in tragedy.)

Lessing's comments on tragi-comedy are even briefer than those on comedy, but much less positive. He excuses Lope de Vega's mingling of the serious and the comic on the grounds that this was dictated by the undeveloped taste of his audience, and he notes Lope's apologetic observation that nature, too, contains similar mixtures of disparates.[86] He also cites the laudatory remarks in Wieland's novel *Agathon* on the rich diversity of Shakespeare's plays, with their stark extremes and incongruities.[87] He is, of course, careful not to condemn either Lope or Shakespeare himself. But in his own judgement, none of the above considerations is enough to justify tragi-comedy as a mixture—however true to reality—of the comic and the tragic, as distinct from an integral dramatic whole in which 'the one does not just follow on the other, but arises so necessarily out of it, and gravity gives rise to laughter, and sadness to joy, so immediately that we find it impossible to abstract the one from the other'.[88] This is precisely the problem he had planned to address in the 1750s in his unwritten treatises on comedy, and like so much else in the *Dramaturgy*, it leaves us with an unanswered question. It is possible, however, that the kind of alternation of the comic and the serious which he has in mind is akin to Tellheim's radical changes of mood and behaviour in *Minna von Barnhelm*, which Lessing had only recently completed.

If Lessing's theory does correspond on this occasion to his own dramatic practice, this is rather the exception than the rule. That the two rarely converge is not so much because, as has been suggested, his theory states that drama should appeal primarily to the emotions whereas his dramas appeal primarily to the intellect.[89] It is rather because, with the exception of *Miss Sara Sampson*, his completed dramas from *The Freethinker* and *The Jews* onwards promote ideological causes of a political or religious nature, for which his dramatic theory makes no provision. In promoting these causes, he certainly does appeal to the spectator's emotions—except that the emotions concerned, such as dismay, anger, and even admiration, are not always those which his theory prescribes.

[85] LM IX, 303–4; cf. B VI, 991. [86] LM X, 76–8. [87] LM X, 78–80.
[88] LM X, 83. [89] See Steinmetz (1977) *passim*.

It has been argued that the influence of the *Dramaturgy* on subsequent drama and dramatic theory was minimal or largely negative.[90] On the negative side, it did indeed hasten the end of heroic and martyr tragedies of French inspiration and the decline of verse drama in the 1770s. But more positively, it also strengthened two of the main tendencies in Storm and Stress drama, namely the exaltation of Shakespeare and the further development of domestic realism. The dramatic theory and practice of the young Schiller also owed much to Lessing's work, as did those of the Mannheim theatre in which Schiller made his theatrical debut.[91] But most of all, the *Dramaturgy* gave an immense impetus to dramatic criticism in Germany. A host of dramatic and theatrical periodicals—nearly 120 by the end of the century—sprang up, many of them directly modelled on Lessing's work, and often with the word *Dramaturgie* or *dramaturgisch* in their titles.[92] And despite predictable protests from the French community in Berlin,[93] the work was not without influence in France itself: Louis-Sébastien Mercier planned to translate it, and a translation by François Cacault, who visited Lessing in 1773,[94] was published in Paris in 1785.[95] In what remains the most substantial scholarly study of the *Dramaturgy*, it has not unjustly been described as 'the greatest dramaturgic text-book of its century'.[96]

The influence of the *Dramaturgy* on the foremost German dramas of the following century was nevertheless limited. In Goethe's *Götz von Berlichingen*, Schiller's *Wallenstein*, Büchner's *Danton's Death* and most major tragedies of the nineteenth century, there is much more emphasis on the destructive power of impersonal external forces than in Lessing's dramatic theory and practice, where individual character and tensions within smaller human groups remain central. Lessing's most important contribution, though impossible to quantify, probably lies in the boost he gave to German self-confidence at a time when vernacular drama was still overshadowed by foreign models.

Lessing completed no new drama during his Hamburg years, but he did continue to work on several dramatic projects, one of which was later published as *Emilia Galotti*. Substantial fragments of three of the remaining projects survive, two of which go back to his early years as a writer. Since these two works, *Doctor Faust* and *The Widow of Ephesus* (along with *Samuel Henzi*, discussed in Chapter 6), are the most significant of all his unfinished dramas, they merit fuller discussion here.

A few months after he arrived in Hamburg, Lessing informed his brother: 'I intend to have my *D[octor] Faust* performed here before the winter is out. At least I'm working on it intensively.'[97] It is a remarkable fact that, like Goethe, Lessing worked intermittently on a Faust drama for most of his adult life, despite the great

[90] Heitner (1956) *passim*; on the work's reception see also B VI, 930–45.
[91] See Sharpe (2007) 56–7, 62–3, 77–8; also Fick (2010) 358–9.
[92] Bender (1992) 81–*passim*; Fick (2010) 357–8.
[93] Karl Lessing to L., 11 April 1768.
[94] L. to Karl Lessing, 8 April 1773.
[95] See Seifert (L.-Bibliography) 286 (No. 2106).
[96] Robertson (1939) 491.
[97] To Karl Lessing, 21 September 1767; on the following see Guthke (1967b) *passim*.

disparity—which commentators have often noted—between the Faust legend, with its devils, magic, and Christian supernaturalism, and the Enlightenment values to which Lessing consistently subscribed.[98] Admittedly, the fact that Gottsched had explicitly condemned the popular play on Faust was a provocation which Lessing could not resist, and to which, as already noted, he responded in the seventeenth *Letter on Literature*, with his scene of Faust and the seven devils. Besides, given his lifelong sympathy for heretics and outsiders, he was inevitably drawn to Faust as a seeker after forbidden knowledge and the arch-outsider of European drama.[99] But Faust is quite unlike the other champions of free thought whom Lessing defended, such as Cardano, Reimarus, and Spinoza (or, in a dramatic context, Adrast in his own *The Freethinker*): for his quest for knowledge is deeply flawed, initially by superstition, and subsequently by a life of buffoonery and crude self-indulgence. Something more than this was needed to convince Lessing that this individual, and in particular his early renunciation of his thirst for knowledge, could form the subject of a tragedy, as distinct from an ironic burlesque. A brief review of Lessing's encounters with the topic may help to provide an explanation.

The earliest allusions to the Faust legend occur in his first completed play, *The Young Scholar*, begun as early as 1747 and published seven years later. These references—to Faust's arcane learning, his dismissal of all the academic faculties, and his ultimate damnation[100]—serve merely to underline the hollowness of the hero's scholarly pretensions, and they may have been inserted at any time before the work's publication at Easter 1754. Soon after that date, Lessing again encountered the legend, for he almost certainly attended Franz Schuch's performance of the ever-popular Faust play, with all its farcical elements, in Berlin on 14 June 1754.[101] That was, of course, precisely the time when he was preparing his edition of Mylius' collected writings: the last of the six supposed 'letters' of which his preface consists, and in which he reveals Mylius' satirical proposal to finance a world tour by exploiting gullible backers, is dated 20 June of that year;[102] and the proposal itself, it will be recalled, is prefixed by a vignette of a horned devil. Here, then, was a real-life example of an adventurer whose quest for knowledge was fraught from the beginning with moral danger, and whose road to perdition, as Lessing would soon discover on renewing contact with Kästner in Leipzig, led through self-indulgence and misappropriation of funds to despair and ignominious death. In the preface to Mylius' writings, he cites a verse he had dedicated to Mylius on his departure for America, describing him as a hero driven by thirst for knowledge (*Wissbegier*).[103] In the prelude to the first sketch of his Faust drama, it is precisely this quality (*Wissbegierde*) which a devil identifies as the means to Faust's seduction.[104]

It is not until the last months of the following year, when Lessing returned to Leipzig and prepared for his journey to England with Winckler, that his plan for a

[98] Cf. Oehlke I, 318; Mahal 261; B VI, 823. [99] Cf. Nisbet (2005b) 87.
[100] LM I, 282–3 and 300–1. [101] Cf. B IV, 826; E. Schmidt I, 355.
[102] LM VI, 406. [103] LM VI, 393. [104] LM III, 380.

tragedy (Moses Mendelssohn calls it 'your domestic tragedy')[105] on the Faust theme is first mentioned in his correspondence. He tells Breitenbauch, in a letter full of references to devils, hell, and magic, that he is currently working on this drama, and adds: 'I am saving the composition of the most terrible scenes for England […], the home of *ruminating despair*'.[106] He knew, by this time, all about Mylius' despair and wretched death in London, and he may already have been planning to follow Mylius' circuitous route to England.

The surviving draft of Lessing's original plan, probably devised around this time, consists of a brief prelude in which an assembly of devils plots Faust's seduction, and outlines of three scenes, with a fragment of dialogue, in which Faust conjures up the infernal powers; to these must be added the later scene from the seventeenth *Letter on Literature* of 1759, in which Faust interrogates another group of devils. The most striking feature of these drafts is that they tell us little more about Faust than that he is driven by a thirst for knowledge, and that the devils he subsequently invokes will exploit this motive in order to ruin him. No indication is given of how this ruin will be accomplished, or how the tragedy will end. In short, we have here the same discrepancy—implicit approval of Faust's basic motivation and failure to reconcile it with his moral undoing—as that in the strange preface, half apology, half denunciation, with which Lessing introduced Mylius' collected writings. This discrepancy remains unresolved in all of his attempts to dramatize the Faust legend. It was also the ultimate cause of their failure.

The original plan does not seem to have developed materially until at least the late 1760s, and there is no evidence to substantiate the claim of a Breslau acquaintance, reported by Karl Lessing, to have read twelve manuscript sheets of the play during Lessing's stay in that city.[107] Lessing did, however, continue to consult works on magic and conjuration, in Hamburg as well as in Breslau, presumably to add colour to the opening scenes,[108] and there are several references to the project in his correspondence with Ebert in his last two years in Hamburg.[109] The first hint of a new departure comes in a note in the commonplace book which he compiled between 1768 and 1775, where he refers, at some point in those years, to 'my second Faust', and to historical models for the 'seducer' in that version.[110] It is clear from later reports that he must here be alluding to his second plan for a Faust drama, without supernatural elements, in which an 'arch-villain' would succeed in corrupting an innocent victim (presumably Faust).[111] No drafts of this plan survive, and nothing more is known of its content, although it has been suggested that the diabolical figure of Marinelli in *Emilia Galotti* may owe something to it.[112] It is likely that this plan failed because of the problems of theodicy and of wholly evil and wholly innocent characters in tragedy, as discussed in the *Hamburg Dramaturgy*.

Concurrently with this plan, Lessing returned to his original version and revised or extended it in significant ways. Although no drafts survive, we do have three fairly

[105] Mendelssohn to L., 19 November 1755. [106] To Breitenbauch,12 December 1755.
[107] B IV, 825. [108] KGL 140; L. to Karl Lessing, 21 September 1767.
[109] Ebert to L., 4 October 1768, 26 January 1769 and 7 January 1770.
[110] LM XV, 219. [111] B IV, 833 and 835. [112] Oehlke I, 319.

full reports on its content, one supplied by Ewald von Kleist's nephew Christian Friedrich von Blankenburg and two by the philosopher and critic Johann Jakob Engel, all of them based on conversations with Lessing, almost certainly during his visit to Berlin in 1776.[113] Although these reports differ on minor details, they all agree on the basic point that, while the devils once again plan to seduce Faust through his thirst for truth or knowledge, their scheme is frustrated by an 'angel' (or 'angel of providence'). This angel substitutes for the real Faust a phantom, whose eventual corruption and damnation the devils are about to celebrate when the angel's deception, and the real Faust's salvation, are revealed from on high, and (in Blankenburg's account) the angel acclaims Faust's thirst for knowledge as 'the noblest of impulses'.[114] According to Engel, it was also to be revealed that the entire action was but a dream of the real Faust, who awakens to thank providence for the timely warning.

It is evident from these reports that Lessing's final reworking of the original plan did not so much resolve the discrepancy between Faust's commendable thirst for knowledge and his self-incurred perdition as remove it altogether: the real Faust remains blameless, and an unreal surrogate falls from grace and earns the wages of sin. It is, of course, possible that Lessing envisaged Faust's sin as lying not in his quest for knowledge or truth itself, but—as more than one commentator has suggested[115]—in expecting or demanding to receive such truth entire or all at once. But if so, it is difficult to imagine exactly how the devils would have led this impatient or dogmatic Faust—or rather, his phantom surrogate—into mortal sin, reduced him to despair, and rendered his damnation, let alone the 'terrible scenes' which would presumably have preceded it, plausible to the audience or reader. In theory, Lessing certainly believed that the transition from good to evil was fluid and possibly instantaneous (as indicated in Faust's encounter with the seventh devil in the scene from the *Letter on Literature*); or in the words of his earlier hero Philotas: 'Our guilt and innocence are capable of infinite misinterpretations and infinite extenuations. Only to the unerring eye of the gods do we appear as we are.'[116] But in all his attempts to dramatize and modernize the Faust legend, he never seems to have succeeded in applying these insights to Faust's motivation—no more than he succeeded, in 1754, in accounting satisfactorily for the transition of his early mentor Mylius from respected natural historian to self-destroying reprobate. What he appears to have overlooked is that, in both cases, it was not the search for knowledge, but its abandonment, which led to catastrophe. (Goethe would later overcome this problem by making Faust's motivation not a quest for truth or knowledge—which he has already rejected—but a quest for varied and intense experience.)

There is no evidence that any version of Lessing's *Faust* progressed further than the surviving fragments and reports suggest. Karl Lessing does mention that material relating to the project, along with other manuscripts, went missing in a trunk which Lessing, on his way to Italy in 1775, sent back to Leipzig for forwarding to Brunswick, but which never arrived.[117] But even if this report is accurate, the

[113] LM III, 386–90; B IV, 835–6; cf. D 382 and 384.
[114] LM III, 386.
[115] B IV, 831; GEL: *D. Faust*, ed. Guthke, 72–4.
[116] LM II, 371.
[117] B IV, 836–7; cf. B XI/2, 1117 and D 391–2.

missing material cannot have differed substantially from the outlines supplied by Blankenburg and Engel, whose information dates from the following year. The only part of the project published in Lessing's lifetime was the scene in the seventeenth *Literaturbrief*, which tells us nothing about the scope and conception of the drama as a whole.

Nevertheless, his plans for one or more Faust dramas had momentous consequences. He discussed them over the years with numerous people, and since news of Lessing's literary activities was always eagerly circulated, his interest in the Faust theme was common knowledge by 1770 at the latest. Not surprisingly, others now turned their attention to it, including Paul Weidmann, Maler Müller, Lenz, and Goethe, and a tacit competition arose between Lessing and his rivals.[118] Lessing apparently resolved to let others, and Goethe in particular, go to press first;[119] and incensed as he was at the way in which the suicide of his friend Karl Wilhelm Jerusalem had been fictionalized in Goethe's *Werther*, he would no doubt have responded intemperately.[120] As it was, Goethe completed the first, fragmentary version of his own *Faust* in 1775, but wisely refrained from publishing it. The *Urfaust* shows no signs of Lessing's influence, and gives no clear indication that Faust will escape damnation. There can, however, be little doubt that, when he eventually completed the work as *Faust I*, Goethe took his cue from Lessing in saving his hero from the clutches of the devil. Once Lessing had recast the legend in the spirit of the Enlightenment, it would never again be possible to denounce Faust's rebellion against medieval values and condemn him to eternal perdition.

The most complete of all Lessing's dramatic fragments is his comedy *The Widow of Ephesus*, planned as early as his student days but probably written, in its surviving form, during and shortly after his stay in Hamburg.[121] Lessing was no misogynist: on the contrary, he satirizes just such a figure in one of his early comedies. But he did have a liking for wicked and even black humour, and he enjoyed and imitated the cynical epigrams of Martial, many of them misogynistic. He was likewise drawn from an early date to that classic of literary misogyny, Petronius' tale of the widow of Ephesus, already dramatized by several eighteenth-century playwrights, including his former fellow-student C. F. Weisse.[122] What attracted him most to it, apart from its wicked humour, was the double challenge of dramatizing the extraordinary and macabre subject matter in a credible manner, and of making the widow's scandalous behaviour not only plausible, but also understandable and even excusable, thereby neutralizing the story's misogynistic implications.

In Petronius' version, a young widow, renowned for her fidelity, resolves to starve herself to death in her husband's tomb. One night, a soldier on guard nearby over the corpses of some crucified thieves notices a light in the tomb and discovers the widow, with her maidservant in attendance. Encouraged by the maidservant, he prevails on the widow first to share his meal, and eventually to respond to his amorous advances. Meanwhile, a relative of one of the crucified thieves removes the unattended corpse and takes it away for burial. The soldier, on discovering the loss,

[118] See Fick (2010) 213; cf. Butler 124–54. [119] Cf. LM III, 385. [120] D 246 and 342.
[121] LM III, 439–66; cf. III, xiii. [122] Weisse I, 365–422; cf. also Griesebach and Ure.

resolves to commit suicide rather than face execution for neglecting his duty. But the widow proves equal to the emergency: reluctant to lose her lover, she gives him her husband's body to replace the stolen corpse.

In his almost complete dramatization, Lessing makes every effort to retain our sympathy for the widow and to present her change of heart as comprehensible. His main reason for doing so, as he indicates in the *Hamburg Dramaturgy*, is to bring the play into line with his own theory of comedy as a realistic form of drama which evokes our sympathetic laughter at human weakness, without forfeiting respect for the comic hero.[123] But as he points out, anyone seeking to dramatize the story faces a peculiar difficulty which previous dramatists, in his opinion, have failed to overcome. For in a dramatic version—especially if the characters are realistically drawn—it is much more difficult to take a tolerant view of the widow's behaviour than it is in the narrative form, in which our distance from the events and our delight at the story's ironic twists make us able to accept, or even excuse, the widow's stratagem. The solution he proposes is as follows:[124]

> In short, if Petronius' story is to be successfully dramatised, it would have to retain the same ending, yet also not retain it; the widow would have to go just as far, yet also not as far.—The explanation will follow elsewhere!

He is clearly alluding here to the solution adopted in his own unfinished draft. He makes the report of the missing corpse an invention of the soldier's servant, thereby making its replacement unnecessary. Nevertheless, the widow still has to agree to the substitution before the need for it is removed; and it is shortly before this point is reached that Lessing's final draft breaks off. As a result, most critics have concluded that he abandoned the work because he was unable to make the widow's consent to the substitution convincing or acceptable—that is, to avoid making her appear vicious or depraved.[125]

As I have shown in detail elsewhere,[126] this cannot be the reason why the play remained incomplete, for Lessing had already succeeded brilliantly, in the final draft, in motivating the widow's actions credibly and sympathetically. To achieve this end, he employed two strategies. Firstly, he raised the level of the principal characters and their dialogue, making them more refined and sophisticated than in any previous version of the story and eliminating the coarser elements almost completely; and secondly, he worked out the widow's motivation to the last detail, building up a series of pressures which leave her no alternative but to act as she does.

The main device to implement the first of these strategies was, as already mentioned, to make the report of the theft an invention of the soldier's servant, thereby eliminating the grisly ending. But Lessing's soldier has also become an officer, and—in some respects at least—a gentleman. All the coarser humour is relegated to his servant, and although it is above all the widow's weakness which is satirized—as in her splendidly ironic oath not to leave the tomb 'without my soul's beloved'[127]—the satire is humane and good-humoured throughout.

[123] LM IX, 333–4; cf. IX, 302–4. [124] LM IX, 334.
[125] Cf. Petsch 88; van Stockum 131; Schröder (1972) 303; Pütz 72.
[126] Nisbet (1989) *passim*. [127] LM III, 453.

But it is to the second of his strategies that Lessing devotes most attention. One of his most ingenious additions to the plot is to make the widow feign sleep in order to escape the intruder's attentions, thereby compelling her to listen to his praises of her beauty, delivered with passionate eloquence. Another is to have the officer claim, just as the widow, now awake, is about to insist that he leave immediately, that he was her husband's bosom friend and comrade-in-arms in earlier days. This enables him to gain her confidence and appear to share her grief. The more he commiserates with her and magnifies their common loss, the more she likes it—and him—until he suddenly remembers his duty. This is where the final draft breaks off. Up to this point, the widow's motivation is complete. All that remained to be written was a short scene with the false report of the stolen corpse, followed at once by the officer's suicidal despair and the widow's agreement to save him. With the widow now facing a new catastrophe which she must associate intimately with the first—the loss of her husband's friend and the sharer of her grief—it is not straining credibility unduly to suppose that she is unlikely to resist for long her servant's insistence that, as a matter of life and death, the only way to save the officer is to surrender her husband's corpse. This grim prospect would have been removed at once by the confession of the officer's servant that he invented the story of the theft to further his master's designs; and after the officer's stern rebuke, the comic atmosphere would have returned in the final scene, essentially complete in the first of Lessing's drafts, between the two servants.

Never was Lessing's dramatic ingenuity put to more rigorous use than in *The Widow of Ephesus*, to render the heroine's motivation intelligible in terms of realistic psychology. Never before had so diverse, subtle, and devastating an accumulation of pressures been brought to bear so tellingly against the widow's resistance, or her capitulation been made to seem so inevitable. In comparison, the heroine's motivation in *Emilia Galotti* is far less transparent and much more problematic, although Lessing successfully completed that play soon afterwards. It is therefore improbable that his dissatisfaction with the widow's motivation was the reason why he failed to complete *The Widow of Ephesus*. In fact, none of the explanations hitherto advanced for Lessing's failure to complete or publish *The Widow of Ephesus* is wholly adequate. The decisive factor is altogether more obvious, and this may explain why no one seems to have suggested it before.

In January 1770, Lessing learned that his friend Engelbert König had died in Italy. By June of that year, after his move to Wolfenbüttel, he had begun an affectionate correspondence with his deceased friend's wife, to whom he became engaged in the following year. Life had suddenly caught up with art: the courtship of a widow had become the centre of Lessing's own emotional existence. The parallel became closer still when Eva travelled to Vienna in the autumn of 1770 to sort out her husband's affairs. She wrote to Lessing of how her maidservant's drunken involvement with the servant of an aristocratic fellow-traveller had deprived her of sleep, and how her own grief had broken out anew.[128] Instead of blaming the maid

[128] Eva König to L., 21 and 30 September 1770.

for keeping Eva, who was in precarious health, up all night, Lessing commended her, in his reply, for helping to distract Eva from her grief and thereby restore her to life.[129] In other words, he was applying the psychology of his unfinished drama to the real-life situation, echoing his own attempts to portray the widow's recall to life in a sympathetic, even providential manner. But once these connections had been made, it would have been unthinkable for him to resume work on the unfinished play (or to publish it if, as has sometimes been claimed, he had already completed it);[130] for the widow's recall to life is coupled with a betrayal of her late husband's memory, and her suitor's claim to have been her late husband's friend is a calculated falsehood. For different reasons, it would have seemed to both Lessing and Eva like a sick joke.

There is, however, a real internal weakness in Lessing's play, a weakness exacerbated by his very success in overcoming the problem he had set out to solve, namely that of the widow's motivation. The widow is subjected, at her most vulnerable moment, to an overwhelming series of pressures, including flattery she cannot escape, the flatterer's professed friendship with her late husband, and the sudden and all-too-genuine threat of his suicide and a second bereavement. These pressures are so great, and applied with such finesse and timing, that her momentary consent to the macabre proposition that was to have been put to her would have been eminently understandable. But the very magnitude of these pressures means that her decision to abandon her vow cannot be wholly free. She overcomes the tyranny of her husband's memory only by surrendering to another dominant male, whereas only a free decision to return to life, taken without external harassment, could fully restore her dignity. But such a decision is impossible within the framework of the traditional story. The problem is that, within that framework, the freer an agent the widow is, the more fickle she will appear, and the less free she is, the more she will appear a passive victim of male domination; but in neither case will she appear in a wholly favourable light. In other words, Lessing could not eliminate the story's misogynistic content entirely without destroying its structure, and with it, the main source of its humour. Whether or not he had such considerations in mind when he decided to abandon this remarkable comedy, it is impossible to say. But it is certain that, around the time when he stopped working on it, he was confronted with a real-life situation which must have shown up the play's latent misogyny in all its harshness. And that was enough to ensure that it would never be published in his lifetime.

Like *Miss Sara Sampson*, the third incomplete play from the Hamburg period, *Der Schlaftrunk* (*The Sleeping Draught*), was begun as the result of a wager. When Lessing declared in 1766 that one could make a tragedy or comedy out of any topic, Ramler challenged him to write a comedy on the boredom-inducing theme of a sleeping draught.[131] Lessing promptly drew up a three-act scenario,[132] but his move to Hamburg interrupted further progress; and although he began to print the first two acts in the following year,[133] the work remained unfinished. The plot is an intrigue to

[129] L. to Eva König, 25 October 1770. [130] See D 303, 392, 564.
[131] B VI, 867–8. [132] LM III, 409–14. [133] LM III, 414–39.

prevent an elderly miser, by means of a sleeping draught, from meeting a deadline which would allow him to bankrupt his old friend, thereby making it impossible for the latter's son to marry the miser's niece and heir; needless to say, the intrigue is successful.[134] Lessing probably felt, in planning this slight and conventional piece, that he had already proved his point, and once he left Berlin, he had little incentive to complete it. Apart from some lively dialogue, the play has little to distinguish it, as Lessing no doubt realized when he abandoned it for other projects.

In the summer of 1768, Lessing began work on his *Antiquarian Letters* (*Briefe, antiquarischen Inhalts*), thereby resuming those studies of ancient art which had lain dormant since the publication of *Laocoön* two years before.[135] The purpose of the *Antiquarian Letters* is polemical, and they have not unfairly been described as 'the most mortal part of his immortal œuvre'.[136] They nevertheless contain many memorable passages, and they helped him to perfect those polemical techniques which he would again employ in the much weightier theological conflicts of ten years later. In addition, the antiquarian conflict with Christian Adolf Klotz, professor of philosophy and rhetoric at the university of Halle, is a significant event in Lessing's biography, reinforcing his reputation as a feared and respected critic.

The origins of the conflict go back to 1766, when Klotz wrote a fulsome letter to Lessing, praising the recently published *Laocoön* and seeking his friendship.[137] Lessing replied in cordial terms, adding that he hoped to call on Klotz that summer on his way back to Berlin from Bad Pyrmont.[138] In the event, he did not make the necessary detour, and Klotz expressed his disappointment in a second effusive letter, declaring his intention to visit Lessing instead and enclosing a laudatory review of *Laocoön*. Lessing did not reply, and Klotz did not visit him.

By 1768, Klotz controlled three learned journals, one of which, the *Deutsche Bibliothek der schönen Wissenschaften*, was set up in direct opposition to Nicolai's *Allgemeine Deutsche Bibliothek*. Lessing noticed its hostile and pretentious tone in February of that year, and when he mentioned it to Nicolai, the latter urged him to tackle Klotz in the manner of the earlier *Letters on Literature*, for Klotz was also by this time sniping at Lessing and other writers who had not identified themselves as his allies.[139] The matter was further discussed when Lessing and Nicolai met at the Easter Fair in Leipzig, and Lessing then began to study the recent publications of Klotz and his followers, informing Nicolai that he was preparing to take the offensive.[140] He planned to do so in two contributions, the first of which was entitled *On the Ancestral Portraits of the Ancient Romans*. In this work, which remained unfinished, Lessing took issue with Klotz's contention that the portraits in question were encaustic paintings, correctly arguing that they were three-dimensional wax images.[141] The second contribution, which appeared in late June in two Hamburg newspapers,[142] was written in response to a reviewer (in fact, Lessing's old adversary Dusch)[143] who declared that Klotz, in his recent book *On the Use and Function of*

[134] Further details in Zwierzina *passim*. [135] LM X, 229–438. [136] Riedel (1984) 17.
[137] To L., 9 May 1766. [138] L. to Klotz, 9 June 1766.
[139] L. to Nicolai, 2 February 1768; Nicolai to L., 24 February 1768.
[140] To Nicolai, 9 June 1768. [141] LM XV, 68–86; cf. B V/2, 922–36.
[142] LM X, 232, n. 1. [143] See D 256.

Ancient Engraved Gems, had convicted Lessing of an 'unpardonable error' by denying, in *Laocoön*, that the ancient artists liked to draw their subjects from Homer's epics. In his reply—which became the first of the *Antiquarian Letters*—Lessing took Dusch to task for his uncharitable expression (although he had himself used it, in the *Letters on Literature*, of feeble translations),[144] and showed that Klotz had misinterpreted the criticized passage in *Laocoön*.[145] Warming to his theme, Lessing now proceeded to attack other criticisms of *Laocoön* in Klotz's book, and identified numerous inaccuracies, errors, and plagiarisms in Klotz's own reflections on ancient gems. The whole was then published, in the form of thirty-four 'letters', as *Antiquarian Letters*, Part I, by Nicolai at the end of September 1768. Part II, with a further twenty-three 'letters' on the same material, followed a year later.

Why Lessing's initially limited plans to refute a few of Klotz's criticisms suddenly expanded, in the latter part of June 1768, into a full-scale assault on Klotz and all that he stood for is an interesting question, especially since the final sections of the *Hamburg Dramaturgy* still remained to be written. But in that same summer, as already mentioned, Lessing underwent a personal crisis, which culminated in his announcement, on 24 September, that he planned to leave Germany for Italy. It may well be that, as soon as news of Winckelmann's death reached Hamburg in the second half of June,[146] he resolved to consolidate his reputation as a leading antiquarian in preparation for a move to Rome; and if so, he might usefully begin by discrediting Klotz as a potential rival.

Christian Adolf Klotz, born in 1738, was a child prodigy, encouraged and cosseted by his father, a well-to-do senior clergyman.[147] Already as a student, he published numerous poems, reviews, and satires, together with several learned works. At the age of twenty-three, he was appointed to a chair at Göttingen. On his move to a chair of philosophy and rhetoric at Halle in 1765, he was given the title of *Hofrat* (Court Councillor), and further promoted to *Geheimrat* (Privy Councillor) a year later after declining a lucrative offer from Warsaw. His early works on Latin authors, like his own poems, are mostly in Latin, which he wrote fluently and elegantly. But from 1766, he wrote mainly in German, directing his works on ancient numismatics and dactyliography at a wider audience. His reputation was effectively destroyed by Lessing, ably seconded by Herder, in 1768 and 1769, and his health, undermined by loose living, gave way in 1771. He died at the age of thirty-three at the end of that year.

Three circumstances led Klotz to abandon Latin treatises on classical literature for vernacular works on the visual arts. The first was the international success of Winckelmann in the latter area; the second was a visit to Dresden in 1765, where he met Christian Ludwig von Hagedorn, Director of the Dresden Academy of Art, and Philipp Daniel Lippert, a former porcelain worker whose paste reproductions of ancient gems, coins and medals had become fashionable collectors' pieces; and the third was Lessing's *Laocoön*, whose popular resonance Klotz hoped to equal with books on numismatics and engraved gems.[148]

[144] LM VIII, 9. [145] LM X, 232–5. [146] See PO XV, Part 17, 38 and B XI/1, 905.
[147] See the article 'Christian Adolf Klotz' in ADB XVI, 228–31; also Hausen *passim* and Kawerau 187–229.
[148] See Hausen 30 and 73–4.

Fig. 27. Christian Adolph Klotz, painting by Johann Georg Rosenberg.

Klotz adopted the role of a *bel esprit*, disparaging the 'barbarism and ignorance' of the common herd and simultaneously dissociating himself from the 'pedantry' of academic scholarship.[149] His cult of 'taste' (*Geschmack*) was directed not at the Greek sculptures venerated by Winckelmann, but primarily at the graces, fauns, amoretti and other exquisite figures of the ancient gems and coins. Such artefacts were judged by their appeal to that Anacreontic hedonism which Lessing, in his early poetry, had also invoked but leavened with self-distancing irony. Unlike the neo-classicism of Lessing and Winckelmann, for whom nature and simplicity were the hallmarks of Greek art, the aestheticism of Klotz and his followers was self-consciously louche and mannered. But for all their air of exclusivity, the aim of Klotz's writings, like that of Lippert's paste intaglios, was to market the rococo tastes of the mid-century aristocracy to a mainly middle-class public.

All along, Klotz had spread his talents too widely. He had dabbled in many areas of ancient literature but specialized in none, and in the visual arts, he was even more of a dilettante. His scholarship was correspondingly superficial. These deficiencies would have done him little personal harm had they not been allied to more serious defects of character, which first alienated, and eventually enraged, more able minds than his. Vanity was Klotz's driving force, and it fuelled ambitions which he pursued with cynical opportunism. His primary means to advancement was flattery; he ingratiated himself with the powerful and patronized the up-and-coming. He dedicated his works to people of influence, such as Frederick the Great's associate Quintus Icilius, the recipient of his edition of Tyrtæus. He had a shrewd grasp of the power of the press, and his three learned journals, edited with the help of disciples, systematically lauded the publications of his own circle, flattered those of potential allies, and disparaged or vilified those of authors who had

[149] See Klotz to L., 9 May 1766; E. Schmidt I, 609 and 617.

criticized, or merely ignored, the works of Klotz and his associates. After negative reviews of Klotz's poems and minor Latin works appeared in Nicolai's *Allgemeine Deutsche Bibliothek*, to which Klotz himself had contributed, it became almost a rule to denigrate whatever Nicolai's journal praised, especially works by authors—including Lessing—whom Klotz now associated with the 'Berlin school'. It was therefore no wonder that Gerstenberg labelled Klotz 'Gottsched the Second'.[150] If one of his erstwhile friends is to be believed, Klotz's duplicity was such that he defended a colleague in one of his own journals against a damning review which he had himself contributed to Nicolai's journal.[151] And at the very time when he was sending flattering letters to Lessing, he said of him to one of his closer associates: 'All that people like him require is incense.'[152] In company such as this, indiscretion was rife, and Klotz's metaphor would later return to haunt him in Lessing's polemics.

All of this was quite sufficient to antagonize Lessing. But something more is necessary to explain the extent of his animosity and the persistence with which he followed it through. Klotz came from Bischofswerda, close to Lessing's native Kamenz, and his father was senior to Lessing's father in the Lutheran hierarchy. Like Lessing, he went to St Afra in Meissen, but his father allowed him to leave when he found the conditions too harsh.[153] Like Lessing, he studied classical philology for two years at Leipzig and took a master's degree at Wittenberg, and his early writings, like Lessing's, included satires on hollow erudition and a defence of Horace's poetry. Though nearly ten years Lessing's junior, he was already the youngest Privy Councillor in Prussia, where Lessing had repeatedly failed to gain advancement.[154] And although he held an academic post, he was now, through his journalism and a series of popular works in German, competing directly with Lessing in the task of improving public taste and bringing the classical tradition to a wider audience.[155] All of these circumstances, along with Klotz's flaunting of his rank on the title page of his publications while referring to Lessing as humble 'Magister', were more than enough to secure Lessing's undivided polemical attention.

The content of the *Antiquarian Letters* is now of purely historical interest. In Part I of the work, Lessing successfully counters most of Klotz's criticisms of *Laocoön* and demolishes many of Klotz's own theories concerning ancient gems. He convicts him of inaccurate use of sources and of plagiarism, or unacknowledged borrowings, from Winckelmann. His refutation of Klotz's claim that the ancients understood linear perspective rests on impressive scholarship and rigorous reasoning. In Part II, he defends himself ingeniously against Klotz's justified accusation that he had falsely identified the sculpture known as the Borghese Gladiator as a representation of the Athenian general Chabrias, and refutes more of Klotz's theories: on the shape and properties of ancient gems, his detailed references to optics and spherical geometry (probably after consultation with Kästner) are a virtuoso performance.[156] The work concludes with a devastating assault on Klotz's character.

[150] B V/2, 1064. [151] Hausen 43–4. [152] D 210.
[153] Hausen 2. [154] See Barner (1993) 24–5. [155] Cf. B V/2, 979.
[156] LM X, 358–88; cf. L. to Kästner, 7 January 1770; on Ls theory of perspective see Seeba (1984) *passim*.

Apart from his now largely obsolete conclusions, Lessing's work has many inadequacies. His approach to visual art, as in *Laocoön*, is primarily that of a philologist, and he himself declares that written sources are of greater value to the antiquarian than personal inspection of the works in question.[157] There are long, and now untenable, speculations on etymology and other peripheral matters, some of them serving only to make up the required length.[158] Mendelssohn and other friends and admirers deplored the fact that Lessing was wasting so much time on trivial issues,[159] and Lessing himself conceded 'I value these studies for what they are worth: as another hobbyhorse to shorten the journey through life.'[160]

The chief merit of the *Antiquarian Letters* lies in their formal properties, above all in their masterly polemical techniques and sparkling and incisive formulations. Lessing's polemical skill is shown to particular advantage when his own position is weak, as in his misidentification of the Borghese Gladiator. When his error, already exposed by Klotz, was again highlighted in an anonymous review in the *Göttingische Gelehrte Anzeigen*—which Lessing soon discovered was by the eminent classicist C. G. Heyne[161]—he constructed an ingenious withdrawal strategy, transforming his inevitable retraction into an attack on Klotz for failing to discern the true nature and understandable origin of his error.[162] Luck, and Heyne, were also on his side: for Heyne, who had clashed with Klotz when he became the latter's superior in Göttingen and who was now himself an object of his attacks,[163] wrote to Lessing in conciliatory terms,[164] and in his subsequent review of Part I of the *Antiquarian Letters*, prepared the way for Lessing's retraction by stressing the inadequacy of the engravings on which Lessing had been obliged to rely.[165]

It is a remarkable fact that Lessing's writing is often no less impressive when he is wrong than when he is right. The brilliance of his style, which can even now bring much of his dated and refractory material to life, has often been noted, and his rhetorical figures, striking images, use of dialogue and the letter form, and constant involvement of the reader have been analysed on many occasions.[166] His contemporaries were already aware of his stylistic originality: Nicolai later praised the *Antiquarian Letters* 'for their excellent manner of writing which, in our language, is in more than one respect *classical*',[167] and Heyne observed that 'Mr Lessing speaks with an energy of which, to judge by normal usage, one would scarcely have thought our language capable.'[168] Some of the *Letters* have a blunt directness and colloquial vividness which, coupled with conceptual precision and logical rigour, had rarely been achieved in German scholarly discourse since Reformation times, and has rarely been equalled since. Some of the best examples occur towards

[157] LM X, 273 and 311. [158] For example, LM X, 293–307 and 390–410.
[159] See D 289; Karl Lessing to L., 11 November 1769; B V/2, 727 and 1081.
[160] To Mendelssohn, 5 November 1768; cf. L. to Nicolai, 2 January 1770.
[161] See B V/2, 1017–19. [162] LM X, 335–7; cf. E. Schmidt I, 622.
[163] See Braun I, 251–4. [164] To L., 17 October 1768. [165] B V/2, 1024–5.
[166] See, for example, Markwardt, Jg. 4, 17–19; Feinäugle 136–9; Jens 11–33; B V/2, 982 and 986.
[167] B V/2, 1079. [168] B V/2, 1062.

the end of the work, where Lessing cites the flattering letters with which Klotz had first approached him, and at one point replies:[169]

> It is one thing to bathe someone in incense; and another—to borrow a phrase from Wernicke—to beat them about the head with the censer. I would like to think that you intended the former: but what you actually did was the latter. I would like to think that this was due only to your clumsiness in swinging the censer: but I nevertheless have the bruises, and I can feel them. Of course it tickles my vanity to hear, even from you, that I wrote quite a good little book. Of course it tickles me to see myself included by you among the ornaments of Germany—for who does not wish at least not to disgrace his fatherland? But enough of this tickling: for can't you see that I'm too doubled up to laugh? Or do you think I have the hide of an elephant? You must think so, for your tickling gets worse and worse and you'll end up tickling me to death.

Like the *Vademecum for Samuel Gotthold Lange*, such passages are amusing. And again like the *Vademecum*, the *Antiquarian Letters* conclude with a very serious lesson—but this time one of more than personal significance. Journalism and criticism have their own code of ethics, which prohibit gross flattery, the formation of cliques and cabals, vilification of adversaries, unsubstantiated allegations, and above all, the use—or misuse—of personal information to cast aspersions on another writer's competence. As Lessing clearly demonstrates, Klotz and his allies have consistently flouted these rules.[170]

It cannot, however, be denied that Lessing himself flouted them, at least in so far as his assault on Klotz was as much an assault on his character—albeit a richly deserved one—as on his scholarship. Mendelssohn, Nicolai, and even Karl Lessing, as well as numerous outsiders, considered his polemics excessively violent:[171] one commentator, with an appropriately classical simile, likened Klotz to Marsyas flayed by Apollo.[172] To these objections, Lessing replied that such things have to be stated in violent terms if they are to have the desired effect.[173] We now know, of course, that his animosity was greatly intensified by his current personal crisis. The hunting metaphors he uses when describing his determination to pursue Klotz to the end,[174] and the plan he drew up for a third, and even longer, series of *Antiquarian Letters*,[175] confirm that, in the latter half of his Hamburg period, this feud became almost an obsession.

To counter Lessing's assault, Klotz had little to offer. In his published replies and reviews of Part I of the *Letters*, he adopted a tone of injured innocence and dignified restraint.[176] But even then, he could not refrain from further falsehoods and calumnies, claiming that Lessing had actively requested his judgement on *Laocoön* and mobilized his brother to attack Klotz in the Berlin press. He declined to reply at all to Part II of the work, but saw to it that one of his disciples—probably Riedel—published a collection of lampoons entitled *Letters of Scurrilous Content*

[169] LM X, 424. [170] LM X, 430–7.
[171] See Nicolai to L., 9 August 1769; KGL 163; B V/2, 965, 984, 1042, 1049.
[172] See Sonnenfels, ed. Rollett, iv (Bibliography primary literature).
[173] To Nicolai, 27 August and 21 October 1768.
[174] D 261; cf. L. to Nicolai, 21 October 1768 and L. to Kästner, 7 January 1770.
[175] LM XV, 105–13. [176] B V/2, 693–7 and 1005–17.

(*Briefe, scurrilischen Inhalts*—the title is modelled on that of Lessing's *Letters*) against Lessing, Heyne, and others.[177]

Meanwhile, Herder devoted two parts of his *Critical Silvae* (*Kritische Wälder*, 1769) to demolishing other works by Klotz, and demonstrated in detail that his monograph on coins and medals, the *Contribution to the History of Taste and Art from Numismatics* (*Beitrag zur Geschichte des Geschmacks und der Kunst aus Münzen*), was largely plagiarized from Addison's *Dialogues upon the Usefulness of Ancient Medals* (1702).[178] Herder and others, including the distinguished Leipzig philologist J. J. Reiske, who thanked Lessing in the name of the German public at large,[179] were profoundly grateful for Lessing's victory: for the *Antiquarian Letters* had cleared the air and rid German intellectual life of journalistic imperialism for the rest of the century. But many, including Lessing's Berlin friends, were also tired of the protracted polemics, and Nicolai complained long afterwards that copies of Part II of the *Letters* still remained unsold; after the success of *Laocoön*, the *Letters*, with their predominantly negative purpose, were certainly an anticlimax.[180] Yet some of the poison which Klotz had disseminated still lingered on. Gleim and Weisse, both conciliatory characters, had responded in a friendly manner to Klotz's blandishments, and Lessing's assault had placed both of them in an awkward position. Lessing's relations with Gleim showed signs of strain,[181] and his relations with Weisse, already disturbed by his outspoken criticisms of the latter's plays in the *Dramaturgy*, suffered permanent damage, by Weisse's own admission, from Klotz's attempts to drive a wedge between them.[182] Further mischief was done when a collection of letters to Klotz from various German scholars appeared shortly after his death, alienating Lessing from the Viennese theatre reformer Joseph von Sonnenfels.[183]

It is nevertheless difficult not to feel some sympathy for Klotz, whose reputation, despite his undoubted gifts and early successes, was now in ruins; he did not long survive his public humiliation. The news of his death affected Lessing more profoundly than he had expected;[184] but it was not in Lessing's nature to exult over the vanquished. It may well be the case that, as has sometimes been suggested, there is more substance to some of Klotz's now forgotten works than his enemies gave him credit for.[185] Occasional attempts have been made to defend him, but without conspicuous success;[186] for even if his scholarly achievement has been underestimated, his defects of character make any full-scale rehabilitation unlikely.

Given that similarities were early noticed between Klotz's fate and that of Lessing's earlier adversary Lange,[187] it is a fitting irony that Lange himself, in a poem entitled 'On Klotz's Grave', paid what was perhaps the sincerest posthumous tribute to his fellow victim.[188]

[177] Extracts in Braun I, 251–60.
[178] Herder SWS III, 189–480, esp. 386–94.
[179] Reiske to L., 8 February 1769.
[180] See B V/1, 519–21 and V/2, 968.
[181] See L. to Gleim, 8 January 1770; also A (2003) 197–8.
[182] See D 265–7 and A (2005) 229.
[183] See Hagen (1773) (Bibliography primary literature); also L. to Eva König, 3 December 1772 and 8 January 1773.
[184] L. to Eva König, 9 January 1772.
[185] See E. Schmidt I, 607, 613, 619; also Adam *passim*.
[186] See, for example, Namowicz *passim*.
[187] See B V/2, 1007 and 1028.
[188] See the article 'Samuel Gotthold Lange' in ADB XVI, 653 and E. Schmidt I, 633–4.

When Nicolai published Part II of the *Antiquarian Letters* at the end of September 1769, a second, shorter treatise by Lessing entitled *How the Ancients Portrayed Death* (*Wie die Alten den Tod gebildet*), printed on fine paper and with seven engravings, was brought out simultaneously by his old publisher Voss.[189] The changes of publisher and presentation were not fortuitous. They served rather to underline the new work's difference from the polemical *Letters*, and there can be little doubt that it was intended to strengthen Lessing's candidature for the Wolfenbüttel librarianship. He seems to have received a provisional offer of the post in September, or possibly even in August (not all of the correspondence survives), and he wrote his new treatise in a remarkably short time, sending copies of the published work to Brunswick in early October to prepare for his visit in the following month.

Despite its obvious differences from the *Antiquarian Letters*, the treatise on death likewise arose out of the controversy with Klotz.[190] In a footnote to *Laocoön*, Lessing had argued that, following Homer's reference in the *Iliad* to death and sleep as twin brothers, the ancients regularly depicted them as twin boys, and never portrayed death as the skeleton or grim reaper of modern sepulchral art.[191] When Klotz's disciple Meusel published a German edition of Caylus' antiquarian essays in 1769, Klotz contributed a preface defending Caylus against Lessing's criticisms, and cited several representations of skeletons on ancient vases, urns, and intaglios as evidence that Lessing's views on the representation of death were false.[192] In his new treatise, Lessing easily disposed of this allegation, rightly pointing out that he had not denied that skeletons featured in ancient art, but merely that they were never used to represent death itself.[193]

This response could very well have gone straight into the projected third part of the *Antiquarian Letters*. But since he was now no longer primarily concerned to discredit Klotz, his new treatise took on a very different complexion. He actually apologizes in his opening paragraph for the work's polemical origin and concedes that the public may well be tired of such quarrels. But he adds, characteristically, that such controversies do have their uses as a means of unmasking prejudice, falsehood, and unquestioned dogma, before he proceeds to develop his own views on the representation of death in ancient art and on the significance of those (relatively rare) skeletons which do appear in it.

Lessing's first main thesis is that the ancients portrayed the genius of death, or the deity Thanatos who personified it, as a beautiful boy or youth, often with wings and with ankles crossed to indicate repose, holding an inverted torch to indicate the extinction of life. Such figures commonly appear in pairs on sarcophagi and funeral monuments, in which case they normally represent sleep and death as twin brothers. Numerous examples, with several engravings, are adduced in support of this thesis, thereby disputing Klotz's contention that all such figures are variants of Eros or Cupid.[194] Lessing's second thesis is that the few skeletons which do occur in ancient art do not represent death itself, but the *larvae* or spectres of the wicked

[189] LM XI, 1–55. [190] See B VI, 1080–6. [191] LM IX, 76–7; cf. *Iliad* XVI, 681–2.
[192] Text in B VI, 1082–3. [193] LM XI, 5–7. [194] LM XI, 7–26.

dead who have found no peace in the afterlife.[195] These theses are defended in a systematic manner, with syllogistic reasoning and progressive induction. Klotz's conclusions are rejected, but without the personal virulence which permeated the *Antiquarian Letters*: to enhance the impersonal tone, he is even replaced at one point by an imaginary objector.[196] Lessing is manifestly at pains to soften his own image as a fierce controversialist.

Unlike most issues discussed in the *Antiquarian Letters*, that of the portrayal of death is of more than antiquarian interest. Lessing's criticisms of Caylus and Klotz renew his ongoing campaign against French classical taste and rococo frivolity, and his hostility to the skeleton image derives at least in part from his earlier contention (in *Laocoön*) that ugliness has no place in classical art. But his objections to the skeleton are not just aesthetic: they also have cultural and religious implications. In rejecting the image of the skeleton, Lessing is rejecting the Christian view of death—or more accurately, the view of death he associates with those varieties of Christianity which enforce belief by means of terror, thereby negating the autonomy of the individual and violating a fundamental principle of the Enlightenment. His rejection of this view is related to his rejection of terror (*Schrecken*) as an essential tragic emotion in the *Hamburg Dramaturgy*, and to his disempowerment of the devil in the revised plan of his Faust drama. He is consequently unable to accept those Christian doctrines—as in Paul's declaration that the wages of sin is death—which would exclude anyone from ultimate salvation. Thus when he maintains, at the end of his treatise, that 'it is a proof of true and properly understood religion if it constantly brings us back to the beautiful', the point he is making is more than simply aesthetic. Behind the aesthetic antithesis of beauty and ugliness, of the mourning youth with his inverted torch and the grim reaper with his scythe, lies the moral antithesis of compassion and terror, of reassurance and despair.

In terms of archaeology and art history, Lessing's theory has numerous deficiencies. As Herder noticed in an essay of 1786 on the same topic,[197] he oversimplifies a complex array of genii and allegorical figures in ancient art, some relating directly to death itself but many more to associated conceptions such as fate and destiny or guardianship of the tomb, and above all to the afterlife. The twin figures on many sarcophagi rarely denote sleep and death, but are often duplicated only for the sake of symmetry: Lessing is misled by his own tendency to think in antithetical categories.[198] Besides, the figure of Thanatos appears in Greek literature not as a beautiful youth, but as a terrifying being (as in Euripedes' *Alcestis*), and even in funereal art, less reassuring images such as dragons, snakes, and even Ixion and Sisyphus are not uncommon. More seriously, whereas Klotz undoubtedly erred in reducing all winged genii directly to Eros, Lessing went too far in denying all connection between them: one of the winged figures is frequently female, in which case the two are Eros and Psyche (who represents the deceased's soul), and the decorative putti on many tombs are all ultimately derived from Eros.[199] The distinction

[195] LM XI, 35–47. [196] LM XI, 41.
[197] Herder SWS XV, 429–85; also Heitner (1982) 128–31.
[198] See Uhlig (1986) 83–4. [199] See Guthke (1997) 150–1.

between pagan and Christian conceptions is also less clear-cut than Lessing imagined, for putti of this kind are also found on early Christian monuments, and sleep as a figure for death features not only in Greek mythology but just as prominently in the Bible.[200] Furthermore, Lessing does not sufficiently distinguish between allegorical figures, whose nature and significance may vary from one artist to the next, and mythological beings such as Thanatos, whose basic attributes are constant: he treats them all as allegories of unchanging significance. Finally, such skeletons as do appear in ancient art do not necessarily represent the *larvae* of the wicked; they may simply denote the deceased's mortal remains, from which the soul, often depicted as a butterfly, has just departed.

But however dated the antiquarian content of Lessing's treatise may be, its true importance is of a different order. The graphic contrast which he drew between the pagan and Christian images of death, though too sharp for historical accuracy, admirably encapsulated the paradigm shift from the baroque era to that of neo-classicism, and from a basically negative to an affirmative view of earthly existence. Though harrowing images were already disappearing from sepulchral art,[201] the genius with the inverted torch supplied a new and welcome replacement for that of the menacing skeleton, and it soon became a regular feature of monumental sculpture.[202] It was, to be sure, a euphemistic and even utopian image: as Schiller, who began his career as a doctor, remarked, death itself has little aesthetic appeal.[203] But it caught the imagination of poets as well as sculptors, including Schiller himself, who celebrates it in his poem *The Gods of Greece* (*Die Götter Griechenlands*),[204] and Goethe, who hailed it as the triumph of beauty over ugliness.[205] Paradoxically enough, although Lessing had no proper conception of myth, he himself created a potent myth which recurs in German literature, in various mutations, from the eighteenth to the twentieth century, when it reappears in the epiphanic vision of the dying Aschenbach in Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice*.[206]

Like *Laocoön*, *How the Ancients Portrayed Death* became a canonic text of the neo-classical movement and of German Hellenism. Unlike the *Antiquarian Letters*, it embodied a positive message and a constructive purpose, outdoing even Winckelmann in its inspirational effect. It also achieved its immediate purpose of smoothing the way to Lessing's appointment in Wolfenbüttel, and provided a serene conclusion to the acrimonious controversy with Klotz.

[200] See, for example, Luke 8.52; 1 Thessalonians 4.15.
[201] See McManners 224 and 326.
[202] See Guthke (1997) 144.
[203] Schiller I, 250; cf. Barner (1984a) 160.
[204] Schiller I, 166 and 171.
[205] Goethe HA IX, 316–7.
[206] Further details in Uhlig (1975).

14

Wolfenbüttel and Brunswick; Travels in Germany, Austria, and Italy; Engagement and Marriage: 1770–1776

Lessing's appointment as librarian was officially confirmed on 15 December 1769.[1] The post was in effect created for him, for his predecessor, who had combined the office with other responsibilities, was moved aside to facilitate Lessing's appointment.[2] He received a salary of 600 talers per year, with free accommodation and heating. Although he did not arrive in Brunswick until 21 April 1770, his salary was backdated to Christmas 1769, and it was agreed that he would in due course be given leave to visit Italy.[3]

The new appointment enabled him to fulfil a long-standing ambition, for as early as 1760, he had expressed a wish to study for an extended period in Wolfenbüttel.[4] At a ceremony there on 7 May, he took a twofold oath, administered by his immediate superior, G. S. A. von Praun. He first pledged his loyalty to the reigning Duke Karl I of Brunswick-Lüneburg, and to his heirs in a long line of succession which included the British monarch George III, to whom the house of Brunswick was closely related; the second oath bound him to perform his duties with the utmost conscientiousness.[5]

To judge by the letters he wrote soon after his inauguration, he embarked on his new career in a positive and optimistic spirit.[6] Given the rhythm of social integration and sudden withdrawal which runs through his life, his new situation did indeed seem ideally suitable. In Brunswick, where he would eventually rent a small apartment, he could escape from his learned labours and mingle with a diverse circle of friends. In Wolfenbüttel—only eight miles away but far enough to preclude frequent interruptions from Brunswick—he could dedicate himself in peace to his work as a scholar and writer. But in his first letter to Eva König, a note of unease can already be detected:[7]

> You must not think that I am not happy here. It is just that, when one remembers having often been happy elsewhere, it is difficult to persuade oneself that this is still the case.

[1] D 284–5. [2] See L. to J. G. Lessing, 27 July 1770; also Praun 513.
[3] Danzel/Guhrauer II, 273. [4] D 167–8; Pröhle 178.
[5] D 293–4; full text of oaths in A (2005) 236–7.
[6] See L. to Ebert, 7 May 1770; to Nicolai, 17 May 1770; to J. G. Lessing, 27 July 1770.
[7] To Eva König, 10 June 1770.

Fig. 28. Wolfenbüttel, ducal palace (façade), c. 1650, engraving by Caspar Merian.

With its ducal palace, baroque churches and parallel streets of imposing timber-framed houses, Wolfenbüttel, like Meissen and Wittenberg, still retains much of its character as Lessing knew it. But in 1770, it was a far quieter place than it is today. Its population of over 10,000 in 1750 had since declined by almost half after the duke transferred his court to Brunswick in 1753 and the Seven Years War and French occupation reduced the total further.[8] The town gates and walls were still in place, there was still a military garrison, and the legal and ecclesiastical administration of the duchy was still directed from Wolfenbüttel. But the ducal palace, encircled by branches of the meandering River Oker, now stood empty, and it was here that Lessing took up his grand but incongruous residence. Five rooms on the second floor, once occupied by the current duke in his years as crown prince, had been refurnished to receive him; their windows overlooked the palace square on which the garrison exercised.[9] These rooms, as one of his visitors put it, were 'very spacious, but for that same reason uncomfortable', and Lessing, never at ease in grandiose surroundings, was before long complaining about his 'vast and deserted' accommodation.[10]

The city of Brunswick offered a very different environment. A thriving town at a crossroads of trading routes, it had recently readmitted its dukes and their court, and fine new buildings of neo-classical proportions now appeared among the old timber-framed houses beneath the towers and spires of Henry the Lion's city. Its population was over 20,000, and it was the capital of a principality which, though not among the major states of the Holy Roman Empire in terms of size and military

[8] Raabe (1997) 9; Danzel/Guhrauer II, 275.
[9] See H. Schneider 56.
[10] Raabe (1997) 30; L. to Eva König, 10 June 1770.

Fig. 29. Wolfenbüttel, ducal palace (façade today, essentially unaltered since Lessing's time; Lessing's residence, on top floor right, from 1770 to 1776).

strength, wielded considerable influence in the eighteenth century through dynastic connections with its two powerful neighbours. The Guelph cousins of the Brunswick dukes in Hanover, formerly united with Brunswick in the single duchy of Brunswick-Lüneburg, were also the kings of England, and in Lessing's time, Karl Wilhelm Ferdinand, the crown prince who invited him to Wolfenbüttel, was married to Princess Augusta, sister of George III. Dynastic ties with Prussia to the east were even closer: the reigning Duke Karl I was married to Frederick the Great's sister Philippine Charlotte, and Frederick himself was married to Duke Karl's sister Elisabeth Christine. As a result of these alliances, Brunswick troops and their leaders played a prominent part in the military campaigns of Prussia and Britain from the Seven Years War to the time of Napoleon.

The ducal family had long been distinguished not just on the battlefield, but also in the realm of scholarship and culture. The learned Duke August the Younger and his son Anton Ulrich had assembled a library of European significance, and under Anton Ulrich, the court became a brilliant focus of baroque culture. In Lessing's time, the reigning duke was the last Brunswick ruler to display the whole panoply of baroque splendour: despite the ravages of the Seven Years War, he maintained a disproportionately large army and a court of some four hundred

members, including an Italian opera, a French theatre company (in the 1760s), a ballet, and a court theatre for diverse productions;[11] the latter establishments, overseen by a *directeur des spectacles*, reputedly consumed around 70,000 talers per annum or five per cent of the principality's revenues.[12] But the duke's power was already on the wane when Lessing first encountered him, and he suffered a stroke in 1776. Lessing had a soft spot for him, as he habitually had for weak and improvident individuals, and his relations with him were good—at least until the affair of Reimarus's *Fragments* in 1778. He accepted the title of Court Councillor (*Hofrat*) in 1776 only to avoid giving the old duke offence.[13]

For all his weaknesses, Duke Karl also had conspicuous public virtues. His love of the arts raised the level of popular culture, and his educational reforms—especially the foundation of the Collegium Carolinum—attracted a number of notable scholars and writers to Brunswick. Not least, his liberal inclinations made the duchy one of the most tolerant states in Germany, where Jews as well as non-Lutheran Christians could live without fear of persecution.

Other members of his family shared and augmented Duke Karl's cultural interests. Whereas the duke looked primarily to French and Italian models in the arts, the duchess—unlike her brother in Berlin—cherished and encouraged German literature. Gleim informed Lessing in 1760 that the duchess would welcome a dedication of *Philotas*,[14] and according to Lessing himself, it was the duchess's constant requests for a new tragedy that finally persuaded him to complete *Emilia Galotti* for performance on her birthday in 1772.[15] The duchess's love of German literature was clearly passed on to her children, including the crown prince, his younger brother Friedrich August (whose French translation of *Miss Sara Sampson* had been performed at court in 1766),[16] and not least their sister Anna Amalia who, as Duchess of Weimar, inaugurated the cultural renaissance which transformed that little duchy, by the end of the century, into the cultural capital of Germany.

It was no wonder, then, that Lessing overcame his antipathy to courts and courtly values sufficiently to accept the call to Brunswick. In those days of patronage, the courts and professional bodies which served them were almost the only places where a German writer without an independent income could find adequate support, and it is difficult to think of any court in Germany which Lessing would have found more congenial. He accordingly told his father, soon after he took up office, that the ducal family were admirable people. But he added, characteristically, that he did not intend to press himself upon them, preferring instead to avoid the court as much as possible and to spend most of his time in the library.[17] His ingrained aversion to court society—irrespective of the personalities involved—is evident throughout his correspondence, so that even when invited to meet the cultivated Anna Amalia of Weimar, he declared that he would only obey the

[11] See Hartmann 155–208. [12] Biskup 176.
[13] See L. to Eva König, 23 July 1776; cf. L. to Eva König, 26 December 1775.
[14] Gleim to L., 10 February 1760. [15] L. to C. F. Voss, 24 December 1771.
[16] A (2003) I, 188. [17] To J. G. Lessing, 27 July 1770.

summons 'as if bludgeoned to do so'.[18] But if any external confirmation of Lessing's initial, positive judgement is required, it is worth mentioning that James Boswell, who visited the Brunswick court twice during his tour of Germany in 1764 and met most of its leading personalities, left a detailed and highly positive account of his impressions.[19]

The two members of the ducal family who left the greatest mark on eighteenth-century history have yet to be mentioned. The first is the reigning duke's brother, Duke Ferdinand, an outstanding military leader who served as field marshal under both Frederick the Great, whose Life Guards he originally commanded, and George II of England, whose demoralized army he took over in 1757 and led to victory at Crefeld and Minden. In the latter campaign, he successfully defended Hanover and tied down one of France's armies in the west, thus relieving the pressure on Frederick in the east, and he subsequently compelled that army to surrender in 1762, thereby hastening the end of the Seven Years War.[20] A man of simple tastes, he earned the devotion of his troops, whose privations he willingly shared; and like his Prussian brother-in-law, he regularly triumphed against superior numbers. In later life, he became Grand Master of the Strict Observance order of Freemasonry and spent most of his fortune, bestowed on him by two grateful monarchs, on charitable causes. He was also a gifted actor and performed at court theatricals, for which he received Lessing's praise in three complimentary epigrams.[21] Lessing visited him at his residence in Vechelde[22] and undoubtedly liked him, for Ferdinand was the recipient of the only printed dediction in all of Lessing's works, namely that of his first three Masonic dialogues *Ernst and Falk*.[23] And although, in a conscious breach of etiquette, Lessing omitted to seek the duke's advance permission to do so (for he knew very well that the duke, as a senior Freemason, was unlikely to approve his public discussion of Masonic mysteries), the duke's reproof in his letter of acknowledgement is mild, and the overall tone of the letter is cordial: as with Tauentzien in Breslau, Lessing clearly felt at ease with this old soldier.

The member of the ducal family with whom he had most dealings was the crown prince Karl Wilhelm Ferdinand, who succeeded his father as duke in 1780. The crown prince was handsome, gifted, and intelligent, and in his youth, he was admired and lionized wherever he went. He was Frederick the Great's favourite nephew, and he shared many of Frederick's qualities, including his large blue eyes, his musical aptitude, his French taste, and his military inclinations. Physically robust, he served with distinction in the Prussian army and subsequently under his uncle Ferdinand during the Seven Years War; he led from the front, in defiance of his father's wishes, and stormed a French battery at Hastenbeck, declaring that his father had other sons who could, if necessary, replace him. Like the rest of his family, he was highly cultured, playing first violin in Frederick's concerts and acting along with Duke Ferdinand in court performances of French dramas. In 1765,

[18] To Eva König, 23 May 1771. [19] See Boswell 12–15 and 51–62.
[20] McLynn 260–79. [21] See Hartmann 176; LM I, 45–6.
[22] See L. to Eva König, 22 August 1771.
[23] LM XIII, 341; cf. L. to Duke Ferdinand, 19 and 26 October 1778.

Fig. 30. Duke Karl Wilhelm Ferdinand of Brunswick, painting by Pompeo Batoni.

he visited England, leaving his English wife to await her confinement while he embarked on the Grand Tour. He lived on a lavish scale in France and Italy, and Mirabeau likened him to Alcibiades. Winckelmann, who accompanied him for several weeks on gruelling hikes round the Roman antiquities, described him as 'the Brunswick Achilles'; resting his arm on a fine Greek krater and with his fair hair unpowdered, he appears in classical pose in one of Pompeo Batoni's most memorable portraits.[24] But Winckelmann also noticed that, despite his ability to charm and engage in animated conversation, the crown prince had an inner aloofness which manifested itself in sudden and prolonged silences.[25] Though normally scrupulously polite, he could also, when crossed, be brusque and contemptuous. He was not indifferent to women: on his return to Brunswick, he brought with him from Naples the first of his mistresses, Maria Antonia de Branconi, who was before long acclaimed as the most beautiful woman in Germany:[26] even Duke Karl, who stood in for his son at the baptism of an illegitimate grandson some months later, was captivated. But while he shared his father's love of pleasure, the

[24] In the Herzog Anton Ulrich Museum, Brunswick.
[25] See Justi III, 288–9. [26] Eisler 147.

crown prince also possessed an iron self-discipline which his father lacked. From 1770, he took an increasing share in government and initiated a series of major financial reforms.

Karl Wilhelm Ferdinand was well read, and a keen student of history.[27] He corresponded with d'Alembert, Diderot, and Mirabeau and visited Voltaire at Ferney.[28] But although his literary tastes were primarily French, he also took an interest in German literature and philosophy. He studied the works of Winckelmann, he met Gleim and Ramler, and having encountered Moses Mendelssohn in Berlin, he invited him to Brunswick to discuss his religious and philosophical opinions.[29] Even before he met Lessing, he was fully aware of his literary importance and took little persuasion to seek his services.

His initial meeting with Lessing was highly successful. On Lessing's initial visit to Brunswick, the crown prince called on him at the house where he was staying, and the impression Lessing made on him, according to Ebert, exceeded his expectations.[30] Lessing in turn declared 'It's a pity the crown prince is a prince, and doesn't really fit into that class'[31]—perhaps because the prince's impressive learning and interest in German literature were untypical of German rulers, or because the prince went out of his way to be agreeable. He certainly read all of Lessing's dramas more than once and praised his wide range of accomplishments.[32] According to one of his courtiers, he actually considered appointing Lessing as secretary to his cabinet[33]—an offer which Lessing would no doubt have refused. But before long, their relationship showed signs of strain. It has been claimed that they failed to communicate properly because their natures were too similar.[34] But while it is true that the crown prince was prone to aloofness and that Lessing tended to keep his innermost feelings to himself, Lessing was by no means reserved in voicing his likes, and more particularly his dislikes, and he erred rather on the side of forthrightness than of reticence in his practical dealings with others. Indeed, it was his very outspokenness which compounded the problem, for his pronouncements in company were always widely reported, and his blunt comments on the court, and on the crown prince himself, inevitably reached the latter's ears.[35] This in turn increased the prince's aloofness, thereby confirming Lessing's growing belief that he was at best indifferent, if not actually hostile to his interests. But whatever the prince's shortcomings, Lessing would acknowledge, in the last weeks of his life, that he had judged him too harshly: for the prince, who was now the reigning duke, refused to accede to the demand of the central Protestant authority in the empire to punish Lessing for his alleged attacks on Christianity.[36]

If Karl Wilhelm Ferdinand lacked the spontaneous humanity which Lessing looked for in vain, his virtues were real and considerable. In politics, he was a pragmatist of liberal inclinations. Like his father, he was tolerant of religious differences: a synagogue was opened in Brunswick in 1780.[37] He was an enlightened and

[27] See Pockels 14. [28] Hoppe 192. [29] See Förster 319. [30] D 284.
[31] L. to Ebert, 7 May 1770. [32] See Ebert to L., 19 January 1773. [33] Pockels 133.
[34] H. Schneider 63; E. Schmidt II, 107. [35] Pockels 133; Danzel/Guhrauer II, 601.
[36] See L. to Elise Reimarus, December 1780. [37] Graf 243.

genuinely popular ruler, and he allowed greater freedom of the press than existed in most German states. In later years, he appointed Joachim Heinrich Campe, a man of progressive views who sympathized with the ideals of the French Revolution, as head of Brunswick's educational system.

When Lessing arrived in Brunswick, the duchy was in the throes of a financial crisis. The cumulative effect of a large loan taken out at the start of the Seven Years War, a series of bad harvests and the old duke's extravagance was that, by 1763, Brunswick had a debt of over eleven million talers, with an annual revenue of only one and a half million; there was a real risk that Blankenburg, the territory given in security, would have to be forfeited.[38] For the first time in the century, the duke convened the Estates to seek financial assistance, which the deputies were unwilling to concede. When the crown prince became co-regent in 1770, he obtained the Estates' support for a series of financial reforms which began to bite in earnest when the old finance minister Schrader von Schliestedt was replaced by the more rigorous Féronce von Rothencreutz in 1773:[39] the old regime of baroque ostentation finally gave way to a new regime of enlightened austerity akin to the Prussian model, and court expenditure was soon cut by half.[40] By 1780, when the crown prince succeeded his father, nearly half of the national debt had been paid off; by 1785, the state was almost in surplus and taxes were gradually reduced; and in 1794, the duke handed over ultimate responsibility for the state's finances to the elected Estates. By the end of the century, Brunswick was a model of financial prosperity.[41]

One of the means employed to reduce the country's deficit was the hiring of troops to Britain between 1776 and 1783 to fight the rebellious American colonists. This practice, hitherto commonplace in Germany, was increasingly condemned by German writers and historians from the later 1770s onwards,[42] but there is evidence that it was not generally so regarded at the time and that most of the troops remained loyal to their German rulers during their foreign service and on their return.[43] In Brunswick in particular, the hire of troops to its close ally Britain was nothing new: as already mentioned, two of the Brunswick princes had themselves fought in British service during the Seven Years War. The old Duke Karl did, however, have profound misgivings about sending troops so far afield, and according to his wife's correspondence, it was distress at the departure of the second contingent in May 1776 that caused the first of a number of strokes which progressively disabled him.[44] He nevertheless had no choice but to accede, since Hanover (i.e. Britain) was his main creditor and the promised subsidies were the only means of rapidly clearing Brunswick's debts. With the agreement of the Estates, the necessary force of nearly 6,000 was duly raised.[45] The duke had ordered that no recruits were to be pressed into service, that as many foreign volunteers as

[38] Deeters (1975) 110. [39] Ibid. 101–2. [40] Pockels 165; R. Hagen 621.
[41] See Deeters (1975) 116–17; Praun 508.
[42] See, for example, Schiller, *Kabale und Liebe*, Act II, Scene 2; Mehring 333–8.
[43] See Wilson 74–94. [44] Droysen 151; P. Zimmermann (1914) 162.
[45] Droysen 145–6 and 157.

possible should be enlisted, and that serving citizens of Brunswick should wherever possible be replaced by volunteers. The troops who marched in February and May for embarkation near Hamburg accordingly left willingly, and no desertions were reported.[46]

It was therefore not out of character for Lessing, on his way back from his travels in January 1776, to suggest that Eva König's son, who wished to become a soldier, might join the Brunswick expedition:[47] he had always been at home in military circles and saw nothing untoward about the exercise, and he again supported the boy's application to join the Brunswick army two years later.[48] Had he lived to see it, however, he certainly would have disapproved of the new duke's refusal to repatriate the wounded and crippled along with the able-bodied survivors on their return from America in 1783.[49] There was indeed a ruthless streak in Karl Wilhelm Ferdinand, especially in matters of financial economy—a trait all too reminiscent of his Prussian uncle.

Although he had saved his country from financial ruin and was on the whole an enlightened ruler, Karl Wilhelm Ferdinand's fortunes declined dramatically in later years. A cautious planner rather than an inspirational commander, he led the ill-fated Prussian campaign against revolutionary France in 1792 and failed to press home his initial advantage at Valmy; after disagreements with the Austrians, he resigned his command two years later. He again proved over-cautious and indecisive when recalled to confront Napoleon in 1806, and was defeated by a numerically inferior force at Auerstedt. Mortally wounded and sightless, he died in exile a few weeks later after Brunswick was overrun by the French.

Such was the remarkable family which Lessing served throughout his years in Wolfenbüttel. On his periodic visits to Brunswick, he also enjoyed the company of a number of excellent men of letters who had come there since the foundation of the Collegium Carolinum in 1745. Although the city of Brunswick had two grammar schools and a medical college, it lacked a university, for the duchy's university was at Helmstedt. The Carolinum was set up in order to bridge the gap between school and university, and to prepare its students for a career in state service.[50] It was founded on the initiative of J. F. W. Jerusalem, a liberal theologian who became court preacher to Duke Karl and tutor to his children.[51] As head of the new institution, Jerusalem was influenced by the college system he had encountered in England: lectures were given in German rather than Latin by professors, and the resident students were further instructed in small groups by personal tutors.[52] The emphasis was on the humanities, including ancient and modern (especially German) literature. Like Jerusalem, many of the original staff had studied at Leipzig, and some of them were already established writers and former members of the so-called 'Bremen Contributors', the breakaway group which resisted Gottsched's authority and acclaimed the poetry of Klopstock.

[46] P. Zimmermann (1914) 164 and 169–71.
[47] See L. to Eva König, 23 January 1776; cf. H. Schneider 209–10.
[48] L. to Duke Ferdinand, July or August 1778.
[49] See the article 'Karl Wilhelm Ferdinand' in ADB XV, 280.
[50] See Meyen (1962) 15–16. [51] Roloff 11. [52] H. Albrecht II, 74.

Lessing knew and had good relations with several of them, including Jerusalem. One of them was Johann Arnold Ebert, who had first attracted him to Brunswick and was a specialist in English language and literature; his prose translation of Edward Young's *Night Thoughts* (1751–52) became a classic of German sensibility. In later years, Lessing's friendship with Ebert cooled somewhat: Ebert was too much of a courtier to gain Lessing's lasting respect.[53]

His relationship with Konrad Arnold Schmid, the most learned man in Brunswick, was, on the other hand, close and cordial throughout.[54] Schmid, who had qualifications in both theology and the classics as well as paleographical expertise, corresponded with him at length on scholarly issues and collaborated with him on some of his publications. Though considerably older than Lessing (he was born in 1716), he retained a youthful enthusiasm for his studies and, with his wife and daughters, kept a hospitable house at which Lessing was always welcome.[55]

Johann Joachim Eschenburg, a much younger man who married one of Schmid's daughters, came to the Carolinum only in 1767 but rapidly distinguished himself as a translator of Shakespeare (1775–82) and other English writers; he was also a prolific editor and critic and an authority on world literature.[56] Like his father-in-law, he corresponded with Lessing on matters of scholarship. He was particularly close to him in his last years, and eventually acted, together with Karl Lessing, as his literary executor.

With Karl Christian Gärtner, the oldest literary figure in this group, Lessing had only limited contact. But he saw a great deal of Friedrich Wilhelm Zachariä, professor of poetry at the Carolinum, in both social and professional contexts. Zachariä continued to write and recycle poems of his own throughout his life, but none of them was as successful as the mock-heroic epic of student life, *Der Renommist* (*The Braggart*), which he wrote at the age of eighteen. He was an energetic man with entrepreneurial skills, and by the time Lessing came to Brunswick, he had taken over the duchy's main newspaper, the *Braunschweigische Zeitung*, and turned the printing and publishing operation of the city orphanage (*Waisenhaus*) into a flourishing concern in which works by major authors, including Lessing, appeared.[57] But Zachariä was too volatile and lacking in perseverance for his own good, and his growing neglect of the newspaper ran up a major deficit for which he was held personally responsible. His health suffered in consequence, and although the government eventually eased his position, his health gave way and he died at the age of fifty in 1777.[58] A large and ebullient individual and an entertaining raconteur, Zachariä was most at home in convivial gatherings, often in Lessing's company. Appropriately enough, he married the landlady's daughter at the 'Weghaus', the hostelry (still extant today) half way between Brunswick and Wolfenbüttel which Lessing regularly patronized.[59]

[53] See Roloff, 11. [54] KGL 234. [55] Meyen (1962) 60–70.
[56] See Paulin (2003) 115–32; Meyen (1957) *passim*.
[57] See P. Zimmermann (1896) 87–130. [58] Ibid. 155–63.
[59] See Raabe (1997) 151–2; cf. L. to Eva König, 8 January 1773.

Finally, Lessing was friendly with a Brunswick official outside the Carolinum circle, namely Johann Joachim von Kuntzsch, chamberlain to the duke, who became his main contact and mediator at court. A worldly character and ladies' man, Kuntzsch played host to Lessing on his initial visit to Brunswick in 1769. With his suave and cynical good humour, he was congenial company and a good listener, and Lessing described him, when he left Brunswick for an extended period in 1774, as 'the one friend to whom I could at least unburden myself'.[60] But Kuntzsch also had a louche quality about him, and when his neglected and debt-ridden estates were impounded soon after Lessing's death, he and his wife disappeared without trace, probably to France.[61]

In contrast to Brunswick, Wolfenbüttel offered little in the way of educated company. Lessing's relations with von Praun, the chief administrator there, were cool but tolerable until von Praun moved to Brunswick in 1773, but he had little in common with this much older man for whom the punctilious observance of protocol was the supreme virtue.[62] Franz Anton von Knittel, the senior clergyman and censor in Wolfenbüttel, became a firm friend despite an initial clash over censorship; an assiduous user of the library, Knittel had discovered a fragment of Wulfila's Gothic Bible in a Wolfenbüttel palimpsest.[63] Two other men whom Lessing often met were teachers at the local grammar school, namely the scientist and geographer Christian Leiste and the classical scholar Konrad Heusinger. Both would later collaborate with him on his scholarly publications.[64]

Never before had Lessing been in a position to switch so easily between learned isolation and social engagement as he was in Wolfenbüttel. Yet almost from the start, he was far from happy with his lot. One crucial difference between this and his earlier experiences was that, whereas he had usually pursued his work in a busy urban environment and retreated periodically to work in another city (as he successively did to Leipzig, Berlin, and Hamburg), his present situation made solitary work the norm and social engagement without work (for he was rarely willing or able to work in Brunswick) the exception. Only in Wittenberg and Breslau had he experienced comparable conditions. But while he had enjoyed his year of study in Wittenberg in the knowledge that it was only temporary, he experienced serious depression in Breslau during his prolonged absence from sustained work and from the lively educated company which he required both for stimulus and relaxation. The situation in Wolfenbüttel was similar, for although Brunswick and its social life were within relatively easy reach, casual visits were no substitute for regular association. For as he tells Eva König:[65]

> In the loneliness in which I have to live here, I become more stupid and worse from one day to the next. I must associate with people again, and I am as good as totally isolated from them here. For what use is it being able to visit this or that person here

[60] To Eva König, 8 April 1774; Raabe (1982) 115.
[61] See B XI/2, 1065.
[62] See Praun 513 *passim*.
[63] See D 299–300.
[64] See Raabe (1997) 104–6 and 108; Milde (1970) 175–8.
[65] To Eva König, 26 October 1772; cf. L. to Karl Lessing, 14 November 1771.

> or in Brunswick? Visits are not regular company, and I feel that I must have the regular company of people to whom I am not indifferent if I am to retain any spark of goodness.

By 1772, he was beginning to suffer from serious depression, and the situation just described was one of its principal causes. The other main causes were his chronic financial difficulties and the growing strain of his separation from Eva König.

Throughout his first six years in Wolfenbüttel, Lessing was plagued by debts, including those he brought with him from Hamburg. He had to borrow 60 talers from his publisher Voss to pay for his initial visit to Brunswick, followed by loans of 200 talers in December 1770 and 600 talers a year later;[66] it is uncertain (not all of the relevant correspondence survives) whether all of these debts were repaid out of money due to him in author's fees. At this time, he was continually running up new debts to pay off older ones, so that his basic position never really improved. He was also drawing advances on his salary, thereby reducing his current income to meet the ongoing repayments: by April 1773, he appears to have received one and a half years' salary in advance.[67]

Lessing's salary of 600 talers plus additional benefits was not munificent but perfectly adequate by the standards of the day, as he himself acknowledged.[68] To cite two comparisons: professors at the Collegium Carolinum, most of whom had wives and families, received 400 to 500 talers per annum in the 1760s;[69] and Friedrich Schiller, who lived on 400 to 450 talers per annum throughout the 1780s, estimated that he could live on 400 to 500 talers when he moved to Jena in 1789.[70] Lessing also earned modest sums from his publications, including the learned periodical which he began to issue as librarian in 1773.[71] But as always, he continued to live beyond his means (a payment of 70 talers in part settlement of a debt to his local wine merchant in 1776 is scarcely a sign of frugality).[72] The result was that, by 1776, he had accumulated debts of around 1,000 talers.[73]

On top of all this, he continued to receive begging letters from Kamenz, ever more insistent and reproachful after his father's death in August 1770, although he sent his mother and sister at least 125 talers in 1771–72;[74] his only fault was in rashly promising them more than he was able to deliver. Though he found these letters profoundly depressing, the only occasion on which he protested at his sister's constant complaints and accusations was when she attacked his brother Karl, who was likewise helping out whenever he could.[75]

By 1773, it was obvious to Lessing that he would either have to secure a higher salary or seek employment elsewhere. A glimmer of hope presented itself in

[66] See L. to C. F. Voss, 30 October 1769 and B XI/1, 955; Voss to L., 15 December 1770; L. to Voss, 6 December 1771.
[67] See L. to Karl Lessing, 8 April 1773; L. to Duke Karl, 23 January 1774 (cf. B XI/2, 1089).
[68] L. to Karl Lessing, 8 April 1773. [69] Meyen (1962) 18 and 55.
[70] See Engelsing 128. [71] See L. to Theophilus Lessing, 8 December 1774.
[72] See L. to Wilke, 11 April 1776. [73] See L. to Eva König, 10 March 1776.
[74] See L. to Justina Salome Lessing and Dorothea Salome Lessing, 7 January and 7 July 1771, and 9 April 1772.
[75] L. to Justina Salome Lessing, 15 July 1776.

February of that year. The crown prince, who had probably heard that Lessing was thinking of leaving, summoned him to say that, in view of the recent death of J. D. Lichtenstein, official historian to the house of Brunswick, it might be possible for Lessing to take on that responsibility, in addition to that of librarian, for extra payment.[76] Further discussion was postponed when the prince was called away to Potsdam, and as the weeks went by and no word came from him, Lessing vowed in April not to set foot in Brunswick again until the matter was settled.[77] His hopes were raised once more in July on the death of the finance minister Schliestedt, whom he blamed for the delay. But as so often before, luck was not on his side, for this was the very moment at which Brunswick's financial crisis reached its height and the new programme of austerity was introduced: the prince was in no position to increase expenditure.[78]

As a result of these and other frustrations, Lessing came close to despair in the years preceding his travels of 1775. On visits to Brunswick, he cursed the city for its empty distractions and longed to return to Wolfenbüttel.[79] Back in Wolfenbüttel, he cursed the place in turn for his loneliness and lack of freedom.[80] He declared that he had lost every spark of creativity and often felt unable to work or even write letters, and he announced at one point that he proposed to send all his friends a circular requesting them to regard him as dead.[81] The following complaint is typical of his state of mind:[82]

> But I now quite often find the whole of life so loathsome, so loathsome! I dream my days away instead of living them. Constant toil which wears me out without giving me any pleasure; a place which becomes intolerable through complete lack of company (for such company as I could have, I do not want); the prospect of the same endless monotony—all these things have such an adverse effect on my soul, and thence on my body, that I don't know whether I am sick or healthy. Those who see me compliment me on my healthy appearance, and I would prefer to box their ears in reply.

His health was certainly suffering, his eyesight was deteriorating, and the monotony of his existence was undermining his mental stability, giving rise to what, in the parlance of the time, he described as 'hypochondria', but what in today's language might better be described as severe depression accompanied by a sense of existential anxiety.[83] But the crucial factor in this depression has yet to be mentioned, namely his three-year separation, between February 1772 and March 1775, from his fiancée Eva König. The following account of Eva's personality, her correspondence with Lessing, and the development of their relationship between 1770 and 1776 should throw more light on Lessing's state of mind during those years.

Eva Catharina König, née Hahn, was born in 1736 in Heidelberg; her father, a prosperous merchant, died while she was still in her infancy.[84] Her background was

[76] See L. to Eva König, 15 February 1773.
[77] See L. to Eva König, 3 April 1773.
[78] See L. to Eva König, 17 September 1773; Deeters (1975) 101.
[79] See L. to Eva König, 2 and 23 January 1772.
[80] See L. to Eva König, 8 January 1773.
[81] L. to Karl Lessing, 30 April 1774; to Eva König, 1 December 1773.
[82] L. to Eva König, 27 June 1772; cf. Grimm (1998) *passim*.
[83] See L. to Eva König, 8 January and 17 September 1773; Nisbet (1973) 83–5 and 91.
[84] On Eva König see Raabe (2005); also Thiele (1881).

Fig. 31. Lessing's wife Eva König, painting by George de Marées, 1771.

a cultivated one—an elder brother successively held chairs of physics and medicine in Holland—and by the standards of the age, she was well educated for a woman. She married Engelbert König at the age of twenty and went to live with him in Hamburg; their happy marriage produced seven children, four of whom survived to adulthood.

On his sudden death in 1769, Eva found herself responsible not only for their children, but also for her husband's business, which was still at the stage of development, and in particular for his two factories in Vienna. Though she received sporadic support from her own and her husband's brothers and invaluable advice from the eminent Hamburg citizen Johannes Schuback, she took on virtually single-handed the task of maintaining the business as a going concern until she could dispose of it on favourable terms for the benefit of her family.

Intelligent, self-possessed, and well endowed with practical common sense, she devoted five years to this formidable task, which involved complex negotiations, arduous journeys, and two extended visits to Vienna, and brought it to a successful conclusion. She did so despite her often precarious health and a depressive tendency which she shared with Lessing (she, too, complains of 'hypochondria').[85] Her letters recount her experiences of atrocious roads, a drunken serving-maid,

[85] See, for example, Eva König to L., 30 August 1770.

travel in ice and snow, famine-stricken villages, importunate beggars, repeated breakdowns, floods, and enforced stoppages in remote regions—all without a trace of self-pity.

Her correspondence with Lessing, which runs from 1770 to 1776, consists of 193 letters, 84 from Lessing and 109 from herself—by far the most voluminous of all Lessing's correspondences. Unfortunately, the original letters do not survive, and the text as we know it is that of Karl Lessing's edition of 1789. Since most of the people referred to in it were still alive, he reduced most names to initials, not all of which have been identified. There is also evidence that he omitted certain passages,[86] and he removed a significant element of Eva's individuality by standardizing her expression to conform with that of Lessing: for although she writes with great eloquence and uses sophisticated language, we know from her surviving travel notes and book of recipes that her grammar and orthography were much more erratic than they are in her edited letters.[87]

The correspondence is neither passionate nor lyrical, and the events described—apart from Eva's misadventures on her journeys—are for the most part fairly commonplace. But it is of great human interest to observe how these two admirable people shared their inner lives and struggled with their long separation in the knowledge that the limited time ahead of them was melting away. (The young Hegel, a great admirer of Lessing, wrote an unpublished appreciation of the melancholy pleasure which the letters afforded him.)[88] There are homely touches as the couple exchange advice on everyday ailments or Eva works on a pair of silk stockings for Lessing, parrying questions from outsiders as to whom they are for. They discuss the doings of their Hamburg acquaintances, they share tips for lottery numbers in pursuit of that good fortune which Lessing so often invokes but rarely encounters, and they console and encourage one another from one disappointment to the next.

One of the most striking features of this correspondence is that, in that age of inequality, the two partners are plainly equals. Eva reproaches Lessing in forthright terms for his lengthy silences, and he resolves—at least temporarily—to mend his ways; and when, as the time for marriage draws near, he struggles with his inveterate love of independence and drags his feet over the arrangements, she calls him firmly to order and issues precise instructions.[89] This, of course, was the very quality he most admired in her: like Minna von Barnhelm, the most positive female figure in his dramas, she has a will of her own and is capable of decisive action. Soon after his marriage, he accordingly told his brother: 'I have always considered her the one woman in the world with whom I felt I could live, so you can rest assured that she has everything I look for in a woman.' He had said much the same to Eva herself five years before.[90]

[86] See editor's notes in B XI/2, 741 and 1108.

[87] See GEL/Eva König, Briefe (2000) 348–54 and König, Eva in Bibliography 'Other primary works and editions'.

[88] See Steinmetz (ed.) (1969) 258–60.

[89] To L., 7 and 8 September 1776; cf. Rattner 101.

[90] To Karl L., I December 1776; to Eva König, 3 November 1771.

The above comments relate to general features of the correspondence, but they give little impression of its development as the situation of each partner changes and their relationship is continually modified in response to changing circumstances. The following account will trace the main events in Lessing's and Eva's lives during the six years in question and seek to discover how they affected them.

In her reply to Lessing's first letter in June 1770, Eva's tone is distinctly coquettish;[91] she followed this up by calling on him with her brother some weeks later after a visit to the spa at Bad Pyrmont. She travelled to Austria in September, stopping in Munich to have her portrait—the only good likeness we have of her—painted by George de Marées.[92] After spending the winter in Vienna, she called on Lessing again on her way back to Hamburg in April 1771. The tone of their letters has by this time become more intimate, and Lessing arranged to visit her that September in Hamburg, although he declined her invitation to stay at her house (he did not wish to compromise either her or himself). It was during this visit that they became engaged, but they agreed to keep their engagement secret, no doubt because the prospect of marriage was still remote and uncertain. Lessing, who had two months' leave from Wolfenbüttel, then spent a fortnight in Berlin and discussed with Voss his plans for a new edition of his works and the possible publication of Reimarus's clandestine treatise. During this visit, his portrait was painted by Anton Graff, court painter in Dresden, probably as an engagement present to Eva (who gave him her own portrait referred to above), although one of several copies was also bought by the Leipzig publisher P. E. Reich.[93] On his way back via Hamburg, where he consoled Eva on the death of her mother, he was inaugurated as a Freemason at the Hamburg lodge 'Of the Three Golden Roses' before returning to Brunswick.

The couple's tribulations truly began in February 1772, when Eva, calling on Lessing on the way, travelled with her brother-in-law at the worst time of year on her second visit to Vienna; she had placed her three youngest children in care, and would not see them—or Lessing—again for over three years. Lessing's letters became less frequent as he struggled with his own depression, and it is only at times of crisis or in unguarded moments that his genuine passion, normally suppressed by his habitual reserve and in view of their uncertain prospects, breaks through, as in the coda to his letter of January 1773: 'Farewell, my love, or I shall scarcely have enough space to tell you what I should really no longer say—that I love you above all else, and embrace you in my thoughts a thousand times each day.' The 'should no longer say' is significant: Lessing has come to doubt whether their marriage will ever be possible, and his behaviour over the next two years reflects this uncertainty.

His own financial crisis of 1773, when his hopes of an improved salary were dashed, has already been mentioned. With no sign of progress in Eva's negotiations in Vienna, he experienced the worst phase of his depression during 1774 and wrote to Eva only once in that entire year. Since Heinrich Schneider's discoveries

[91] To L., 12 June 1770.
[92] See H. Schneider 264–5; for a second portrait, allegedly of Eva, see Spalding (2005), Fig. 32.
[93] See L. to Eva König, mid-August 1772; also Rudloff-Hille (1991) 19–20.

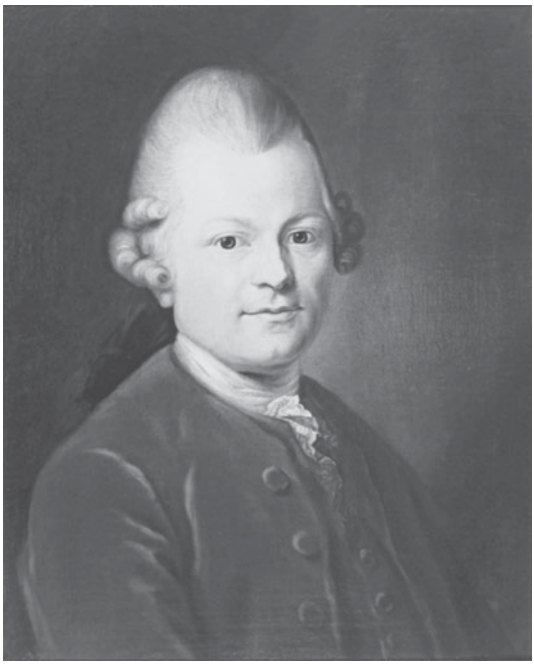

Fig. 32. Lessing, painting by Anton Graff, 1771.

on Lessing's relations with Ernestine Reiske, it has become clear that his situation during that year was seriously complicated by an entanglement with another woman.[94]

Johann Jakob Reiske, a prolific scholar and editor of classical Greek authors, was also the foremost German Arabist of his time, having studied for eight years in Leiden and copied numerous texts from what was then the finest collection of Arabic manuscripts in Europe.[95] He wrote to thank Lessing, it will be remembered, for his demolition of Klotz in 1769, and Lessing subsequently helped him with his requests for information from the Wolfenbüttel library. Morose, prematurely aged, and underrated by the academic community, Reiske had to earn his living as a headmaster in Leipzig. He was touchingly grateful to Lessing for his recognition and support, and dedicated a volume of his edition of the Greek orators to him.[96] He also decided to visit him personally in Wolfenbüttel and examine the Arabic manuscripts in the library, since Lessing had no means of deciphering them.

Reiske's wife Ernestine was an extraordinary woman.[97] Born in 1735, she was almost twenty years younger than her husband, whom she married in 1764; their marriage was childless. From assisting her husband with simple clerical tasks, she eventually became so accomplished a philologist in her own right that she was able,

[94] H. Schneider 110–65.
[95] See Kuschel (1998) 106–10; Brockhaus (1830) IX, 162–3.
[96] See Reiske to L., 12 April 1771.
[97] See Bennholdt-Thomsen (1992) *passim*.

after her husband's death, to complete and publish several of his unfinished projects. She also conducted much of his correspondence, and she was no less eager than he to meet Lessing, who had paid her a chivalrous compliment in one of his letters.[98]

The Reiskes visited Lessing for some two weeks in August 1771, unwittingly delaying his planned visit to Hamburg. They had also intended to spend time with their friends the Eberts in Brunswick, but Ebert, about to leave for several weeks in Berlin, was unable to see them.[99] It is therefore likely that, while Reiske was studying Arabic manuscripts in the library, Ernestine saw a good deal of Lessing. There is ample evidence that Lessing was attractive to women, one of whom recollected that 'he had the most expressive and unforgettable physiognomy, as well as the most animated and agreeable conversation';[100] Eva König also noted that, a year after he left Hamburg, a new actor (J. F. H. Brockmann) had greatly impressed the ladies because of his resemblance to Lessing.[101] He dressed simply but elegantly; one observer commented that he would look well in uniform.[102] The portrait traditionally attributed to Georg Oswald May, possibly painted in 1766, gives a good impression of these qualities. In short, he had the appearance not so much of a scholar or librarian as of a man of the world. Ernestine must at once have realized that, while Lessing possessed most of her husband's abilities as a scholar, he had none of his deficiencies as a man. And whether or not she let him know it, this impressionable woman fell deeply in love with him. The Reiskes left for Leipzig on 21 August, while Lessing prepared to depart for Hamburg to ask Eva König for her hand in marriage.

Ernestine made no secret to her husband of her feelings for Lessing, and she was clearly overjoyed when Lessing, in his learned periodical on the library's holdings, paid her another handsome compliment in 1773 for copying a codex of Aesop for his use, rating her achievement more highly than that of Anne Dacier, the celebrated French translator of classical texts.[103] In his next letter to Lessing, Reiske complained—only half in jest—that the compliment was excessive and had turned his wife's head:[104]

> She will tell you herself that she loves you. What more do you want? I won't be jealous about it. [...] Of course my wife has no objections to your flatteries, as you can well imagine. But I object all the more. [...] For you are spoiling my wife and leading her astray.

Events took a new turn when, after a protracted and harrowing illness, Reiske died in August 1774, cared for by his distracted wife. On her relations with Lessing from this time onwards, we have to rely on her correspondence with Ebert, published in 1951 by Heinrich Schneider, in which she regularly pours out her sorrows; for after Lessing's death, she demanded the return of her letters to him, unread, from his executors, and destroyed them along with most of his letters to her.[105] She certainly

[98] L. to Reiske, 17 December 1770. [99] See Ebert to L., 7 August 1771.
[100] Friederike Jerusalem in D 302. [101] To L., 19 May 1771. [102] D 295.
[103] LM XI, 371. [104] Reiske to L., 13 February 1773. [105] H. Schneider 128–9, 156, 158–9.

wrote to inform him of her husband's death.[106] They must also have agreed soon afterwards that Lessing would index Reiske's posthumous papers, with their annotated transcriptions of many rare manuscripts, and, with the help of his unpublished autobiography, prepare a biography of Reiske himself. Ernestine sent all the relevant papers to Lessing on 14 October 1774, and a correspondence, now lost, ensued.[107] Since she was not in the habit of concealing her emotions, Lessing must by now have been fully aware of her feelings for him. All this, it will be recalled, occurred at a time when he was himself deeply depressed and near the end of his tether.

In this volatile situation, the crucial development came in the shape of a letter from Eva, announcing that she had at last sold her husband's main factory in Vienna on favourable terms, that her uncle had effectively cancelled a debt of nearly 7,000 talers owing to him from her husband's estate by transferring the entitlement to her children, and that she planned to return shortly to her family, calling on Lessing around three years after their last meeting—that is, in late February 1775.[108] Shortly after receiving this letter, Lessing, instead of writing in relief about his preparations to welcome her, replied—for the first time in over nine months—in a remarkably offhand way, advising her to let him know when exactly she planned to call on him, 'or else I might easily happen to be away'.[109] She had, in fact, indicated fairly clearly when she might arrive, but he then proceeded to inform his brother that he had been 'in a highly unpleasant situation, so that I absolutely must take drastic steps to breathe freely elsewhere if I am not to suffocate here in the mire'. He added that he planned to go to Leipzig, and thence to Berlin or Dresden;[110] and before his departure three weeks later, he told another correspondent that he would proceed from Leipzig to Berlin and spend 'a few weeks' there—that is, during the very time when Eva planned to call on him.[111] What we witness here is another of those decisions to flee which recur throughout his life—to flee not so much from a particular place as from psychological pressures which have become intolerable.

There can be little doubt that his chief object in going to Leipzig was to see Ernestine, for shortly before he left, Ebert sent him a letter to give to her.[112] Although he probably intended to discuss with her the projected biography of her late husband, this was not alone sufficient to justify a special visit to Leipzig, for it could just as easily have been dealt with by letter. What we do know is that, after a dreadful winter journey, he arrived in Leipzig on 16 February and stayed for around a week.[113] He saw a good deal of his old friend Weisse, to whom he said that he planned to leave Wolfenbüttel for good and that he would call on him again on his way back from Berlin.[114] Weisse also noted that 'he seemed to have something else

[106] See B XI/2, 1075.
[107] See B XI/2, 1077 and 1086; also L. to Theophilus Lessing, 8 December 1774 and H. Schneider (1951) 133.
[108] To L., 28 December 1774.
[109] L. to Eva König, 10 January 1775.
[110] L. to Karl Lessing, 14 January 1775.
[111] To Wieland, 8 February 1775.
[112] Ebert to L., 10 February 1775.
[113] See L. to Kuntzsch, 17 March 1775; cf. B XI/2, 1092 and D 341 and 343–5.
[114] D 342–4.

on his mind that he wanted to tell me, but something kept coming in the way'. There is also no doubt that he visited Ernestine—and that even before he left Leipzig, a rumour was circulating that the two were about to marry.[115]

From Ernestine's letters to Ebert and others, two things at least are clear. Firstly, Lessing did not tell her of his engagement to Eva. She undoubtedly expected to see him again, and wrote repeatedly to him after he went to Italy, but received no reply.[116] Secondly, we know from her letters to Ebert and others that she endured extreme torment after Lessing's departure, and more particularly towards the end of the year as she began to realize that she had lost him for good.[117] Her raw anguish still makes harrowing reading, as in the following extract from a letter:[118]

> I can do nothing. [...] I read nothing. Oh God, what help can a book give me! I put it back and take down another, and do the same again. Then I go from one room to another in search of rest, but find none. Then I lie on the floor once more, bathed in tears, and beg God to end my wretched life.

Lessing was undergoing a crisis of his own at this time, but it is difficult not to conclude that he behaved towards Ernestine with less than his usual humanity. He and Eva had, admittedly, agreed to keep their engagement secret. But this need not have prevented him from telling Ernestine that his heart was committed elsewhere, or simply that he had no intention of marrying her. It appears that, when he left her, he was still uncertain of his intentions himself.

The turning point probably came soon after he left Leipzig for Berlin, where a forwarded letter from Eva informed him that illness had prevented her from returning to Hamburg in February as planned; she further asked him to let her know his movements, so that she might be sure of meeting him on her way home.[119] The tone of Lessing's reply is very different from that of his previous letter: he now assures Eva that he intends to remain in Wolfenbüttel, he announces that he plans to come and meet her shortly in Vienna, and signs off with the words: 'I embrace you most tenderly, and remain for life, whatever may befall me, yours alone.'[120] He had, it seems, found Ernestine's emotionality overpowering, and he avoided Leipzig on his journey south to Vienna.

Ernestine probably learned of Lessing's forthcoming marriage in the summer of 1776, by which time he had resumed his correspondence with her on his promised work on her late husband's papers.[121] But although, as she informed one of her correspondents, she had since received advances and indeed proposals from a number of men, she never remarried;[122] instead, she struck up a maternal—and possibly sexual—relationship with a young nobleman roughly half her age and

[115] See D 338–9, 343, 357.

[116] See Ernestine Reiske's letter to J. G. Schneider in Danzel/Guhrauer II, 669; also Bennholdt-Thomsen 91–2.

[117] H. Schneider (1951) 133–6.

[118] Ernestine Reiske to Ebert, 12 November 1775 in H. Schneider (1951) 142; also in Bennholdt-Thomsen/Guzzoni (eds), 16–19.

[119] Eva König to L., 16 February 1775.

[120] L. to Eva König, 7 March 1775.

[121] H. Schneider (1951) 144 and 146–7.

[122] Ibid. 145; Danzel/Guhrauer II, 669.

moved with him to different places for a number of years.[123] Lessing never compiled the promised catalogue of Reiske's papers, but helped instead to negotiate their sale to the Danish scholar Peter Frederik von Suhm.[124] Nor did he write the promised biography: Ernestine edited her husband's autobiography herself and published it in 1783.

One minor mystery still attaches to this unhappy episode. Lessing received, in instalments, the considerable sum of 900 talers from Ernestine—probably during 1775, for he added two years' interest when he calculated the debt in 1777. Since the Reiskes had always been poor, she must have acquired this sum from the sale of books by, or belonging to, her late husband[125] (she also published several volumes of his work after his death). The payments to Lessing may have been meant to finance the publication of the planned biography and the catalogue of Reiske's manuscripts. But since the relevant correspondence was destroyed, all this is speculation. We do know, however, that Lessing repaid at least some of the debt in 1779 out of sales of *Nathan the Wise*.[126] Finally, the affair has a touching postscript. Although she had long since recovered her letters to Lessing after his death, Ernestine wrote again in 1786 to his successor as ducal librarian, requesting the return of 'my portrait, which the late Hofrat Lessing had in his possession. It can be recognised […] by a rose in my hair and a kind of dark yellow costume.'[127]

On leaving Leipzig, Lessing spent around two weeks in Berlin, staying with his brother and visiting Mendelssohn, Nicolai, and other old friends. Since his Wolfenbüttel appointment and the success of his latest play, *Emilia Galotti* (see Chapter 16), his renown was such that he now received a succession of overtures from potential employers. He dined with Prince Friedrich of Prussia, but did not take up subsequent offers of a post in the Prussian finance ministry or as headmaster of the Joachimsthal Gymnasium, both of which positions he would certainly have found uncongenial.[128] He likewise turned down an invitation from the Hamburg theatre, through Bode, to supply new dramas at a fixed rate of payment.[129] The Austrian ambassador in Berlin, Gottfried van Swieten, who had long wished to attract him to Austria, now gave him numerous letters of recommendation to eminent figures in Vienna.

He then travelled south via Dresden, where he spent a week and met Philipp Daniel Lippert, the director of antiquities; he was also given to understand that he might be appointed, if he so wished, to succeed the aged director of the Saxon academies, C. L. von Hagedorn.[130] From Dresden he proceeded to Prague, and called on Ignaz von Born, a leading Austrian Freemason, with whom he probably discussed his own plans for a work on the origins of Freemasonry.[131] He also wrote

[123] H. Schneider (1951) 154 and 159; Bennholdt-Thomsen 113.

[124] See LM XVI, 290–2; also H. Schneider (1951) 150; D 305–6; L. to Ernestine Reiske, 27 March 1777.

[125] See L. to Ernestine Reiske, 18 December 1777; Danzel/Guhrauer II, 669 and H. Schneider (1951) 145.

[126] See L. to Weisse, 27 April 1779.

[127] Ernestine Reiske to E. T. Langer (1870), in Heinemann 179.

[128] See Karl Lessing to L., 18 March 1775 and L. to Karl Lessing, 26 March 1775.

[129] L. to Bode, 9 March 1775. [130] D 357; B XI/2, 1093. [131] H. Schneider (1951) 183–4.

Fig. 33. Ernestine Reiske, engraving, perhaps after the painting described on p. 443.

at this time to Duke Karl in Brunswick, requesting a further month's leave for a journey to Vienna (on which he had already set off).[132]

Eva was naturally overjoyed to see him, and she later declared that the few days she was now able to spend with him were the only enjoyable ones in all her years in Vienna.[133] Lessing did not, of course, tell her about his relations with Ernestine. But he did apparently admit that he had at one point given up hope that he and Eva would ever be married, for when he again ceased to write to her for months on end later that year, she said that she feared he had again withdrawn from his commitment. These fears were reinforced when the rumour about Lessing's supposed engagement to Ernestine eventually reached her.[134]

In travelling to Vienna, Lessing had not forgotten the various overtures he had received from the Austrian authorities since the late 1760s. In 1771, he had seriously considered an offer, transmitted via Sulzer and Karl Lessing in Berlin, from the ambassador van Swieten in connection with Joseph II's plan for an Austrian academy. A possible salary of 1,500 talers had been mentioned, and money was offered for a trip to Italy via Vienna.[135] Since Eva still had capital investments in Vienna with no immediate prospect of recovering her capital, Lessing had been inclined to pursue this offer further, provided it had nothing to do with the running of theatres.[136] His enthusiasm had waned, however, when he learned that Klotz's disciple Riedel had also received an offer, and he decided not to take the matter any further, at least for the present.[137]

[132] See L. to Kuntzsch, 25 March 1775.
[133] To L., 29 April 1775.
[134] See Eva König to L., 5 November 1775.
[135] See Karl Lessing to L., 6 and 19 November 1771; also Wangermann 63.
[136] To Karl Lessing, 14 November 1771.
[137] To Karl Lessing, 31 December 1771; also L. to Eva König, 26 December 1771 and 9 January 1772.

Eva had meanwhile struggled in Vienna to retain her workforce and increase production both in her main factory, which produced silk, velvet, and other textiles from Italian raw materials, and her smaller wallpaper factory, both of which had been helped by subsidies from the Austrian government. Though her Hamburg adviser Johannes Schuback recommended as early as 1771 that she should sell the factories without delay,[138] the situation was complicated by the possibility that Lessing might settle with her in Vienna, in which case she intended to retain the flourishing wallpaper factory to secure a steady income, while selling the larger silk factory. She also had to contend with her factory manager Hornbostel, a native of Hamburg, whose cooperation depended on the prospect of his eventually taking over the factories himself. She was finally able to agree the sale of the silk factory in October 1774 and the other factory a few months later; the first effectively went to Hornbostel, who acted through a temporary Austrian partner. The sum realized, when reinvested, secured her an annual income of around 500 talers after all her liabilities were met.[139]

By the time Lessing joined her, Eva's business in Vienna was accordingly over, and he no longer had any compelling reason—apart from his dissatisfaction with Brunswick—to seek employment there. He nevertheless found himself the object of much attention, and he no doubt went along with it for long enough to discover whether there was any genuine prospect of congenial employment. He was invited to dine with various members of the higher nobility, and he had audiences with both Maria Theresia and Joseph II.[140] According to Karl Lessing, the empress asked him for his impressions of Viennese culture, and of literature and the theatre in particular; Lessing answered diplomatically that he had been in Vienna for too short a time to reach a considered judgement.[141] He had, in fact, learned a good deal in advance about the Austrian theatre, for Eva had kept him informed about cultural matters in Vienna and about the theatre in particular, and his impressions were by no means favourable. He was no doubt gratified to hear that Joseph II had seen *Emilia Galotti* twice in 1772, during which year it had numerous performances in Vienna, and he was not at all put out by the emperor's reported remark that he had never laughed so much at a tragedy in all his life. But when Eva told him that, after the heroine was killed by her father, the actor playing the Prince had picked up the dagger and licked the blood off it, he was justifiably incensed, and feared that the emperor had laughed at all the wrong places.[142] He duly complained about this, and about wilful alterations to his plays in Viennese productions, to T. P. von Gebler, a leading figure in the Austrian government. Gebler, himself a minor dramatist (Mozart supplied the music for his *Thamos, King of Egypt*), embarrassed Lessing by sending him his mediocre plays, on which Lessing felt unable to comment for fear of prejudicing Eva's position in Vienna;[143] and whether he knew

[138] See Eva König to L., 10 December 1771 and 4 February 1772.
[139] See H. Schneider (1951) 234–43; also Raabe (2005) 88–9.
[140] D 359 and 363; L. to Karl Lessing, 7 May 1775.
[141] KGL 201–2.
[142] See Eva König to L., 15 July 1772 and L. to Eva König, 29 July 1772.
[143] See L. to Eva König, 27 June 1772.

it or not, Gebler had only recently been campaigning for Lessing to be offered a contract as director of the projected Austrian National Theatre, with a salary, provisionally fixed by the powerful Chancellor Kaunitz, of 2,000 talers.[144]

By the time of his visit, then, Lessing was undoubtedly the most respected German-speaking dramatist in Austria.[145] His name was associated not only with his own plays, but also with his translations of those of Diderot, especially *Le Père de famille* (*Der Hausvater*), which was widely attributed to Lessing himself;[146] in a successful season in 1771, it had been seen by both the emperor and his mother.[147] Lessing's arrival in 1775 was accordingly taken as a signal to perform his plays, and Count Rosenberg, director of the Burgtheater, put on *Minna von Barnhelm*, *Emilia Galotti*, and *Der Hausvater* during his visit.[148] The performances ended with shouts of 'Viva Lessing!', and on one occasion when Lessing was actually present, he was obliged to acknowledge the ovation.[149]

None of this could obscure the fact that the Austrian theatre still had major deficiencies and was badly in need of reform. Attempts at reform had been made as early as the 1760s by the influential writer Joseph von Sonnenfels, whose *Letters on the Viennese Stage* of 1767–9 were much influenced by Lessing's *Hamburg Dramaturgy*. Joseph II was sympathetic to Sonnenfels's aims, and briefly put him in charge of the Austrian theatre.[150] In his hostility to improvisation and to the popular Viennese comedy, Sonnenfels's position was close to that of Gottsched, on whose literary society the Viennese Deutsche Gesellschaft, of which Sonnenfels was chairman, was modelled; like the emperor himself, he failed to realize that the popular comedy was the most vital and original component of the Austrian dramatic tradition. Lessing had at first felt a measure of sympathy for Sonnenfels, especially in view of his friendly reception of Eva on her first visit to Vienna (which she probably owed to her association with Lessing).[151] But when a letter of Sonnenfels to Klotz, casting doubt on Lessing's personal integrity, was published late in 1772,[152] Sonnenfels awaited in fear and trembling the demand for a public explanation which he assumed Lessing would wish to make. Lessing only refrained from doing so on hearing of the public humiliation which Sonnenfels had brought upon himself by his various indiscretions, for as he put it himself, he was not prepared to strike a man who was already down. In literary matters at least, Sonnenfels was now a spent force.[153]

With the emperor's backing, theatre reforms nevertheless went ahead in Vienna. Less than a year after Lessing's visit, the old Burgtheater was renamed the 'Court and National Theatre' with the specific remit of promoting German drama, and new theatres were allowed to open in the Viennese suburbs. Talent scouts were sent out to look for good actors, and one of them, the actor J. H. F. Müller, whom Lessing had known in Berlin and who had taken him to view the medieval manuscripts of

[144] See A (2003) 239–40. [145] See Beales 231. [146] See Eva König to L., 26 January 1771.
[147] Beales 235; also B V/1, 579. [148] B VI/1, 581; D 358 and 361. [149] D 359–60.
[150] See Kann 205 and 220. [151] See L. to Eva König, 10 April 1772.
[152] Text in Sonnenfels, ed. Rollett (see Bibliog. 'Primary literature') 25.
[153] L. to Eva, 8 January 1773.

Klosterneuburg during his visit to Vienna, came to Wolfenbüttel to seek his advice.[154] Lessing welcomed the reforms—not least the abolition of ballet as an adjunct to drama, and Joseph's efforts to rid the theatre of French influence—and contrasted the emperor's policy favourably with that of the Francophile Prussian monarch. To consolidate and complete these reforms, he added, a drama school should be established, for he had noticed in Vienna that there was no common standard even in the spoken language, so that each actor spoke in his or her regional dialect. We do not know what the emperor discussed with Lessing when he met him in 1775. But there can be little doubt that, in his reforms of the following year, one of the influences which guided him was that of Lessing.[155]

Lessing never did receive a firm contractual offer of employment in Vienna. But even if he had received one, he would not have accepted it. For apart from the fact that his Hamburg experiences had put him off any further practical involvement with the theatre, he had seen enough of Austrian affairs to realize that his future must lie elsewhere. The inconsistent behaviour of the authorities he dealt with, who alternately blew hot and cold on the prospects of a pan-German academy with the possible involvement of Protestants, mirrored the nature of the Austrian regime itself. It will not have escaped him that the first collected edition of his own works, the *Writings* (*Schriften*) of 1753–5, and even his youthful collection of Anacreontic poems, the *Trifles*, were on the list of proscribed books in Austria,[156] and he and Eva had seen enough signs of discrimination against Protestants to conclude that there was little hope for him there as long (in his own words) 'as a certain pair of eyes is still open'.[157] As long as the empress was alive, Joseph's reforms would always be shackled by his mother's conservative instincts. It was no doubt with such considerations in mind that, on his way north through Vienna at the beginning of 1776, Lessing deliberately left a day early to get out of an invitation to meet the Chancellor Kaunitz.[158]

Lessing's wish to visit Italy goes back at least to his Breslau period, and possibly even to the lectures of J. F. Christ in Leipzig, which were partly designed to prepare better-off students for the Grand Tour. By the time he was offered his Wolfenbüttel post, this wish was so strong that he made it a condition of his acceptance that he be allowed to fulfil it. It is therefore deeply ironic that, when he was finally given an opportunity to do so, the offer was both unwelcome and well-nigh impossible to refuse. It came as a direct request from the youngest son of his employer Duke Karl, namely Prince Leopold of Brunswick, who had come to Vienna with a view to possible employment in the Austrian army. Maria Theresia, a cousin of Duke Karl, approved in principle, but matters had not been fully debated in Brunswick and further consultation was necessary on so delicate an issue, for the Brunswick dukes had hitherto fought on the side of Austria's old enemy Prussia. Prince Leopold accordingly resolved to make an excursion to Venice while his parents

[154] D 362 and 412–19. [155] Cf. Beales 234; Flemming 49.
[156] See Rudloff-Hille (1982) 95.
[157] See L. to Eva König, 1 March 1772; Eva König to L., 18 November 1772.
[158] See L. to Eva König, 23 January 1776 and D 372.

decided his future. At this point, he encountered Lessing, whose credentials he knew and admired. He duly urged him to accompany him to Venice as guide and adviser, and assured him that he would set matters straight with his father[159] (who, as earlier mentioned, had already been asked to approve retrospectively Lessing's extra month's leave to visit Austria). Eva König, newly reunited with her fiancé after three years of separation, was for her part anxious to return to Germany without delay in order to see her children and prepare for her wedding, but in the knowledge that the trip to Venice would be a relatively short one, she reluctantly accepted Lessing's departure for Italy on 25 April. She then left Austria herself for her native city of Heidelberg, where her eldest son Theodor was undergoing medical treatment, and waited for Lessing to catch up with her.

From this point on, what began as a temporary setback became a prolonged ordeal for them both. As his stay in Venice drew to a close, the prince, having heard nothing from Brunswick, decided to continue south to Florence, and as one delay succeeded another, the excursion became a Grand Tour of Italy lasting almost to the end of the year. To make matters worse, Lessing's correspondence with Eva was gravely disrupted: Gebler, and another Viennese acquaintance whom Eva had asked to forward her letters to Lessing, failed to do so, since they did not know his whereabouts and neglected to consult the Brunswick legate who would have been able to reach him.[160] One of Lessing's letters disappeared without trace, and having failed to elicit any response, he concluded that Eva must be seriously ill or even dead, and gave up writing to her in July. Only at the end of the year, by which time Eva had long since returned to Hamburg, were such fears allayed and communication restored.[161]

Lessing's letters to Eva from Italy are consequently full of anxiety and regret. He suffered from the southern heat and was periodically unwell. And although the prince, like his eldest brother before him, travelled incognito as 'Graf von Blankenburg', this alias was chiefly designed to moderate the demands of hoteliers, lackeys, and artisans for gratuities, whereas heads of state and the higher nobility, who were fully informed of the prince's identity, received him with all the courtly ceremony which Lessing detested.[162] As he later explained to Heyne, he also regretted the fact that he had travelled with no advance preparation: given the chance, he would have approached the Italian antiquities with specific enquiries in mind.[163] In short, this unexpected, inopportune, and unplanned journey was a far cry from what he had so long hoped for.

But not everything was quite so negative as Lessing's gloomy letters suggest. Although he resented the formalities of travel with a prince, his complaints never relate to the twenty-three-year-old Prince Leopold personally. Lessing was at ease in the company of younger people—many of his closest friends in the 1770s, from Eschenburg and Leisewitz to Jacobi and Daveson, were much younger than himself—and all the evidence suggests that Leopold was not only intelligent and

[159] See L. to Karl Lessing, 7 May 1775.
[160] See Santini I, 180.
[161] L. to Eva König, 26 December 1775.
[162] L. to Eva König, 8 May 1775.
[163] To Heyne, 4 May 1776.

cultivated but also a far more kindly and amiable character than his eldest brother (so much so that his uncle Frederick, at a recent encounter, had questioned his military aptitude).[164] It was precisely these humane qualities which led to his tragic death and posthumous fame when he drowned in his efforts to rescue ordinary citizens from the Oder floods of 1785. The prince's adjutant Warnstedt, who, along with two servants, accompanied the party to Italy, was also a capable and cultivated man. He had fought in the Seven Years War under Karl Wilhelm Ferdinand and eventually rose to senior rank in the Brunswick army. He was often to be found in Lessing's company at jovial gatherings in later years.[165]

Thanks to Warnstedt's meticulously kept account book,[166] we are fully informed of the party's itinerary, including the courts and eminent personages, monuments, theatres and places of interest they visited. Often covering seventy miles per day, they travelled via Salzburg, Innsbruck and across the Brenner to Lake Garda, Brescia and Milan, where they spent a week, then on to Mantua, Verona, Padua, and Venice, where they stayed from 22 May to 3 June. From Venice they proceeded via Ferrara and Bologna to Florence, stopping there for three weeks until the heat drove them to the coast at Pisa and Livorno, where they took ship to Corsica. They sailed back to Genoa and went on to Turin, and while the rest of the party continued to Geneva and Ferney to visit Voltaire, Lessing—for understandable reasons avoiding a reunion with his old adversary—remained alone in Turin for around three weeks. Still without news from Brunswick, they then set off for Rome, where they remained from 22 September to 15 October, and finally pressed on to Naples. It was here that the prince at last heard that, at the wish of his mother, his uncle Frederick had offered him command of a Prussian infantry regiment stationed at Frankfurt an der Oder. Returning to Rome on 9 November, they halted again for nearly three weeks before proceeding post haste back to the Austrian frontier and on to Munich, where Lessing left the party to reach Vienna by Christmas while the others made their way to Brunswick.

As the prince and his companions zigzagged across north Italy on their unplanned journey—they stayed in Bologna on three separate occasions—they managed to see most of the sights of the Grand Tour, which traditionally ended in Naples, as well as others such as Corsica. It is clear from the account book that they had a busy schedule, with numerous visits to theatres, operas, concerts and galleries, and excursions to places outside the centres where they stayed. No expense was spared, and the prince's entire journey cost well over 12,000 talers, or around one per cent of Brunswick's annual revenue.[167] Few comments by Lessing himself survive on the places they visited, but the following highlights may briefly be mentioned.

The party attended the main annual festival of Ascension Day in Venice on 25 May, witnessing the ceremony of the Doge's marriage to the sea, which was followed

[164] See the article 'Leopold von Braunschweig' in ADB XVIII, 377; also Santini I, 95–104.
[165] See Deeters (1971) 141–2; D 491, 534–6, 546–8.
[166] Text in Santini I, 207–81; see also Deeters (1971) *passim* and Santini II, 518–87.
[167] According to Deeters (1971) 156 the journey cost 12,306 talers; according to B VIII, 1123 the cost was 13, 324 talers.

by a two-week fair attended by traders from many countries. On this particular occasion, the scale of the ceremonies and festivities was more lavish than usual, for they were attended by Joseph II himself, the Archdukes Maximilian and Ferdinand (with the latter of whom the prince's party had dined in Milan),[168] the Grand Duke of Tuscany, and the Dukes of Parma and Modena.[169] There were church services, a banquet, a grand regatta and naval salutes, concerts, balls and theatre performances, illuminations and crowds of up to 200,000 spectators. In his one letter from Venice, Lessing is characteristically laconic: the only event he mentions is of purely personal significance, namely his visit to the grave of Engelbert König in the cemetery of San Cristoforo; he was also able to reassure Eva that her husband had died of natural causes.[170]

In Florence, it is enough to say that they saw all the familiar sights. But in Livorno, a free port and the home of a polyglot and multi-confessional community, we know that the party visited the synagogue, and that Lessing met one, or possibly two noted Jewish scholars currently resident there.[171] Prince Leopold recalled in later years having listened with rapt attention to Lessing's discussions with one of them on philosophical matters[172]—almost certainly the rabbi Abraham Isaak Castello, poet, Talmudist and philosopher; it is likely that they also met Joseph David Azuley, envoy from Jerusalem and charismatic interpreter of Hebrew tradition. The content of their discussions is unfortunately not recorded.[173] This visit to the Jewish community stands out as an unusual item in a tour such as that of Prince Leopold, and it betrays the hand of Lessing. He had intended, it will be remembered, to sail from Hamburg to Livorno in 1769, and it is possible that he had obtained introductions to the leading Jews of that city from Moses Wessely or other members of the Hamburg Jewish community.

Of the visit to Corsica, which had recently thrown off the yoke of Genoese rule only to fall under French domination, all that is known is that the party was received by the French military governor, the Count de Marbœuf; this trip was the closest Lessing ever came to visiting France itself. It was in Turin that he at last had sufficient free time to pursue his own interests, and apart from working in the library there (his so-called 'diary', which will be discussed below, dates largely from his weeks in Turin), he made the acquaintance of several Italian scholars. One of these was Giuseppe Vernazza, antiquarian and historian, with whom he discussed Piedmontese customs and the medieval holdings of the university library.[174] Another was Carlo Denina, historian, theologian, and professor of rhetoric, who was subsequently called to Berlin and membership of the Berlin Academy by Frederick the Great. Denina, who was much impressed by Lessing's erudition, records a revealing anecdote on Lessing's Islamic sympathies. He told Lessing that he was planning to write a utopian novel on a future conquest of Greece by an international force, and the subsequent partition of the country under distinct varieties of government. Lessing at once interjected

[168] See L. to Eva König, 8 May 1775. [169] Further details in Ostwald *passim*.
[170] To Eva König, 2 June 1775; Deeters (1971) 148; Ostwald 82–3.
[171] Santini I, 238. [172] Ibid. I, 98. [173] Ibid. I, 442–52. [174] Ibid. I, 123.

(they conversed in French): 'Au nom de Dieu, ne touchez pas à mes Turcs!' Denina promptly abandoned his plans for the novel.[175]

In Rome, the party stayed at the Locanda Stuart on the Piazza di Spagna in the heart of the tourist district. They were led on an extensive tour of antiquities by J. F. Reifenstein, successor to Winckelmann as cicerone to notable foreign (and especially German) visitors; they also visited Frascati, Albano, and Tivoli. In Roman antiquarian circles, Lessing was better known than the prince, and word of his presence soon reached the German press, which at once cast him in the role of a second Winckelmann, claiming that his advice had been sought not only by the aged Cardinal Albani, but also by the Pope himself.[176] Visits to Cardinal Albani and the Vatican Library are indeed recorded in Warnstedt's account book, and the party was granted an informal audience with the recently elected Pius VI at the Quirinal.[177] But there was certainly no time for Lessing to study medieval manuscripts, as Schubart's *Deutsche Chronik* alleged, and it is highly unlikely that the Pope conversed for two hours with Lessing in German, as the same journal declared.[178] A later and more credible correction by Schubart states that Lessing subsequently ridiculed such claims, declaring that his conversation with the Pope had been brief and inconsequential.[179] The claims in question are nevertheless significant inasmuch as they reflect the high expectations of the German public with regard to Lessing's Italian journey; and the same expectations, together with disappointment at their non-fulfilment, have dominated German accounts of Lessing's journey and its written legacy right down to the present.

The trip to Naples, with several visits to the theatre and opera, an audience with King Ferdinand and Queen Maria Carolina of the Two Sicilies, excursions to Pozzuoli, Pompeii and Herculaneum, and an ascent of Vesuvius (then in an active phase)—all under the guidance of Sir William Hamilton—made a fitting climax to the tour.[180] On their return visit to Rome, the prince and his companions witnessed the enthronement of the new Pope, and Lessing purchased a large consignment of books for the Wolfenbüttel library.[181] But of all the impressions Lessing received in Rome and Naples, the only surviving record he left is around two pages of sparse comments, many of them short headings or corrections to factual errors in the standard German guidebook.[182]

These comments are to be found in what has traditionally been known as Lessing's 'diary' (*Tagebuch*) of his Italian journey, but which is much better described as a travel notebook.[183] Admittedly, more than the first third of it consists of dated entries; but the dates refer, in most cases, to the days on which the entries were made rather than to specific events on those days, and they cover only six weeks (from late August to early October) of a journey which extended from April to

[175] See D 367–8. [176] D 369–71. [177] Santini I, 93–4, 258, 261.
[178] D 369 and 371; Deeters (1971) 152. [179] D 371–2.
[180] Santini I, 266–77; Deeters (1971) 154. [181] Santini I, 279 and II, 587.
[182] LM XVI, 268–71.
[183] LM XVI, 256–88; cf. the annotated editions in B VIII, 685–720 and Santini I, 121–76 ('Notizbuch'); also the facsimile edition by Wolfgang Milde, Wiesbaden 1997 ('Tagebuch').

December. Apart from occasional remarks on Italian customs, institutions, and famous buildings (mainly designed to correct or supplement J. J. Volkmann's tourist guidebook, the *Historisch-kritische Nachrichten von Italien*),[184] nearly all of the entries are of a philological, antiquarian, or bibliographical nature: it is, in short, a scholarly miscellany, closer in character to Lessing's commonplace book (the *Collectanea*) than to a journal or travelogue in the usual sense. It concludes with a series of bio-bibliographical listings of Italian scholars, drawn almost exclusively from the first three volumes of an Italian review journal, the *Efemeridi letterarie di Roma* (1772–74).[185]

All this contrasts starkly with the expectations of Lessing's contemporaries, who expected at the very least some authoritative pronouncements on classical monuments from the author of *Laocoön* and the *Antiquarian Letters*. It has also been a major disappointment to later generations, who have drawn unfavourable comparisons between Lessing's arid and amorphous compilation and the radiant vision of Goethe's *Italian Journey*.[186] Even the unpropitious circumstances under which Lessing wrote—his leisure and freedom curtailed by courtly formalities, his peace of mind disturbed by his fiancée's silence, his plans to prepare for such a journey frustrated by an unexpected summons—cannot wholly efface the impression of a missed opportunity. In a brave attempt to compensate, the most comprehensive study of his Italian experience, the massive and lavishly illustrated catalogue of a major exhibition devoted to this subject in 1993, brings every detail of the journey vividly to life. But in informing us so fully of what Lessing must have seen, may have thought, and might have written, it makes us even more conscious than before of how little he himself had to say about so rich an experience.

It must, in fairness, be added that, in addition to the surviving notebook, further manuscripts relating to the Italian journey, now lost, are recorded among Lessing's posthumous papers.[187] The almost complete absence in the notebook of comment on ancient works of art does indeed suggest that the missing papers may have included material of this kind, as confirmed by a letter of Lessing to Nicolai in which he states his intention to continue the *Antiquarian Letters* on the basis of 'various remarks […] which I believe I made on my Italian journey'.[188] But as this reference suggests, the remarks in question can hardly have amounted to a continuous travelogue or narrative of personal impressions: like the notebook, they can only have been another collection of scattered observations of a predominantly antiquarian nature.[189] And despite the efforts of some scholars to find echoes of the Italian experience in *Nathan the Wise* and other late works of Lessing, such echoes are at best hypothetical and in any case of peripheral significance.[190]

To anyone familiar with Lessing's personality, his bookish approach and lack of subjective response to the beauties of Italy are in no way surprising. In the first

[184] 3 vols, Leipzig 1770–1771. [185] LM XVI, 274–88; cf. Muncker (1902) *passim*.
[186] See, for example, Oehlke II, 248; GEL: Tagebuch der italienischen Reise, ed. Milde, 137.
[187] See B VIII, 1125. [188] To Nicolai, 20 September 1777; B VIII, 1125–26 and 1132.
[189] Cf. Guthke (2000b) 66; Grimm (1985) 117–18.
[190] See, for example, Stefan Matuschek, 'L., Soave, Vico' in Santini I, 395–409; also Santini I, 452–64.

place, he belonged to a generation which still rated rational analysis and written records more highly than direct experience:[191] his attitude is akin to that of Leibniz, who went to Italy in 1689 to investigate the genealogy of the Guelph rulers of Brunswick and spent most of his time in libraries and in conversation with fellow scholars.[192] Secondly, as his surviving correspondence confirms, Lessing was constitutionally averse to autobiographical and confessional writing: after his description as a schoolboy of the Prussian assault on Meissen, there is no sustained description of major events, impressive spectacles, or notable personal encounters in all of his writings. Nor is it the case that the idiom for vivid personal expression was not yet available, as has sometimes been alleged:[193] he had himself translated Diderot's rhapsodies on the natural landscape from the dialogues on *Le Fils naturel*,[194] he had read Rousseau's sparkling descriptions of Lake Geneva and the wine harvest in *La Nouvelle Héloïse*, and he knew—and was not impressed by—Werther's effusions on the changing seasons in Goethe's recently published novel. He set no great store by direct observation, as in his repeated defence of written evidence as against personal examination in the study of classical art, and he once declared that a visit to the collection of plaster casts in Mannheim was more useful than a trip to Rome to see the badly displayed originals.[195] The same attitude, compounded by his aversion to the strident enthusiasms of the young Storm and Stress generation, is evident in his lack of interest in landscape, as when, in response to someone who declared 'I myself could not survive for long if there were no bushes and trees', he retorted 'they have no place in my life'; or when he replied to someone else who rejoiced in the emergent green of springtime 'Oh, it has turned green so often before—I wish it would turn red for a change.'[196] It is for this reason, and no other, that his notes from Italy include no descriptions of Vesuvius, Corsica, the Alps, or the Grand Canal.

Appropriately enough, his main acquisition in Italy was a large consignment of books, 264 titles in all and many in multiple volumes, for the Wolfenbüttel library. Most of them relate to his own interests, with large numbers of titles on Italian literature, philology, antiquities, and guides to Italy. Many of them are by authors whose names appear in the lists of contemporary Italian scholars and artists in his notebook.[197]

These systematic lists of scientists, philosophers, historians, poets, antiquaries, philologists, and even actors, with separate entries on those whom Lessing had personally met, raise the interesting question of why he should have troubled to collect such apparently pointless data in the first place; for they look more like a preparation for work in the Italian community than materials for further study or written elaboration abroad. The answer to this question gives us the clue to his real purpose in starting a 'diary' so late in his tour. Already in May, he had written from

[191] Cf. Wiedemann (1984) 154; Grimm (1985) 117; Guthke (2000b) 43.
[192] For example, E. C. Hirsch 232–44; Antognazza 299–309.
[193] See, for example, Mattenklott 233.
[194] Diderot, ed. GEL (Bibliog. 'L's translations') 104–6 and 139–40.
[195] LM X, 273 and 311; XI, 209; D 427.
[196] D 541 and 526.
[197] See Santini II, 677–851; also R/S (2004) 145–216; B VIII, 1131.

Milan to his brother: 'This foretaste […] has completely revived my old idea of living and dying in Italy, for I so much like everything I have so far seen and heard.'[198] Clearly, he could not write to Eva in this vein without upsetting her, and his tone in his subsequent letters from Italy—all of them to Eva—is correspondingly negative. But his brother, whom he visited shortly after his return from Italy, would later report that 'if he had not made firm arrangements in Vienna for his forthcoming marriage, he would certainly have returned to Germany, but stayed there only long enough to make a permanent move to Italy';[199] and Gebler, whom he saw in Vienna on his way back to Germany, reported 'that he found Italy, and Rome in particular, so extraordinarily congenial that he may well pay it a second and longer visit'.[200] It is therefore likely that, when he had heard nothing from Eva by late August, he took active steps to prepare for this eventuality. But even after he was happily married, he more than once assured Maler Müller—another of those much younger men with whom he formed a close rapport towards the end of his life—that he wished to spend his last years with him 'in Italy [where Müller would shortly settle] or somewhere else'.[201]

The main reason why Lessing wrote nothing of substance in consequence of his visit to Italy is therefore because he intended to make a longer return visit in order to do the job properly. But if so, what sort of work would he have written? We do know that he told Nicolai in 1777 that he wished to continue the *Antiquarian Letters*, presumably with reference to ancient works he had seen in Italy and intended to study further. But we also know that, on his way back via Dresden, he made provisional arrangements with Winckelmann's German publisher to produce a new edition of Winckelmann's *History of the Art of Antiquity*,[202] which would certainly have incorporated those corrections he had kept in reserve when he published *Laocoön*, and no doubt other corrections besides; and a few months later, he further indicated that he wished to publish an edition of Winckelmann's works as a whole.[203] In short, he would have taken significant steps towards realizing the ambition which many people had long attributed to him, namely that of becoming Winckelmann's successor.

Back in Vienna at the end of 1775 and again in contact by letter with Eva, Lessing resolved to travel north as soon as possible. Calling once again at Prague, he proceeded to Dresden with a view to confirming the earlier offer of employment there in case he should fail to secure improved conditions in Wolfenbüttel, where Eva had begged him to settle with her after their marriage.[204] On this occasion, he was granted an audience with the Elector of Saxony, who assured him that he might succeed Hagedorn as director of the academies if he so wished, with a salary of 1,800 talers, and made him promise to come to Dresden if he should decide to leave Wolfenbüttel.[205] He also spent a few days in Kamenz with his mother (who died a few weeks later) and sister, and met his brother Theophilus before going on to Berlin. (He again took care to avoid Leipzig.) In Berlin, where he spent over a

[198] To Karl Lessing, 7 May 1775. [199] KGL 200. [200] Dvoretzky (1971–72) I, 56.
[201] D 427; Karpeles 19. [202] LM XV, 7 n. 1. [203] L. to Dassdorf, 26 September 1776.
[204] L. to Eva König, 26 December 1775. [205] D 374; L. to Eva König, 23 January 1776.

fortnight, he discussed his plans for a work on Freemasonry and for the publication of Reimarus's manuscript with Nicolai and Mendelssohn.[206] At a lunch to which he was invited by the Prussian minister of justice von Zedlitz, he also made the acquaintance of the philosopher and critic J. J. Engel, to whom he outlined his current plans for a Faust drama.[207] He then made his way to Brunswick and arrived there on 23 February, just over a year after setting off on his travels.

His first priority in Brunswick was to seek an improvement in his financial circumstances, which he had discussed inconclusively with the crown prince as early as 1773. He now determined to tackle the matter directly, and was prepared to resign on the spot if his conditions were not substantially improved. Despite Eva's entreaties to him to exercise restraint, it seems that, early in March, he told the crown prince what he thought of his treatment over the last three years and offered his resignation.[208] The prince, who spoke encouragingly and was no doubt grateful to Lessing for accompanying Prince Leopold to Italy, made a provisional offer some weeks later which Lessing was inclined to accept, and the agreement was finalized in June. Past advances on his salary were written off; he received a new advance of 1,000 talers; his salary was increased to 800 talers net after deductions; he was promised a house close to the library; and he was given the title of *Hofrat*, which he reluctantly accepted.[209]

The way was now at last clear for his wedding to Eva, whom he had seen very rarely and only for a few days at a time since he first formed an attachment to her six years before. After attending to his responsibilities in Wolfenbüttel and resuming work on several literary projects which had remained in abeyance for a year, he set off for Hamburg on 3 August in the company of Eschenburg. Much of his time there was doubtless spent with Eva and on planning their wedding and removal to new quarters in Wolfenbüttel in October, but he also managed to see many old friends, including Büsch and the Reimarus family. He saw a good deal of Klopstock in particular, and met two young men who became his devoted admirers, namely the poet and translator J. H. Voss and the educationalist J. H. Campe.[210] He left Hamburg for Brunswick on the last day of the month.

Throughout the next month, letters went to and fro between Wolfenbüttel and Hamburg as arrangements for the wedding on 8 October were finalized. The house near the library which Lessing had been promised was found to be structurally unsound, and he was instead allotted the upper floors of the so-called Meissner house (now the headquarters of the Lessing Academy) on the east side of the palace square. He now set about hiring a cook and housemaid.[211] The wedding was to take place not in Hamburg itself, but in the country house of Johannes Schuback in Jork, on the south side of the Elbe estuary and just north of Buxtehude. Schuback, a prosperous merchant from an old Hamburg family (his father had been mayor of the city), had witnessed and survived the Lisbon earthquake of 1755 and

[206] D 379–81. [207] D 382–4 and 387–9. [208] See L. to Eva König, 10 March 1776.
[209] See L. to Eva König, 11 April and 5 and 23 June 1776; L. to Féronce, 22 or 23 June 1776; also B XI/2, 1127 and Danzel/Guhrauer II, 673.
[210] D 398, 400, 402; Lüdtke 47 and 49. [211] B XI/2, 822, 825, 1124; Raabe (1997) 53.

was now Portuguese Consul in Hamburg. He had advised Eva on her business affairs since 1771, and helped her to liquidate her husband's assets in Austria.[212] Eva was also a close friend of his wife, and had spent several weeks with her at Jork in June of that year. Since she would have to quit her own house in Hamburg before the wedding if she wished to travel to Wolfenbüttel immediately afterwards, it made sense to accept the Schubacks' offer to hold the wedding in Jork. Wary as always of pomp and ceremony, Lessing urged Eva to ensure that this be kept to a minimum, and that no guests or witnesses be invited other than the family in residence and the brother of Eva's late husband; for good measure, he also sought to make his visit to Jork as short as possible, and announced that he would arrive in the clothes she had last seen him in. Eva quite reasonably insisted that he arrive at least two days in advance, and that he wear a new waistcoat and trousers which she would provide for him.[213] She also reminded him, as a Brunswick civil servant, that he must bring with him a ducal permit to marry. But her chief concern was not with such formalities: at the end of her penultimate letter to Lessing, she for once expressed those passionate feelings which she had for so long held in check.[214]

Though delayed by an unannounced visit from Gleim, who not for the first time arrived at the least opportune moment, Lessing reached Jork at the appointed time. The wedding went according to plan (although one anecdote has it that, at some point during that day, Lessing was rescued after falling into the Elbe or a nearby watercourse).[215] After a few more days at Jork, Eva and he, together with Eva's children Amalie or Malchen (15), Engelbert (11), and Fritz (8), set off for Wolfenbüttel. This was the beginning of what would be the happiest year of Lessing's life.

[212] Lüdtke 65–6.
[213] Eva König to L., 18 September 1776; L. to Eva König, 20 and 23 September 1776; Eva König to L., 25 September 1776.
[214] Eva König to L., 25 September 1776.
[215] D 412; Danzel/Guhrauer II, 584.

15

Lessing, the Library and Related Publications: 1770–1782

The best libraries in eighteenth-century Germany were not those of the universities, but the major royal or princely collections such as those in Dresden, Munich, Mannheim, and Berlin.[1] With the notable exception of Göttingen, which was generously subsidized by Britain, university libraries were generally small and underfunded; they were run by part-time librarians who were also university teachers with their own specialized interests, and their hours of opening were limited. The princely collections, on the other hand, usually had full-time professional curators, and even if their funding was erratic or limited (Lessing's annual allowance of 200 talers for all library expenditure had not changed since 1708),[2] they might also be augmented from time to time by special purchases or bequests from the ruling family; scholars, moreover, normally had ready access to their holdings. But neither the university libraries (again, with the exception of Göttingen) nor the princely collections as yet approximated to the modern ideal of a learned library as an up-to-date resource for research, including research in the empirical sciences. They were rather storehouses of past knowledge, and the acquisition of rare and remarkable books still took precedence over the furtherance of current research. It must also be remembered that, in the eighteenth century, the work of the Renaissance was not yet complete, for it was still by no means uncommon for scholars to discover, in the major collections, hitherto unknown texts or fragments by writers of classical antiquity, and more especially of the Middle Ages. It was therefore highly desirable that those in charge of such collections should have wide expertise in historical and philological scholarship.

Wolfenbüttel was particularly fortunate in that many of its rulers were book collectors and men of learning. Although the earliest collections had been transferred to the duchy's university in Helmstedt, the greatest collector of all, Duke August the Younger, was able in the course of his long life (1579–1666) to amass a collection of over 130,000 works, further augmented by his son Anton Ulrich (1633–1714) and by major bequests from other generations of the family. The library was strong from the start in early printed books and medieval manuscripts, both of which categories were further enlarged when the priceless collection of early medieval codices from the monastery of Weissenburg in Alsace and the library

[1] On the following, see Reifenberg 14–29.
[2] See Milde (1969) 100; L. to Duke Karl Wilhelm Ferdinand. 3 September 1780; A (2005) 240.

of the Danish classical scholar Marquard Gude (or Gudius) were acquired in 1690 and 1710 respectively.[3] It was accordingly an ideal place for the study of classical, medieval, and Renaissance philology—that is, the very areas (especially the first and third) to which most of Lessing's scholarly endeavours had hitherto been directed.

Since the time of Duke August, who himself compiled the first catalogue and was in effect the first librarian, the most notable figure to hold that office was Leibniz, who served from 1690 to his death in 1716. Though he combined this office with numerous other responsibilities and spent most of his time in Hanover and elsewhere, he nevertheless had a hand in planning a new library building, compiling an alphabetical catalogue, and acquiring the Gude and other collections. Since the middle of the century, the library had been run by Lessing's superior von Praun, assisted by C. J. B. Hugo, the lawyer who was moved to other duties when Lessing was appointed. After narrowly escaping destruction during the French siege and occupation in the Seven Years War—von Praun was taken hostage for three years—the library had returned to its quiet normality by the time of Lessing's arrival.[4]

The building as Lessing knew it was constructed under Anton Ulrich between 1706 and 1710.[5] An imposing and imaginative structure inspired by the Villa Rotonda of Palladio, it had an oval central hall with tall pillars, lit by the side

Fig. 34. Wolfenbüttel, the ducal library ('Old Rotunda', since demolished) with Lessing's house from 1777 to 1781 (extreme left).

[3] Heinemann (1894) 123–5. [4] Ibid. 146–55. [5] Ibid. 103–6; Raabe (1997) 64–70.

windows of a cupola which was originally surmounted by a massive golden globe.[6] Behind the pillars, the main floor and the gallery above it were surrounded by shelves which housed the original collection; eight rooms at the corners of the building, four on each level, housed special collections and some of the recent bequests. Beneath the hall itself, which was reached by a double staircase in the projecting front of the building, was a vaulted basement which, like the older building which preceded it, served as a stable for horses. The main disadvantage of the building was that it could not be heated in winter, when the inkwells were known to freeze;[7] when Leibniz requested that heating be provided in at least one room, the duke refused on the grounds that, in a timber-framed structure, no risk of fire to the irreplaceable books could be contemplated.[8] Regrettably, this fine edifice was demolished in 1887 after a larger, stone-built structure more suited to modern needs was erected on the land behind it.[9]

Of all the varieties of professional employment which Lessing might have chosen, librarianship was the one to which, by inclination and experience, he seemed best suited. His first paid assignment after leaving Leipzig university was to compile a catalogue of Rüdiger's library in Berlin. In Wittenberg, he spent every available moment in the university library and claimed to have handled every book in its collection. On leaving Wittenberg, he expressed an interest in the vacant post of assistant in Count Brühl's library in Dresden, and in his final years in Berlin, the post he most coveted was that of royal librarian. But as he himself observed, the Wolfenbüttel librarianship seemed particularly well suited to his needs.[10] The only formal duties mentioned in his oath of allegiance were to keep a financial account of accessions, not to lend out manuscripts without prior permission from the duke or senior administrator, and to record loans and recover lent books within a reasonable time.[11] He was also explicitly encouraged to pursue his own scholarly interests, as he explained to his father:[12]

> I have no actual official duties other than those I wish to impose on myself. I can pride myself on the fact that the crown prince was more concerned that the library should be of use to me than that I should be of use to it. But I shall certainly try to combine the two; or to be more precise, the one is implied by the other.

Since some of his successors as librarian were to claim that Lessing did little for the library and neglected his duties, a review of his basic achievements, on which much light has been cast in recent years by Paul Raabe, Wolfgang Milde, and others, will not be out of place here. As far as accessions are concerned, more books were purchased by Lessing between 1770 and 1780 from his meagre allowance than by his

[6] See Fig. 34 on p. 458 (exterior of ducal library) and Fig. 35 on p. 460 (interior of library); see also the illustration in Raabe (1997) 70, in which the golden globe is still in place.

[7] H. Schneider (1951) 58–9. [8] Heinemann (1894) 129. [9] Raabe (1997) 75–8.

[10] See L. to J. G. Lessing, 27 July 1770; on L's work as librarian see D 620–32 and Santini II, 588–98.

[11] D 294–5. [12] To J. G. Lessing, 27 July 1770; also B VII, 588.

Fig. 35. Wolfenbüttel, interior of ducal library ('Old Rotunda', since demolished) in the nineteenth century.

predecessors in any other decade of the century; his immediate successor purchased no books whatsoever.[13] The 975 works in 2,095 volumes which he acquired included books in fourteen languages and on a very wide range of subjects. He concentrated on neglected areas such as modern German literature (French literature was plentifully supplied through princely bequests), recent reference works

[13] See Milde (1985) 116 and Milde (1969) 101.

(Adelung's German dictionary, Johnson's English dictionary, and Félice's encyclopedia in over fifty volumes) and standard editions (Raspe's edition of Leibniz, Johnson's edition of Shakespeare), and on filling major gaps in the holdings of foreign authors (especially Italian and Spanish literature, but also key works such as the Koran and Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* in German translation).[14] Mindful of the need to direct resources towards areas of existing strength, he also made the eminently sensible suggestion—eventually adopted in recent times—that major libraries should specialize in distinct chronological periods, so that, for example, Wolfenbüttel and Göttingen might agree on a year (such as 1710 or 1740) to demarcate their distinct areas of responsibility.[15] Another sensible initiative concerned the disposal of duplicates, which inevitably accumulated as the same titles recurred in successive bequests. Leibniz had applied unsuccessfully for permission to sell these, and Lessing successfully resisted Karl Wilhelm Ferdinand's proposal that they be donated free of charge to the University of Helmstedt.[16] He proposed instead that they be exchanged with other institutions or individuals for books of more use to the library, and we know that he had already, with Duke Karl's approval, effected such exchanges with the Collegium Carolinum and a number of private collectors.[17]

As for loans and borrowers, the highest figures in the century are those for the period 1760 to 1780.[18] For the years 1770 to 1780, 5,230 loans to 550 borrowers are recorded—a large number in comparison with other libraries of the period.[19] As might be expected, many of the borrowers were court officials, administrators, and teachers. More surprising is the large number of artisans, merchants, and ordinary citizens (including 59 women) who also used the library; travelogues and novels from recent bequests were specially popular with this group.[20] Their presence suggests that Lessing regarded the library as a resource not just for scholars, but also for the wider local community.

Lessing received and replied to numerous learned enquiries from Brunswick, other parts of Germany, and abroad. He reproduced three such enquiries, with his own detailed responses, in the first issue of *On History and Literature*, the learned periodical he founded and edited in order to publicize the library's resources, and his correspondence with Reiske, Heyne, and others is full of material of this kind.[21] Another duty he performed for the general public was to show visitors of all classes and from various countries round the library and its treasures. He entertained many of them in his own quarters, especially during the time of his marriage, and many testimonials survive of their gratitude for the friendly and helpful welcome they received.[22]

[14] On this see R/S (2004) 9–23, 46, 49, 58, 76, 129, 140.

[15] D 629.

[16] Heinemann (1894) 122; L. to Duke Karl Wilhelm Ferdinand, 21 and 29 June and 3 September 1780.

[17] Reifenberg 59; H. Schneider (1951) 84–7.

[18] Reifenberg 32.

[19] Milde (1969) 112 and 114; Milde (1970) 162.

[20] Reifenberg 66; Milde (1969) 115 and Milde (1970) 163–9.

[21] LM XI, 487–98; Reifenberg 75–7.

[22] Reifenberg 24; D 296, 327, 336, 417–18, 435, 437–8, 455–8, 475–7.

The biggest task which Lessing undertook as librarian, but was unable to complete, was that of reordering into subject classes all books acquired since the previous century (the so-called *Nova Supplementa*, amounting to some 100,000 volumes) with the aim of making them more readily accessible to readers.[23] In so doing, he offended his superior, von Praun, who had been responsible for the earlier arrangement, by going over his head and obtaining permission from Duke Karl himself for the change.[24] This work was begun in 1772 and continued, after an interruption, between 1776 and 1780, so that the main rearrangement by subject was more or less complete by the time of Lessing's death in 1781.[25] In view of the complaints of Lessing's successor E. T. Langer, who had worked with him during the last year of his life, that the books in question were in a chaotic state,[26] it would appear that the subject groups had not yet been internally organized. But since Langer favoured von Praun's earlier practice of keeping collections and bequests intact, it may well be that his complaints were exaggerated.

Langer's complaints raise the whole question of why the judgements on Lessing by several of his immediate successors—notably E. T. Langer, C. P. C. Schönemann, and Otto von Heinemann—were so overwhelmingly negative, and to what extent these judgements were justified.[27] In Langer's case, it is fairly obvious that he regarded all changes as unwelcome and was concerned rather to reduce than to expand the library's activities, for borrowings declined by two-thirds during the 1780s and no books whatsoever were purchased during the thirty-seven years of his tenure;[28] it therefore suited his purposes to denigrate Lessing's achievements at every opportunity. Heinemann's contention that Lessing 'did as good as nothing for the library as such'[29] is patently absurd, and it is significant that both he and Schönemann praise the punctilious von Praun and the Brunswick administration at Lessing's expense: they, too, were more concerned with the routine cataloguing and lending operations normally carried out by junior staff than with the new acquisitions and relations with the wider community to which Lessing devoted so much of his attention.

There had certainly been problems with loans before Lessing's appointment, for the official minute of his inauguration records that, since 'all kinds of disorder' had recently been discovered in the lending system, this should no longer be operated by the secretary Cichin, but by the librarian himself.[30] But Cichin remained in post, the second library secretary was made redundant in 1771, and Lessing was frequently away from Wolfenbüttel, so that it is scarcely surprising that some irregularities continued. Such cases were relatively few, and many of them were no more than procedural, for Lessing often kept borrowers' requests as evidence of loans instead of entering these in the loan book.[31] And although he did not keep a formal record of all his purchases, this record was eventually constructed after his death

[23] See Milde (1969) 105 and Reifenberg 31 and 70–3. [24] KGL 189.
[25] L. to Eva König, 1 May and 26 October 1772; Reifenberg 64–73.
[26] D 630–2; cf. Milde (1969) 103 and Reifenberg 6.
[27] See D 621–32; Heinemann (1894) 166–9.
[28] Reifenberg 5. [29] Heinemann (1894) 158.
[30] D 294–5. [31] Reifenberg 9; Milde (1969) 116 and 119–20.

from his collection of the relevant receipts.[32] There was also some slippage in Lessing's response to scholarly queries, as in his unfortunate failure to reply to J. M. Goeze's query of 1774, which earned him the latter's enduring enmity; for this, and any other such omissions, his chronic aversion to letter writing is doubtless responsible. To blame him, as Schönemann does, for failing to complete loan records for books and manuscripts which, in his last years, he worked on in his own house next to the library is typical of the carping criticisms of his early successors:[33] Lessing was overworked and inadequately supported, and he had no option but to work in his own house rather than in an unheated library. It is true that he was less punctilious than modern librarians, and than his formal instructions prescribed, in lending out manuscripts to other scholars. But the majority of such loans were to his local collaborators Heusinger, Knittel, and Leiste, all of whom contributed to *On History and Literature* and were subject to the same limitations as Lessing on library use in winter. He was, however, exceeding his discretion in allowing his brother Theophilus, an able Latinist who was preparing a work on the Song of Songs, to borrow a manuscript for several years.[34] And although he was perhaps justified in taking a manuscript with him to collate with a related manuscript in Dresden, that manuscript, to his own consternation, was in the case of papers which went missing in transit from Dresden to Brunswick in 1775.[35]

A good deal of such criticisms go back to the malicious comments of the library secretary Cichin, an apostate monk from Bavaria who quarrelled incessantly with the library assistant Helms; he also appears to have sold autograph letters from leading figures of the Reformation, at least some of them from library holdings, at knockdown prices during Lessing's absence.[36] Cichin was himself responsible for many of the library's shortcomings, and it may well be that his resentment of Lessing goes back to reprimands he received for his inefficiency. It is hard to avoid the suspicion that those of Lessing's successors who seized on Cichin's comments as evidence of Lessing's incompetence did so in order to live more easily with the memory of a predecessor whose achievements so obviously eclipsed their own. On a more positive note, it is gratifying to record that at least one of Lessing's early successors, F. A. Ebert (not to be confused with J. A. Ebert of the Collegium Carolinum), indignantly repudiated Langer's accusations.[37]

Constructive and valuable though they were, Lessing's routine activities as librarian are nevertheless of minor significance in comparison with his main achievement of bringing to light and interpreting a wide range of unknown or forgotten works from the library's holdings. He thereby did more than anyone else until recent times to bring the library and its treasures to the attention not just of specialists, but also, by virtue of his lucid presentation and facility for imparting life and excitement to even the most refractory materials, of the educated public at large. He did so both in separate publications and in what became the first learned

[32] Reifenberg 33; H. Schneider (1951) 87–8.
[33] For further details, see D 624 n. 1.
[34] See L. to Theophilus Lessing, 8 December 1774; Heinemann (1894) 168.
[35] See L.to Karl Lessing, 16 June 1776.
[36] See H. Schneider (1951) 77–8; E. Schmidt II, 69.
[37] D 630.

periodical produced by any German library,[38] the six volumes in the series *On History and Literature. From the Treasures of the Ducal Library in Wolfenbüttel*. Not only does this series cover a much wider range than its title suggests (some of the most substantial items deal with philosophy and theology); it also bears witness to Lessing's growing expertise as a palaeographer and medievalist, for much of the material he discusses comes from manuscripts of the medieval period. The sheer variety of material at his disposal accounts in part for the breadth—not to say diffuseness—of his interests in the first half of the 1770s, given that he managed at the same time to develop his own ideas on philosophy and religion, to revise and amplify his earlier literary works, and to complete the last and most important of his tragedies, *Emilia Galotti*. There can at least be no doubt that, since he devoted so much of his efforts, from his first months in Wolfenbüttel onwards, to uncovering and publicizing the library's resources, he took his responsibilities as librarian very seriously.

The first of the works he wrote for the library appeared as a separate publication less than five months after his arrival in Wolfenbüttel: it is entitled *Berengarius Turonensis*.[39] In it, he announces and elucidates his discovery, among the Weissenburg manuscripts, of a hitherto unknown work by the eleventh-century heretic Berenger of Tours (*c*.1010–1088), who denied the doctrine of transsubstantiation and ascribed a purely symbolic value to the Eucharist; Lessing's interest in this topic was probably aroused by his new friend and colleague K. A. Schmid, who had just published an epistle by Adelmann, another eleventh-century theologian, written in response to Berenger.[40] Berenger's heresy was denounced by Lanfranc, who later became Archbishop of Canterbury, in a vigorous defence of the orthodox doctrine; and although Berenger was never formally condemned as a heretic, he was obliged to recant on more than one occasion, for the last time in Rome in the year 1079. What was not known until Lessing discovered it was that Berenger had written a circumstantial rebuttal of Lanfranc's views, a work which he preserved and added to until the end of his life. The original manuscript of this work, now known as the *Rescriptum contra Lanfrannum*, was probably destroyed, and the Wolfenbüttel codex is an early copy of it.[41] Although Lessing's essay describes it in detail, the *Rescriptum* was not published in full until the nineteenth century; an authoritative edition did not appear until 1988.[42]

It was the work's polemical form which first caught Lessing's attention, as he himself admits, and once he discovered who the author was and why he wrote it, he realized that Berenger was an ideal candidate for another of those 'vindications' (*Rettungen*) of supposed heretics of the kind he had written nearly twenty years before. But whereas the figures he had earlier defended were chiefly victims of Lutheran orthodoxy, he now presents Berenger, with his denial of transsubstantiation, as a victim of the Catholic church and a forerunner of Luther. His famous definition of a heretic nevertheless embraces both categories, for what really matters to him is not so much whether such people were right or wrong in their opinions

[38] See R/S (2004) 9. [39] LM XI, 57–162. [40] See B VII, 601.
[41] See Ganz et al. 3–4 and 16. [42] See Berengarius (1988) (Bibliog. 'Primary literature').

as the fact that they resisted dogmatic authority: '[A heretic] is a man who *at least wished* to see with his own eyes. […] Indeed, in certain centuries the title of heretic is the greatest recommendation a man of learning can bring with him to posterity.'[43] A large portion of the essay is accordingly devoted to the issue of truth and the overcoming of prejudice—especially the kind of prejudice we inherit in our childhood.

Berenger's denial of transsubstantiation does indeed foreshadow the Reformation, but whether his views on the symbolic nature of the Eucharist approximate most closely to those of Luther (as Lessing claims), Zwingli, Calvin, or any other reformer is neither generally agreed nor of any great significance: as Lessing himself admits, Luther actually endorsed the formula of recantation which Berenger was required to recite.[44] But when Berenger argued that the orthodox doctrine according to which bread becomes the body of Christ, though not the same body that was born of Mary and died on the cross, is illogical, or that the accidents of a substance (such as the bread-like qualities of bread) cannot persist once the substance itself is changed, the authority to which he was appealing was not that of the church, but that of reason[45]—and this, more than any affinity to Lutheranism, was what mattered most to Lessing. It is with this in mind that he exaggerates Berenger's modernity and plays down his scholastic subtleties and doctrinal tergiversations.[46] Thus, although the essay can indeed be read as a tribute to Lutheranism, it also embodies a rationalistic view of religion akin to that of Voltaire, who—as Lessing was surely aware—had cited Berenger as a champion of reason against bigotry both in his *Essai sur les moeurs* of 1756 and his *Traité sur la tolérance* of 1763.[47] As with so many of Lessing's writings on religion from this time onwards (and already in the burlesque 'sermon' he had written a few months earlier to reconcile the opposing views of Alberti and Goeze), its tendency is fundamentally ambivalent.

The essay is enlivened by Lessing's favourite rhetorical devices of the letter form and the gradual build-up of expectations before his main discovery is revealed. It also contains some impressive detective work as he investigates the date of the manuscript and its relation to events in Berenger's life and to the various synods at which his opinions were discussed. On the precise nature of Berenger's views on the Eucharist, he is more tentative, and he speculates inconclusively on the early Christian understanding of the sacrament. Like his later and more famous work *The Education of the Human Race*, the essay ends with a long series of rhetorical questions: as so often, he is more concerned to stimulate debate than to offer definitive solutions.

Although he declared his intention to publish the complete text of the *Rescriptum*,[48] he did not return to it—perhaps because he had nothing more of substance to say. He did, however, take pleasure in informing his father, in the same letter in which he told him about his appointment as librarian, of his discovery of the manuscript and about Berenger's affinity to Luther. He was now at last in the kind

[43] LM XI, 62. [44] LM XI, 64–5; Ganz et al. 29. [45] See Ganz et al. 34–44.
[46] See J. Schneider (1953) 186; Liepmann 101–13. [47] Voltaire XI, 383 and XXV, 29.
[48] See L. to J. G. Lessing, 27 July 1770.

of settled employment in which his father had always wished to see him, and his new discovery had even given him the theological credentials which his father had once hoped he would attain. (When the essay was published, his old teacher Ernesti, whose interests had now shifted from classical philology to theology, actually declared that he would put Lessing forward for a doctorate in theology if he chose to revisit Leipzig.)[49] It was also fortunate that he wrote to his father when he did, after more than two years of silence. For Johann Gottfried Lessing died less than a month after receiving the letter.

Lessing was amused to find that both his rationalistic friends in Berlin and eminent Lutherans like the ecclesiastical historian C. W. F. Walch saw the essay as a tribute to Lutheran orthodoxy;[50] only one reviewer, Johannes Müller, saw it as a tribute to Enlightenment values. As Lessing commented to Eva König:[51]

> You won't believe what an agreeable odour of orthodoxy I have acquired among our Lutheran theologians. Just wait and you'll hear me proclaimed as nothing less than a pillar of our church. But whether this role really befits me, and whether I might not soon lose this fine reputation again, only time will tell.

He obviously relishes his ambiguous position, and already hints at his plan to publish the work of Reimarus. Interestingly enough, his attitude to his own essay shows a parallel ambiguity. For while he assures his brother that he writes such pieces, rather than more substantial works of his own, only to earn money (for his Brunswick publisher Zachariä paid him for his contributions), he later declares, when urged by Nicolai not to waste his time on such material: 'You can say what you like, but this is the one book among all those I have written which has given me the most pleasure and been the least tedious to write.'[52] In short, he feels the same ambivalence towards his own writings on religion as he feels towards religion itself.

Soon after completing the essay on Berenger, Lessing began planning his periodical *On History and Literature*, the periodical in which he would publish a series of similar, but shorter essays or editions of rare items from the library. Although he at one point seemed to envisage publishing as many as twelve volumes in all,[53] only six volumes appeared, the last two posthumously under the editorship of Eschenburg and Leiste respectively. He had in fact reckoned from the start on the collaboration of other scholars, and he appeals explicitly to Heusinger, Knittel, and von Praun in the preface to the first volume; Heusinger, Knittel, and Leiste duly contributed to later volumes, and others such as Reiske, Heyne, Schmid, and Eschenburg gave their support through personal advice and learned correspondence.

Lessing's first step before launching the series was to preclude any interference by the censorship, for after the incident in which Knittel, as official censor, had objected to a section of the essay on Berenger,[54] he was determined that this should not happen again. He therefore went over the head of his superior von Praun (who

[49] See Karl L. to L., 4 June 1771; also KGL 179.
[50] See B VII, 618–19, 628–34, 636–9.
[51] To Eva König, 25 October 1770.
[52] To Karl Lessing, 11 November 1770; to Nicolai, 16 February 1771.
[53] To Nicolai, 20 September 1777.
[54] See D 299–300.

was unlikely to support any change to the status quo) and asked Duke Karl to exempt the periodical from censorship; to this, the duke readily agreed, with the formal proviso 'that he [Lessing] will not print anything which might offend religion and propriety'.[55] When the first volume was published at the beginning of 1773, Lessing reinforced this point by sending a copy to Knittel, with whom he was now on amicable terms, to show him that it contained nothing offensive; he added that he had taken steps 'to preserve a freedom which I have until now enjoyed everywhere, and *the very thought of whose removal I would find intolerable, however little it might affect me* [Lessing's emphasis]'.[56] The censorship in Brunswick was in fact extremely liberal, and in the Empire as a whole, it was possible to publish almost anything in one state or another, given that political constitutions varied considerably, that the 1648 settlement recognized three religious confessions, and that some rulers (notably Frederick the Great) were themselves indifferent to religious heresy.[57] Just how strongly Lessing felt about freedom of expression is evident not only from the above remark to Knittel, but also from the fact that, in the first three volumes of *On History and Literature*, he repeatedly attacks the banning or burning of books, defends those who were denied free speech, and insists on the need to preserve the authentic text of all written documents.[58] He had admittedly always subscribed to such principles; but the frequency and vehemence with which he now asserts them are a sure sign that he was actively preparing to publish material which would test the authorities' tolerance to the limit.

Another recurrent theme which features in the first two essays of the first volume and another two in the fifth, posthumous volume is that of the Aesopic fable and its history. Among other projects of 1772, Lessing was planning a revised collection of his own fables for inclusion in a new edition of his collected writings, to be accompanied not by the five treatises on the fable which he had published in 1759, but by a general history of the Aesopic fable. For various reasons, this project was never completed: some forty new fables of his own went missing in the box of papers lost between Dresden and Brunswick in 1775, along with a draft of the history itself, according to Eschenburg.[59] The lost draft, if it ever existed, can have been no more than an outline, for in a note of around 1780, Lessing himself remarks that, although he had assembled extensive materials for the planned history (substantial portions of which survive),[60] their sheer volume deterred him from writing it.[61] It is at any rate clear that, between 1771 and 1780, he did pioneering work on the transmission of classical fables in the Middle Ages. Through studies of medieval codices and early printed books in the ducal library, he made several important discoveries, the results of which he documents in the four essays referred to above.

His first discovery, which relates to the earliest known versions of classical fables in German verse, is described in the first essay of *On History and Literature*, entitled

[55] KGL 189–90; Duke Karl to L., 13 February 1772.
[56] L. to Knittel, 13 January 1773.
[57] See Graf 21; Kiesel/Münch 118; Blanning (2002) 139–40.
[58] LM XI, 397; XII, 236 and 275; cf. also Reifenberg 96.
[59] D 391–2; L. to Karl Lessing, 16 June 1776.
[60] See LM XVI, 96–195; also Reynolds *passim*; Döring (1999) *passim*.
[61] LM XVI, 193.

'On the So-called Fables from the Times of the Minnesingers'.[62] The title alludes to a volume published by Lessing's old adversaries, the Swiss writers Bodmer and Breitinger, entitled *Fables from the Times of the Minnesingers*, and the adjective 'so-called' refers not to the fables themselves, but to their dating to the age of the minnesingers, which Lessing in due course showed to be false. He demonstrates not only that the fables in the Swiss volume, whose editors claimed that they had never before been published, are an incomplete collection from a manuscript of which at least six versions survive,[63] but more significantly, that the same collection, with six additional fables and a series of woodcuts, was published in Bamberg in 1461 in what was the first illustrated printed book in the German language.[64] This rare and remarkable incunabulum, a copy of which Lessing discovered in the Wolfenbüttel collection, also contains an epilogue in which the identity of the German versifier is revealed: but in a characteristic move to sustain his readers' interest and build up suspense, Lessing holds back this second discovery for his second essay of the same title, published posthumously in 1782. Meanwhile, he concludes his first essay with the complete text of the six fables which Bodmer and Breitinger had failed to discover.[65]

The posthumously published sequel to this essay,[66] which incorporates later work on the same collection of fables, reveals that the author of the whole collection, originally entitled *The Precious Stone* (*Der Edelstein*), was the Swiss monk Ulrich Boner or Bonerius, who dedicated it to his patron Riedenburg (Johann von Ringgenberg). This discovery allows Lessing to heap further ridicule not only on Bodmer and Breitinger, but also on his other old enemy Gottsched, who had misread a manuscript of Boner's work and taken Riedenburg for the author. He further concludes, on linguistic evidence, that *Der Edelstein* cannot have been written in the thirteenth century, as the Swiss critics had maintained, and cannot be earlier than the second half of the following century. Since we now know that it dates from around 1350, he was close to the truth.[67] He also attempts, by collating several manuscripts and the printed edition of 1461, to construct a model text of one of the fables, as close as possible to the German of his own day without wholesale modernization, as an example of how editors of medieval German texts might in future proceed;[68] and although his procedure does not tally with that of present-day editors (he himself admits that it contains an arbitrary element), it does represent a step towards the creation of a critical edition.[69] He further tries, again by comparing different versions, to reconstruct the original collection of 100 fables and to identify their Latin sources, a task which contributes to his wider plan to write a history of the Aesopic fable in general.

The Greek tradition of the Aesopic fable proper, which Lessing had studied in some detail in 1759 and on which his own prose fables of that year are modelled,[70] must be distinguished from the Latin tradition of Phaedrus, whose verse fables of the first century AD (themselves derived mainly from Aesopic originals) are the

[62] LM XI, 322–51. [63] LM XI, 326. [64] Kowalewicz 166. [65] LM XI, 339–51.
[66] LM XIV, 3–33. [67] See B X, 884. [68] LM XIV, 9–16.
[69] See B X, 885–6. [70] See also LM XIV, 227–35.

basis of most medieval collections. Since no authoritative text of Phaedrus was established until the nineteenth century,[71] all kinds of confusion and speculation surrounded his work and identity in Lessing's time: Lessing's Leipzig teacher J. F. Christ had maintained, for example, that the supposed fables of Phaedrus were in fact a forgery of the Renaissance humanist Niccolo Perotti. Although he does not address this hypothesis directly, Lessing does seem to have regarded it as sound, or at least as highly plausible.[72] But it did have the positive effect of encouraging him to explore the tradition of the Latin verse fable in depth during his years in Wolfenbüttel, and in the second essay in the first volume of *On History and Literature*, entitled 'Romulus and Rimicius', he succeeds in removing some of the confusions which beset it.[73] In a series of ingenious deductions, he demonstrates that the fourth-century collection of Latin prose fables traditionally ascribed to 'Romulus' belongs to a distinct line in the transmission of the fables associated with Phaedrus, and has nothing to do with the Latin humanist Rimicius or Ranuzio d'Arrezzo. (Rimicius, who translated some of Aesop's fables and the semi-mythical life of Aesop into Latin in the fifteenth century, had been wrongly described by some scholars as an editor of 'Romulus', and actually identified, by the French scholar Isaac Nevelet, with the figure of 'Romulus' himself.) Lessing further demonstrates that the fables of 'Romulus' are the basis of many of those in Heinrich Steinhöwel's German translation of 'Aesop' (published around 1480), another rare book in the ducal library.

Like the previous essay in the first volume, the essay 'Romulus and Rimicius' has a sequel in the fifth volume of *On History and Literature* published in 1782. This sequel, entitled 'On the Anonym of Nevelet', was probably the last work Lessing produced for publication before his death; it remained a fragment after he sent the first part of it to the printer late in 1780.[74] In it, he discusses and seeks to identify the medieval author known as the 'Anonymus Neveleti', whose Latin verse fables, published by Isaac Nevelet in his anthology *Mythologia Aesopica* of 1610, were a major source of Boner's *Edelstein*. Lessing rightly describes the anonymous work as a 'versified Romulus'[75] and a major link in the transmission of the Phaedrus complex; but although he rejects a number of attempts by earlier scholars to establish the anonymous author's identity, the fragment breaks off before he reveals his own alternative solution. (As usual, he builds up the reader's expectation in preparation for the concluding revelation.) Eschenburg's search, as Lessing's literary executor, for evidence among Lessing's papers of what that solution might have been proved fruitless.[76] But it is perhaps not inappropriate that, to a topic so full of mysteries as that of anonymous medieval authors, Lessing should have added a mystery of his own.

Lessing's essays on the fable are the most substantial studies of medieval topics in *On History and Literature*. Like all eighteenth-century scholarship on the Middle Ages, they have long since been overtaken by later discoveries. Their merit lies not in their present validity but in their pioneering quality. His work on the

[71] See B VII, 1051. [72] LM XIV, 40; cf. B X, 904. [73] LM XI, 351–80.
[74] LM XIV, 33–42; B X, 896. [75] LM XIV, 33. [76] See LM XIV, 42–3 n. 1.

German fable and its origins is a significant contribution to the development of medieval German studies,[77] and his work on codicology and textual editing, in which he begins to apply the methods of classical philology to medieval literature, points ahead to the much greater achievements of Lachmann and others in the following century.[78]

The third essay in the first volume deals with the *Tarich Beni Adam*, a semi-mythical genealogy, in Turkish, of the rulers of Turkey all the way back to Adam.[79] Its one-time owner Wilhelm Schickard, who knew little of the Turkish language, published what purported to be a Latin translation of the section on the ancient Persian monarchs, but which, as Lessing's friend Reiske pointed out,[80] was probably reconstructed from more familiar sources. The manuscript in question had been brought back as plunder from Hungary and given or sold to Schickard; and although other copies were made, the original, presumed to have gone to the imperial library in Vienna, was in fact lost until Lessing discovered it in a locked chest in Wolfenbüttel. As he readily admits, he knows no Turkish himself, and he makes little attempt to investigate the historical background of the work or its contents.[81] In this case, he writes rather as librarian than as scholar, drawing the public's attention to a rediscovered manuscript of potential interest to historians of Asia.

The fourth essay, on an anonymous poem in doggerel verse entitled *The Nightingale* (*Die Nachtigall*),[82] written in defence of the knight Wilhelm von Grumbach's revolt of 1557–67 against the bishops of Würzburg who had confiscated his territory, attracted Lessing's interest not for its intrinsic merit, which is slight, but because it was publicly burned in 1567, shortly before Grumbach himself was executed. Lessing describes his hunt for this rare work with his usual dramatic flair, culminating in the discovery of no fewer than three manuscript copies. These enable him to reproduce the complete text, transforming the nightingale, as he puts it, into a phoenix. His main purpose, however, is to condemn all attempts to suppress printed works, and he declares: 'What has once been printed belongs to the whole world for all time. No one has a right to destroy it.'[83] In this poem, 'the voice of the people'[84] speaks out against oppressive authority, and even if Grumbach's punishment was justified, no one was entitled to silence this appeal for justice.

As has recently been shown, this essay on an apparently obscure episode had a strong contemporary resonance.[85] For Lessing's condemnation of the unjust measures taken against Grumbach is full of oblique allusions to the secret trial and execution in 1772 of the Danish reformer J. F. von Struensee after a failed palace revolution which he organized with the Danish queen's connivance; his attempt to publish his final legal submissions was suppressed by the authorities. Lessing, who knew many of Struensee's Hamburg associates and had probably met Struensee himself, had followed this *cause célèbre* with interest, and he was almost certainly aware that it had deeply divided the ruling house of Brunswick, to which both the

[77] See Liebertz-Grün 332. [78] See Kowalewicz 165 and 254. [79] LM XI, 380–94.
[80] Reiske to L., 13 February 1773. [81] Ibid.; also PO XXIII, 1018–22.
[82] LM XI, 394–416. [83] LM XI, 397.
[84] LM XI, 399. [85] See Bohnen (2001) *passim*.

Danish queen and her victorious opponent, the dowager queen, were closely related. His sympathy with Struensee's fate is implicit in his account of the Grumbach episode.

Lessing's fifth and sixth contributions to the first volume deal with two items from classical antiquity, namely a poem on the Pythian baths attributed to Paulus Silentiarius (AD 527–565)[86] and supposed *anekdota* (i.e. unpublished items) from the writings of Marcus Aurelius.[87] The Silentiarius piece, which has been described as 'an exemplary philological performance',[88] consists of an annotated edition of the Greek text, with hitherto unpublished scholia from a codex in the Gude collection. The author, a court official under Justinian, describes the hot springs and volcanic phenomena associated with the Pythian baths, whose location in Asia Minor Lessing identifies, in an ekphrastic poem of limited poetic merit. Though not the first to do so, Lessing alerts his readers to a frequent misreading of the Aldine edition, which printed the short lines of the poem in two parallel columns, to be read across the page, so that subsequent editors published the columns sequentially and thus made nonsense of the poem. As for the twenty-six Greek fragments which a Florentine librarian had described as hitherto unknown extracts from the works of Marcus Aurelius, Lessing finds them grouped together in the same codex as the Silentiarius poem, and reveals that all but two are extracts from Aelian's *On the Nature of Animals*, whereas the remaining two are familiar passages from the *Meditations* of Marcus Aurelius.

The seventh item in the first volume of Lessing's periodical is his important essay 'Leibniz on Eternal Punishment'.[89] Since it is a key text in Lessing's philosophical development, it can more appropriately be discussed in that connection in Chapter 17. The volume concludes, as already mentioned, with Lessing's responses to three learned queries relating to the library.

The volume was generally well received.[90] There was always an interested public for everything Lessing wrote, and the reactions of those best qualified to judge were highly positive. Heyne found the essay on Leibniz the most substantial (as did Karl Wilhelm Ferdinand of Brunswick);[91] but he also welcomed the discovery of the *Tarich Beni Adam* manuscript, and urged Lessing to write a full history of the Aesopic fable,[92] a suggestion which Lessing planned to take up. Reiske, in an immensely thorough letter (over twelve pages in modern print), does not hesitate to correct or amplify Lessing's findings on points of detail, but his overall response is favourable and indeed enthusiastic: he describes how he dropped everything on receiving the volume, and read all except the Leibniz essay (Reiske disliked philosophy) in one evening.[93]

Lessing's own comments on his periodical are diffident and even apologetic, especially in his letters to Berlin. He declares repeatedly that he writes such material only to earn money (from his Brunswick publisher) and to fulfil his duties as

[86] LM XI, 416–52. [87] LM XI, 452–60.
[88] See Eduard Stemplinger in PO XII, Part 14, 39. [89] LM XI, 461–98.
[90] See B VII, 987–1000. [91] B VII, 995; Ebert to L., 19 January 1773.
[92] Heyne to L., 28 January 1773; B VII, 994. [93] Reiske to L., 13 February 1773.

librarian, and that he would much rather be writing works of his own.[94] But such comments, like his self-deprecating remarks on *Berengarius Turonensis*, must not be taken at face value: he was racked by guilt at his failure to deliver more material for the new edition of his collected works to his Berlin publisher Voss, who had lent him large sums of money.

The second volume of *On History and Literature*, published in October 1773, contains seven more items on an equally varied range of material from the library. The first of these, entitled 'Marco Polo', takes further that interest in Asiatic history which the *Tarich Beni Adam* had aroused.[95] Lessing had meanwhile discovered three manuscripts relating to Polo's travels, one of which enables him to correct inaccuracies in the better known version of Pipinus, as he shows by printing the two Latin texts of the opening chapter of Polo's work in parallel columns. Though some of the readings from the main anonymous manuscript were indeed hitherto unknown—as Heyne acknowledged in his review in the *Göttingische Gelehrte Anzeigen*[96]—Lessing overrates the manuscript's importance and its closeness to Polo's original narrative. His conclusions, like those of all eighteenth-century students of Marco Polo, were superseded in the following century by the discovery of further more reliable manuscripts.[97]

The volume continues with another minor piece, entitled 'The Flemish Chronicle', in which Lessing is able to supply, from a Wolfenbüttel manuscript, a missing passage and several textual corrections to the published version of a Cistercian chronicle relating to the Hundred Years War.[98] This also gives him a welcome opportunity to correct the anti-English bias of French historians, and of Voltaire in particular, in their interpretation of the events in question.

The next item, on the monastery of Hirschau (now known as Hirsau) in Württemberg, is the most interesting and readable piece in the second volume[99]—not least because Lessing expressly sets out, in a humorous preamble, to refute the accusation by a reviewer of the previous volume (almost certainly C. F. Bahrdt, who had applied unsuccessfully for the post which Lessing now held) that he is a 'micrologist' or writer obsessed with trivialities.[100] As he rightly replies, importance and unimportance are relative categories, which change according to the perspective of the viewer—unless the viewer himself is too ponderous to shift from his present position. He now brings to bear on medieval art those iconographical skills he had developed in his antiquarian writings, and describes, in a lively first-person narrative, the steps by which he arrived at his present discovery, adding 'that the manner in which one reached a conclusion is often as valuable and instructive as the conclusion itself'.[101] On reading a brief description of the forty cloister windows of Hirsau, destroyed by the French in 1692, he had noted their similarity to the illustrations in the so-called *Biblia pauperum* (*Poor Man's Bible*), a late-medieval

[94] To Karl Lessing, 28 October 1772; 5 December 1772; 8 April 1773; see also L. to Heyne, 13 January 1773.
[95] LM XII, 3–29. [96] PO XXII, 1025. [97] PO XX, Part 25, 25.
[98] LM XII, 29–38. [99] LM XII, 38–55.
[100] B VI, 998; on the identity of the reviewer see PO XXIII, 777. [101] LM XII, 40.

work of religious instruction whose woodcuts—often forty in number—showed parallel scenes from the Old and New Testaments, with Latin superscriptions and glosses as an aid to comprehension.[102] Further researches eventually led him to more detailed descriptions of the windows in the work of a sixteenth-century abbot of Hirsau, which confirmed the similarity.

Lessing's conclusion that this similarity cannot be coincidental is perfectly sound. But his further conclusion, based on the architectural surround of the woodcuts (in fact a common feature in woodcuts of that period), that the woodcuts must be based on the windows, is false: for subsequent research has shown that many late-medieval church windows were based on the woodcuts of the *Biblia*, whose origins lie some two centuries before the Hirsau windows were constructed.[103] It is nevertheless to Lessing's credit that he was the first to discover that the two sets of images were closely related, that the title *Biblia pauperum* was late and inauthentic, and that the work itself had nothing to do with help for the illiterate, but was intended for the use of preachers.[104] But as he himself suggested, the most valuable part of the essay is not so much his conclusion, as the manner in which he reached it—or more precisely, the manner in which he describes how he reached it; and that is what makes the essay still worth reading today.

The remaining essays in the second volume can be dealt with more briefly. The fourth essay, again on the monastery of Hirsau, supplements the previous one with further information on the buildings, paintings, and more particularly the library of the monastery, with a list of works written by its inhabitants;[105] all of this is based on Lessing's researches at Wolfenbüttel. The fifth contribution, on Leibniz's response to the Socinian heretic Andreas Wissowatius's critique of the Trinity,[106] throws interesting light on Lessing's philosophical development; like his other essay on Leibniz in the first volume of *On History and Literature*, it will be discussed in Chapter 17. The next item brings four unpublished epigrams from the Greek Anthology, discovered in a Wolfenbüttel codex, in the shape of three riddles and a complex arithmetical problem attributed to Archimedes.[107] With the help of his friend Christian Leiste, Lessing gives a partial solution to the problem. Lessing and Leiste can be forgiven, in that computerless age, for not completing it, for one later analyst has calculated that the number to be determined would consist of nearly a quarter of a million figures.[108]

The final item in the volume contains a sixteenth-century Latin account by Erasmus Stella of the geography and inhabitants of the region between the rivers Elbe and Saale, which Lessing believed was hitherto unpublished.[109] Both he and K. A. Schmid, who helped him to prepare the text, were mortified to read in a review by Klotz's disciple G. B. Schirach, who held a professorship at nearby Helmstedt, that the text in question had been published six years earlier from the autograph manuscript, by the Bavarian philologist P. D. Longolius; Lessing's source was

[102] See the illustrations in PO XVI, Part 18, between pp. 46 and 47.
[103] See Liebertz-Grün 333 and Kowalewicz 187. [104] Liebertz-Grün 335–6.
[105] LM XII, 55–71. [106] LM XII, 71–99. [107] LM XII, 99–115.
[108] See PO XII, Part 14, 44. [109] LM XII, 115–55.

merely a copy. Lessing could only console himself with the knowledge that his own commentary contained material which Longolius had overlooked.[110]

The second volume of *On History and Literature* is accordingly no less varied than the first, although some of the minor items are of relatively little weight. Among the few reviews that appeared, those by Heyne and C. F. Bahrdt justly describe the Hirsau essay as the most significant, although Heyne rightly points out that Lessing's contention that the woodcuts of the *Biblia pauperum* are based on the Hirsau windows remains unproven: both sets of images might well be derived from a common source.[111]

Before he published the third volume of *On History and Literature* in October 1774, Lessing made a discovery which he considered sufficiently important to announce, as he had done with the work of Berenger, in a separate publication. Bearing the title *On the Antiquity of Oil Painting, according to Theophilus Presbyter*, it appeared in August 1774, and was intended—again like the essay on Berenger—as a prelude to the publication of the Latin manuscript which it described.[112] The manuscript concerned, entitled *An Inventory of All the Arts* (*Diversarum artium schedula*), came from the Gude collection, and had hitherto been overlooked since it was bound together with a manuscript of Vitruvius. It contains, among other things, an account of the preparation of colours for painting by mixing them with oil. Since the invention of oil painting had traditionally been ascribed, by Vasari and others, to Jan Van Eyck in the early fifteenth century, it now appeared that it was several centuries older. Lessing believed that the manuscript itself was of tenth- or eleventh-century date, and conjectured that Theophilus Presbyter was none other than Tutilo, a ninth-century monk of St Gallen noted for his artistic skills. Although the identity of Theophilus is still disputed, it is now certain that the Wolfenbüttel manuscript, the oldest (though not the most complete) known manuscript of the *Schedula*, dates from the twelfth century—still around two or three centuries before the time of Van Eyck.[113]

Along with that of Berenger's *Rescriptum*, the discovery of the *Schedula* is the most significant of Lessing's finds in the ducal library. Quite apart from the question of oil painting, the work cast new light on numerous artistic technologies of the Middle Ages, including those of enamelling, manuscript illumination, and the hitherto imperfectly understood process of painting on glass. It is this wider significance that Lessing emphasizes both in the preface to his essay and in the letter to Duke Karl in which he announces its publication;[114] for he knew that the duke, ever anxious to improve techniques at the Fürstenberg porcelain factory and in other industries within the duchy, was keenly interested in such matters.

As for the invention of oil painting, there is no doubt that Theophilus recommends oil, as well as resin, as a medium for mixing colours. But as Lessing acknowledges, he recommends the resulting preparation only as a medium for painting

[110] See Schmid to L., 12 December 1773 and L. to Schmid, 12 December 1773.
[111] B VII, 1094 and 1096. [112] LM XII, 157–97.
[113] See Kowalewicz 201, 206, 211.
[114] L. to Duke Karl, 12 August 1774; cf. PO XVI, Part 18, 32 and 38.

doors or other large surfaces, noting that it is slow to dry (and therefore less suitable for the art of painting, in which successive coats are applied); some further improvement—as Lessing again acknowledges—was consequently necessary before oil painting, with more rapidly drying colours, reached the form in which we now know it.[115]

Lessing's essay on Theophilus prompted a search for further manuscripts and initiated a debate on the origins of oil painting which continued well into the nineteenth century.[116] Early German reviews were highly positive,[117] and the essay achieved international resonance, not so much directly as through R. E. Raspe's treatise *A critical Essay on Oil-Painting, proving that the art of painting in oil was known before the pretended discovery of John and Hubert Van Eyck* (London, 1781). Raspe discovered two further manuscripts of Theophilus in Cambridge, and his work has greater historical breadth than Lessing's, incorporating references to ancient Egypt and classical antiquity.[118] But as some contemporaries already noticed, its central thesis on the invention of oil painting was directly plagiarized from Lessing.[119] Art historians have, it it true, long since ceased to argue over whether Jan Van Eyck or Theophilus was the inventor of oil painting, for they have now fully assimilated the insight, already implicit in Lessing's essay, that the invention of oil painting was not an instantaneous event but a gradual process. No less important than this insight was Lessing's discovery of the work of Theophilus itself, which one modern handbook describes as 'the most important source of information on medieval arts and techniques'.[120] The Wolfenbüttel manuscript, printed in 1780 under Lessing's supervision, was published shortly after his death by Christian Leiste in the sixth volume of *On History and Literature*;[121] a more complete edition of the text appeared in 1874.[122]

The year 1774, it will be remembered, was a profoundly unsettled one for Lessing, and it is surprising that he produced as much in it as he did. But in order to prepare a third volume of *On History and Literature* for publication in October—this time containing only five items—he had to draw on the help of others. His friends Heusinger and Knittel submitted pieces on the epistles of Ovid and the Apostles' Creed respectively, and Lessing took the momentous step, whose consequences became fully apparent only four years later, of including the first of a series of extracts, or 'fragments', from the clandestine work of Reimarus, claiming to have discovered it in the ducal library and denying all knowledge of its authorship. This 'fragment', together with the five further extracts from Reimarus which, along with Lessing's editorial commentary, occupy the whole of the fourth volume of *On History and Literature* published in 1777, will be discussed in connection with Lessing's religious controversies in Chapter 18. His two remaining essays in the third volume do, however, call for comment here.

[115] LM XII, 166–7 and 171. [116] See B VIII, 747. [117] B VIII, 749–51.
[118] See Kowalewicz 211 and PO XVI, Part 18, 36.
[119] PO XVI, Part 18, 36 and XXIII, 791; B VIII, 751–2. [120] Osborne 1132.
[121] LM XIV, 47–125. [122] Schedula diversarum artium, ed. Albert Ilg (Vienna, 1874).

The first of these is another 'vindication' of a maligned heretic, namely Adam Neuser, a Lutheran preacher in Heidelberg.[123] When the Elector Palatine introduced a Calvinist observance in 1563, Neuser became disaffected and established relations with the Polish unitarians, whose views he now shared. Accused of heresy and treason after allegedly appealing to the Turkish sultan for asylum, he fled to Hungary and, after narrowly escaping execution on a brief visit home, eventually made his way to Constantinople where he converted to Islam and apparently served in the sultan's bodyguard until his death in 1576. The document discovered by Lessing is a letter written by Neuser from Constantinople in 1574, replying to another letter, discovered since Lessing's time,[124] from a German friend who had urged him to repent and return to Christianity and his abandoned family. Neuser cogently describes the circumstances of his two escapes from his persecutors and his continuing quest for religious truth. On the evidence of this letter and further researches of his own, Lessing exposes a whole series of inaccuracies and false accusations in reference works by Jöcher and others regarding Neuser's conduct and morality, and demonstrates that at least some passages in his alleged appeal to the sultan for help are almost certainly forged.

Later scholarship has largely confirmed Lessing's findings.[125] His essay is also more objective than that on Berenger, whose modernity and consistency he had somewhat exaggerated. In the case of Neuser, he merely reports the latter's unitarianism and conversion to Islam, without either defending or condemning them; he simply defends Neuser's right to freedom of conscience, and denies that his apostasy is necessarily a sign of moral turpitude. In short, the essay is an eloquent plea for tolerance; and although the views expressed in it are familiar enough from Lessings earlier writings (especially the 'vindications' of the early 1750s), their timing and context are significant: for Neuser's views were closely akin to deism, and the title which Lessing gives to the Reimarus fragment which immediately follows the Neuser essay, and for which he is again preparing the way, is 'On the Toleration of Deists'.

The one remaining essay by Lessing in the third volume of his periodical is a much slighter piece, containing minor addenda and emendations, drawn from interleaved manuscript notes in the Aldine edition of an astrological treatise by the fourth-century writer Julius Firmicus Maternus.[126] The only justification Lessing gives for publishing it is the alleged need to publish all known works without abridgement; once again, his thoughts are primarily on Reimarus.

The only other item by Lessing, apart from those already referred to, in later volumes of *On History and Literature* is that entitled 'Maranjon'.[127] Although this work was already in print by the first months of 1780, it was not published until late in that year when it appeared as a free-standing publication; it was also included in the sixth volume of *On History and Literature* published by Christian Leiste in 1781 soon after Lessing's death.[128] It consists of a brief preface by Lessing, followed

[123] LM XII, 201–54. [124] Text in B VIII, 789–92. [125] B VIII, 789.
[126] LM XII, 271–90. [127] LM XIV, 125–31.
[128] See LM XIV, 46 and XXII, 463; also Franzbach (1970) *passim*.

by a short work in Spanish by Pedro Cadena on the geography of Brazil (1634), together with a seventeenth-century German translation; both texts were taken from a manuscript discovered by Lessing in the ducal library. Leiste, whose current specialism was the geography of the Americas, welcomed this work as fulfilling the need for a description in German of Brazil. He was primarily responsible for preparing the text and translation for publication, and he added his own explanatory notes.

Lessing and Leiste made a grave mistake in relying on an antiquated translation, which Lessing himself described as 'amateurish gibberish' (*schülerhaft und kauderwelsch*)[129] and to which Leiste made only minor revisions. Misled by its incorrect version of the long-winded Spanish title, Lessing took its reference to the two Brazilian regions of 'Marañon and Gran Pará' to be the compound surname of a conquistador who had first explored these regions; and since, as he also noted, the name 'Marañon' was sometimes given to the River Amazon, he further emphasized his error by using this name as the title of his work. Though the error was at once noticed by several people with knowledge of Spanish,[130] there was fortunately no Klotz or Lange among them. It is not difficult to imagine what capital Lessing would have made of a gaffe such as this if one of his adversaries had committed it.

Some errors of this kind were doubtless inevitable in a journal which demanded so wide a range of skills and scholarship as *On History and Literature*, and in this case, Lessing's increasing reliance on his Wolfenbüttel collaborators was at least in part responsible. But the series as a whole was a remarkable achievement, and it helps to explain why the editors of at least three other periodicals, one of which offered him the high rate of fifteen talers per sheet, sought to recruit him as a contributor.[131] The greatest strengths of *On History and Literature* and the other associated publications were their major contribution to scholarship, the wide variety of their subject matter, and not least their stylistic virtuosity: as Heyne commented: 'With admirable artistry, Lessing treats each of his articles like a drama: he begins by painstakingly weaving his plot, then holds us in prolonged suspense, and finally supplies the dénouement.'[132] They amply fulfilled Lessing's aims of demonstrating his competence as a librarian and of bringing the riches of the Wolfenbüttel library to the notice of a wider public.

[129] LM XIV, 129. [130] See PO XXIII, 1027–9; also Leisewitz, Tagebücher II, 76–7.
[131] D 536. [132] B VII, 994.

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Miscellaneous Writings; *Emilia Galotti*: 1770–1775

After his departure from Hamburg, Lessing's literary interests declined sharply, and his relationship with contemporary literature—apart from the two major dramas he was still to write—became increasingly tenuous. This was largely due, of course, to his work for the library and, in the late 1770s, to his religious controversies, both of which took up a great deal of time. In addition, his disillusion with the theatre and with public taste in Germany predisposed him to cultivate non-literary interests. Throughout the previous two decades, he had done more than anyone to shape the course of German literature; but although he continued to command respect, the new literature which arose in the 1770s grew ever more remote from him and, with the Storm and Stress movement, developed in ways of which he could no longer wholly approve. For these reasons, his literary interests in the early 1770s were mainly historical (as in his studies of the fable), and his own contributions to literature and literary theory were dictated primarily by fortuitous circumstances or commercial considerations.

His first such publication, entitled *Poems of Andreas Scultetus*, was prompted by his association with Zachariä and his publishing enterprise at the Brunswick orphanage (*Waisenhaus*). Zachariä had begun in 1766 to publish a series of anthologies of seventeenth-century poetry, a project guaranteed to appeal to Lessing, whose interest in baroque poetry went back to his studies in Wittenberg and to his own edition, in collaboration with Ramler, of Logau's epigrams in 1759. When he heard—apparently already in Hamburg[1]—that Zachariä was about to publish the second anthology in his series with poems by Paul Fleming, he offered to add an appendix with poems by the forgotten Silesian writer Andreas Scultetus which he had collected in earlier years. This appendix was duly included in the anthology and simultaneously issued as a separate publication, both of which appeared at Easter 1771.[2]

Lessing explains in his preface how he discovered the first, and longest, of the six poems he now publishes, the 'Triumphal Trump of Easter' ('Oesterliche Triumphposaune'), as a student in Wittenberg. He had noticed its affinity with the poetry of Opitz, whom he respected as a major poetic innovator, and he was surprised to discover some ten years later in Breslau that Scultetus, who had attended school there and converted to Catholicism before his early death, was virtually unknown. Researches in the Breslau libraries brought several more of his poems to light.

[1] See LM XI, 165. [2] LM XI, 163–208.

Lessing was attracted by Scultetus' bold conceits and vivid imagination, declaring that his poems contain 'more true sublimity than bombast'.[3] His enthusiasm was confirmed when, in 1758, his friend Ewald von Kleist was equally impressed by the Easter poem and borrowed an image from it for a poem of his own. But as with Logau, it is above all the richness and energy of Scultetus's language which appeals to Lessing, who sees in it an inspirational resource for contemporary German poetry; and just as he had done with Logau, he adds a series of philological glosses on Scultetus' poetic language.

Modern scholars have found Lessing's enthusiasm for Scultetus excessive, but it has rightly been pointed out that he had little to compare Scultetus's work with, since knowledge of baroque poetry was still very patchy.[4] Although one or two polite notices appeared, the edition was largely ignored, and Lessing's friends, to whom he presented it somewhat apologetically, were unsure how to react.[5] He nevertheless deserves credit as a pioneer of baroque studies in an age which was not yet ready for them, and he went on to place his notes on texts and variants of Tscherning's poetry at the disposal of Eschenburg, who edited the third and final volume in Zachariä's series after the latter's death in 1777.[6]

Lessing's next literary project goes back to the beginning of 1770, when, annoyed by an unauthorized reprint of his early comedies *Damon* and *The Old Maid* which he now rejected as inadequate, he approached Voss with a proposal to issue a new and authoritative edition of his collected works.[7] Voss promptly published his collected comedies, omitting the two discarded works, at Easter of that year. A pirated edition of the collected *Writings* of 1753–5, which appeared soon afterwards,[8] strengthened Lessing's resolve to issue a revised edition of his collected works, omitting inferior items and adding new essays by way of commentary.[9] The first volume of his *Miscellaneous Writings* (*Vermischte Schriften*), with a selection of his epigrams and early poems, duly appeared in the autumn of 1771. In preparing it, he gave his friend Ramler a free hand to revise the entire selection and reject any items he found inadequate; he also supplemented the epigrams with a substantial new essay entitled 'Scattered Remarks on the Epigram' ('Zerstreute Anmerkungen über das Epigramm') with historical and theoretical observations on that genre. But despite repeated promises and some preparatory work on his odes, fables, and short narrative poems, the second volume of the *Miscellaneous Writings*, scheduled to appear in 1772, was not published in Lessing's lifetime. Instead, Karl Lessing published it in 1784, and the two existing volumes became the first in the posthumous edition of Lessing's collected works in thirty volumes, edited by Karl Lessing, Eschenburg, and Nicolai and completed in 1794. But having failed to deliver the second volume in 1772, Lessing was in no position to default on the other item he had promised Voss for that year, namely a new drama which, together with *Miss Sara Sampson* and *Philotas*, would make possible an edition of his collected

[3] LM XI, 165 and 168–9.
[4] See B VII, 712, 716–17, 724; also E. Schmidt II, 79.
[5] B VII, 716 and 719–20; L. to Gleim, 6 June 1771; Karl Lessing to L., 15 May 1771.
[6] B VII, 710.
[7] L. to C. F. Voss, 5 January 1770.
[8] See LM XXII, 422–3.
[9] L. to Ramler, 16 December 1770; L. to Karl Lessing, 26 May 1771.

tragedies.[10] *Emilia Galotti* was duly completed, and the collected tragedies appeared at Easter 1772.

Before this play is discussed, something must be said about the essay on the epigram which Lessing included in the first volume of his *Miscellaneous Writings*. His work on the epigram is closely parallel to that on the fable, for in both cases, he was a practitioner as well as a theorist, and he studied and wrote on both genres and their history at various stages of his life.[11] Just as his *Scattered Remarks on the Epigram* was written to accompany his collected epigrams, so also did he plan to include an essay on the history of the fable with his collected fables in the second volume of the new edition. That essay was never completed; but his essay on the epigram has strong affinities with the *Treatises on the Fable* which he had published in 1759.

Lessing began work on his *Scattered Remarks on the Epigram* towards the end of 1770 and completed it the following summer. It was published in the autumn of 1771 together with his selected epigrams and poems.[12] The essay's modest title, which does less than justice to its incisive reasoning and impressive scholarship, was doubtless chosen to avoid any hint of dogmatic pretension and to reflect the fact that only the first of its five sections contains systematic reasoning. Unlike the *Treatises on the Fable* of 1759, which also consists of five sections, Lessing now devotes more space to concrete examples than to theoretical abstraction; this reflects his growing interest in historical scholarship during the Hamburg years and his first years in Wolfenbüttel. The remaining sections deal respectively with Catullus, Martial, priapic poetry, and the Greek Anthology.

In the first section, he begins by dismissing past definitions of the epigram as imprecise and inadequate. Then taking his cue from the word's etymology, he concludes that its essence is that of an inscription, originally on a monument, which draws our attention to the latter and briefly informs us of its purpose. In short,[13]

> the epigram is a poem in which, in the manner of an inscription proper, our attention and curiosity are drawn to some individual object and more or less held in suspense, then all at once satisfied.

This etymological definition serves two purposes. It firstly brings in the historical dimension to which Lessing is anxious to do justice, and secondly, it stresses the fact that the epigram refers to, or begins by describing, a visible or tangible object. Though Lessing's etymology is correct, the historical inference he draws from it is questionable, for early Greek monuments rarely constituted a puzzle to be resolved, and early inscriptions rarely built up suspense and suddenly relieved it.[14] The real importance of the definition lies rather in its second function; for Lessing wishes above all to establish that the epigram consists essentially and archetypally of two parts, the first of which represents a sensuous object, and the second of which evokes a pleasurable response on the part of the observer on suddenly recognizing the object's significance.

[10] L. to C. F. Voss, 24 December 1771.
[11] Cf. also LM XV, 457–61.
[12] LM XI, 211–315; cf. B VII, 738.
[13] LM XI, 217.
[14] Cf. E. Schmidt II, 93; Woessner 87–92; Fick (2010) 364.

As Lessing himself admits, he is not the first to maintain that the epigram has a two-part structure, for this is already present in J. J. Scaliger's distinction of *propositio* and *deductio*, or François Vavasseur's of *expositio* and *conclusio*.[15] But whereas these distinctions denote a fundamentally logical relation, Lessing is more concerned—just as he was in his dramatic theory—to base his definition on the effect of the work of art on the recipient; and in the case of the epigram, he defines its two stages as the expectation (*Erwartung*) aroused by the object described and the resolution or enlightenment (*Aufschluss*) which suddenly follows when the expectation is satisfied. In this respect, his definition is certainly original, and it does more justice to the epigram's aesthetic quality than the purely logical definitions of earlier theorists.

Though the effect that Lessing has in mind is not that produced by a logical inference, it does have an intellectual quality about it: it is that of wit or amusement as a hitherto unexpected conclusion is briefly and memorably drawn. In this respect, the epigram, like the fable and philosophical dialogue, is among those hybrid forms of art and philosophy which always aroused his interest. In so far as its effect is one of amusement, it is also closely akin to comedy; but to judge by many of the examples of successful epigrams which Lessing cites in his essay, the effect need not be one of amusement (as it regularly is in his own epigrams), but merely one of pleasurable insight as a moral or cognitive truth is memorably expressed. To this extent, its effect is rhetorical rather than purely poetic.[16]

Once Lessing has established his definition, he deduces from it a comprehensive poetics of the epigram, including its essential qualities, aberrations, and relationship to cognate forms, no less incisive than his memorable analysis of epic and descriptive poetry in *Laocoön*. The epigram's two main aberrations, of which examples are given, are those which arouse our expectations without a concluding revelation or punchline, and those which present an abstract conclusion or general maxim without a concrete instance to prepare for it. Length, balance, economy and other attributes of the successful epigram are also analysed in detail.

The second section of the essay, on Catullus, serves chiefly to draw a line between the epigram and other short poems which do not conform to Lessing's definition; it continues with remarks on the rediscovery of Catullus by Renaissance scholars and on variant readings in surviving manuscripts. It is followed by the central, and much more important section on Martial, whose work had furnished the model for most of Lessing's own epigrams since his student years and remained fundamental to his understanding of the genre thereafter. As he puts it, Martial was 'the first to cultivate the epigram as a distinct genre, and to devote himself exclusively to it'.[17] It would, however, be more accurate to say that he was the first to cultivate the satirical epigram as a distinct form and on a large scale, for the satirical epigram is a relatively late development which Martial brought to fruition in first-century Rome.[18]

[15] LM XI, 218–19; see also B VII, 743 and Woessner 74–87.
[16] See Barner (1985) 356 and 365. [17] LM XI, 257. [18] See Riedel (1976) 181–2.

In treating Martial's work as definitive, Lessing was in no way original, for the satirical epigram had already been regarded as canonic by Gottsched and by other writers since Renaissance times.[19] Nevertheless, he was clearly reluctant to trace the origin of the genre to Nero's Rome rather than to classical Greece, where poems very different from Martial's, from genuine inscriptions to playful or ekphrastic verses, had long been described as epigrams. And this is why he was so anxious to insist that the monumental inscription was the archetypal form of the genre: it enabled him to identify in the earliest examples that bipartite form so characteristic of Martial's satirical epigrams, thereby confirming the genre's classical provenance.

Finally, the section on Martial is also another of Lessing's 'vindications', for he defends the Roman poet against the charge that he was personally involved in many of the iniquities and perversions he describes. But given the grossness and frequency of such material in the epigrams, Lessing's defence—that the references in question are primarily satirical, and that the poetic persona and real persona must not be confused—carries less conviction than it did when he applied it to Horace some twenty years earlier.

In his brief comments on the priapic poems in the fourth section, Lessing has nothing to say on their poetic or cultural significance, but deals mainly with manuscript variants and amendments derived from his research in the Wolfenbüttel library. The final section on the Greek Anthology, though more extensive, consists of 'scattered remarks' such as the essay title promised, discussing the transmission of the Greek verses, elucidating obscurities in them, and noting similarities and differences between them and the epigrams of Martial. Lessing's contention that certain of the poems are later than, and possibly imitated from, the Roman poet is now no longer accepted.

There can be no doubt that Lessing's definition and analysis of the epigram applies admirably to the satirical variety as cultivated by Martial. It was accordingly cited in handbooks of poetics by Eschenburg, Sulzer, and others, and almost certainly influenced the shape of later German epigrams, including the *Xenien* of Goethe and Schiller.[20] More recent studies of Martial and related epigrammatists have confirmed the broad accuracy of Lessing's account.[21]

The main critic of his essay, as of his earlier *Treatises on the Fable*, was Herder, who rightly points out that the epigrams in the Greek Anthology are far more varied in form than Lessing suggests, and that Lessing's definition is unduly restrictive. Herder discusses the epigram, and Lessing's essay, on several occasions between 1772 and 1786,[22] always respectfully and sympathetically, and distinguishes no fewer than seven distinct forms, of which the satirical or 'pointed' epigram is only one;[23] he also argues that the basic form is that of a descriptive poem, rounded and complete in itself.[24] The strength of Herder's position, just as in his critique of Lessing's *Treatises on the Fable*, is that he is more conscious than Lessing of the cultural and anthropological determinants of the genre, and of the sheer diversity of forms

[19] See Fick (2010) 362. [20] See B VII, 750–2. [21] See Riedel (1976) 182–3.
[22] See the selection in B VII, 762–72. [23] Herder SWS XV, 366–7 and 377.
[24] Ibid. 219; cf. Barner (1985) 359.

it encompasses. The weakness of his position is that his own basic definition of the epigram as 'the poetic exposition of a present object, or an object conceived of as present, for any chosen purpose of a didactic or emotional nature'[25] is so wide that almost any descriptive poem, from Keats's 'Ode on a Grecian Urn' to Rilke's sonnets on statues, flamingos, and hydrangeas, would qualify as an epigram. It is true, of course, that what Lessing's definition gains in precision, it loses in breadth (indeed, it does not even fit all of Martial's poems), whereas the converse is true of Herder's definition. It is also true that modern epigrams show a greater formal variety than those of the eighteenth century.[26] But as in Lessing's day, the satirical epigram is still regarded as the definitive form. We remain indebted to him, as we do in the case of the fable, for filling a gap in classical poetics, which excluded such genres on the grounds that they perform a rhetorical or didactic as well as a poetic function.

Apart from *Emilia Galotti*, the only other writings of the period 1770 to 1775 which remain to be mentioned are the miscellaneous notes in Lessing's commonplace book (the *Collectanea*) and the materials he collected with a view to compiling a German dictionary. In view of his decision to sell his personal library, he set up an alphabetical commonplace book in 1768 to record the fruits of his reading, at the same time incorporating scattered notes from earlier years as far back as the Breslau period.[27] Although he continued to maintain it until the time of his travels in 1775, the bulk of the notes are of earlier date, especially from his years in Hamburg. They include extensive drafts and materials for the *Antiquarian Letters* in particular, as well as for a planned critique or edition of Winckelmann. But although antiquarian and philological notes predominate, the most striking feature of the collection is its variety: it is a polyhistorical compendium in which the quaint and the curious, those 'pedantic' interests which Lessing's friends at times reproached him for, are richly represented along with mainstream scholarship. Games and puzzles, alchemy and obstetrics, freaks and eccentrics, angels and flying machines all have their place; but so too do numerous anthropological observations on sight, hearing, smell, sneezing, kissing, speech, language, and physiognomy. But perhaps the most interesting feature are those observations which were too radical or contentious to find their way into Lessing's published writings: the entry 'Deutsche Freiheit' (German freedom), for example, contains his most circumstantial critique of absolutism and support for democratic procedures, and the entry 'Rabbinen' (rabbis) takes seriously the suggestion that mutually contradictory interpretations or propositions may be equally true—a reflection not without significance for Lessing's philosophical development, as the next chapter will show.

Lessing's glossary to Logau and his notes on Scultetus' linguistic usage are products of his growing interest in the German language, including its earlier phases and dialect forms. At some time during the 1760s (almost certainly in the Breslau period), he began to make systematic notes with a view to compiling a dictionary of the German language.[28] One of the dictionaries then in use was Christoph Ernst

[25] Herder SWS XV, 344. [26] Woessner 108; Ziemann 235–7.
[27] LM XV, 125–423; commentary in B X, 1125–47. [28] See B X, 1012–25.

Steinbach's *Deutsches Wörter-Buch* of 1725, and from around 1760 until the mid-1770s, Lessing compiled alphabetical notes, with semantic and etymological comments and examples from his reading, in an interleaved copy of Steinbach's work.[29] These and other collections of notes on grammar, comparative linguistics and dialects, along with glosses on German usage from the medieval period to the Reformation and beyond,[30] were to form the basis of a comprehensive and historical dictionary, the need for which was already obvious by the middle of the eighteenth century. It was met, however, not by Lessing but by Johann Christoph Adelung's *Dictionary of the High-German Dialect* (*Wörterbuch der hochdeutschen Mundart*), whose five volumes were published between 1774 and 1786. As soon as the first volume of this work appeared, Lessing abandoned his plan.[31] Nevertheless, he continued to collect material as late as 1778,[32] perhaps because he did not share Adelung's puristic attachment to High German, but took the view that Low German, Silesian, and all the other dialects, as well as archaisms and borrowings from other languages, served to enrich the native tongue.[33] A large portion of his notes, together with his draft of a treatise on German lexicography (no doubt with criticisms of Adelung), seems to have been lost in the trunk which went missing in transit from Dresden in 1775.[34] But even if he had suffered no such losses and Adelung had not pre-empted him, it is unlikely that Lessing, given his aversion to protracted systematic work, would ever have completed a dictionary. His surviving notes do, however, testify to his appreciation of the historical depth and regional breadth of his native language.

Despite his heavy commitment to the library, Lessing found himself under recurrent pressure to write more dramas. Even before he left Hamburg, he was repeatedly urged by Ebert to complete *Dr Faust*, *Der Sleeping Draught*, and other dramatic projects he had spoken of,[35] and after his move to Brunswick, the Duchess Philippine Charlotte pestered him (Lessing's own expression) for a new tragedy every time she saw him.[36] The play he initially had in mind—perhaps with a hint of defiance—was what he described as an 'anti-tyrannical tragedy' on the theme of Spartacus and his leadership of the slaves' rebellion in ancient Rome;[37] but like so many of his dramatic plans, it got no further than brief notes and scraps of dialogue.[38]

He was now in any case thoroughly disillusioned with the theatre, and although Ackermann's troupe visited Brunswick from April to September 1770 and part of the company even performed on thirteen occasions in the deserted palace in Wolfenbüttel,[39] he told Eva that he had no wish to see them, declaring 'I think it's the devil's work that the theatre continually dogs me.'[40] As late as 14 November

[29] LM XVI, 4–42. [30] LM XVI, 43–95. [31] See L. to Karl Lessing, 2 February 1774.
[32] See B X, 1014. [33] See B X, 1021–2. [34] See L. to Karl Lessing, 16 June 1776.
[35] See Ebert to L., 4 October 1768; 26 and 27 January 1769; 5 May 1769; 7 January and 16 February 1770.
[36] L. to Voss, 24 December 1771.
[37] See L. to Ramler, 16 December 1770; Ebert to L., 15 December 1770; L. to Karl Lessing, 24 December 1770; B VII, 962.
[38] LM III, 469–72. [39] See F. L. W. Meyer I, 215. [40] L. to Eva König, 10 June 1770.

1771 (by which time he was committed to writing *Emilia Galotti*), he told his brother that, although he was hoping for a move to Vienna, he would not accept any offer connected with the theatre, adding 'I become more indifferent towards the theatre from one day to the next.'[41] And when Döbbelin came to Brunswick with his troupe on 20 November 1771 for a winter season in which they performed three of Lessing's plays, Lessing failed to attend any performances until Döbbelin, fearing that Lessing bore some grudge against him, arrived in person with his wife to fetch him from Wolfenbüttel.[42]

Two factors finally persuaded him to write a new tragedy. Firstly, on his visit to Berlin in late September, he had promised Voss to supply a new play for the edition of his collected tragedies which Voss was preparing to publish; he had to stick to this promise, for he was obliged to ask Voss for a substantial loan in early December.[43] Secondly, Döbbelin heard about the new play and formed a plan to give it its first performance in celebration of the duchess's birthday in March 1772; and since the duchess, who was almost certainly informed of this plan, had already pressed Lessing for a new tragedy, he had little option but to complete it by this deadline.[44]

He elected to write *Emilia Galotti* rather than *Spartacus* probably because he had done some work on a stage version of the former play in Hamburg, so that it required less effort than an entirely new project to complete it. But when he resumed work on it in December 1771, his reluctance to do so is evident from his comment to Voss towards the end of the year: 'I have almost reacquired my taste for drama through working on this new tragedy.'[45] All of the above circumstances, routinely ignored by interpreters of *Emilia Galotti*, throw an interesting light on his state of mind before and during the play's composition. But despite the pressures he was under, he might not have completed it in time if Döbbelin had not threatened, when the final scenes were still missing as the deadline for performance approached, to supply a conclusion himself.[46]

Emilia Galotti enjoys a status in German literature akin to that of *Hamlet* in English literature. Though one of the most intensively interpreted of all German dramas, there has never been any general consensus on its meaning from its first performance to the present day. Political, sociological, psychoanalytical, metaphysical, Aristotelian, Schillerian, and other readings compete for attention, and the clarity of Lessing's dialogue serves only to mask the complexity of the problems which underlie it.[47]

The plot, which is a simple one, closely follows the story of Virginia—or at least the first part of it—in Livy's history of Rome.[48] The prince of Guastalla, who is in love with Emilia Galotti, discovers that she is about to be married to Count Appiani. The prince's chamberlain Marinelli asks for a free hand to resolve the problem, and arranges for Appiani to be murdered and Emilia abducted. Alerted—albeit too late—to the conspiracy by the prince's former mistress, the Countess Orsina,

[41] To Karl Lessing, 14 November 1771.
[42] See D 318; Hartmann 215; L. to Eva König, 11 December 1771.
[43] See L. to Voss, 1 and 6 December 1771. [44] L. to Voss, 24 December 1771. [45] Loc. cit.
[46] KGL 186–7, ed's note. [47] See Fick (2010) 380; Ryder 329; Dvoretzky (1963) *passim*.
[48] Text in GEL: *EG*. Erläuterungen und Dokumente, ed. Müller, 27–33; see also B VII,838.

Emilia's father Odoardo, after vainly seeking his daughter's release, stabs her to death at her own request in order to save her virtue. There is no equivalent in Lessing's play for the second part of Livy's story, in which the death of Virginia sparks off a successful revolution by the common people against the tyrant Appius Claudius.

Like the myths of Medea and the madness of Hercules, the Virginia story is one of those ancient legends of extreme situations which had fascinated Lessing since the early 1750s.[49] Though the original story was not itself a drama, it had already been dramatized by numerous writers from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century, several of whose plays Lessing knew.[50] He probably knew the Virginia drama of Jean Gilbert de Campistron (1686); and he certainly knew the more recent versions by Agustín Montiano y Luyando (of which he published a lengthy paraphrase in 1754),[51] Johann Samuel Patzke (which he reviewed in 1755),[52] and Samuel Crisp (the opening dialogue of which he translated in the 1750s).[53] The (relatively minor) influences of these plays on *Emilia Galotti* have been documented in detail elsewhere.[54]

Most earlier dramatizations retained the political revolution as the climactic event which alone made sense of Virginia's sacrifice, and Lessing's decision to eliminate it had far-reaching consequences for his own play. For whereas Virginia's father, after the tyrant Appius claimed her on the spurious grounds that she was born to a slave of his retainer, killed his daughter primarily to preserve her freedom as a Roman citizen, Lessing's Odoardo kills his daughter merely in order to preserve her virtue. By thus making the threat of seduction and the heroine's desire to preserve her innocence into the main issue, Lessing relates his play to the tradition inaugurated by Richardson's novel *Clarissa*, many details of whose plot are echoed in *Emilia Galotti*.[55] Two other innovations—to some extent foreshadowed by Campistron and Crisp respectively[56]—are the substantial roles he gives to the heroine's mother and to the Countess Orsina as the discarded mistress of the would-be seducer. The figures of the prince and his discarded mistress also inherit some features of Mellefont and Marwood in *Miss Sara Sampson*.

Lessing's interest in the Virginia story goes back to his studies of Montiano, Crisp, and Patzke in the mid-1750s, but his own plan to dramatize it arose around 1756 in conjunction with his projected tragedy *Rome Delivered* (*Das befreite Rom*) on the related theme of the rape and suicide of Lucretia and the consequent overthrow of the Roman monarchy. He began work on it in 1757, planning to submit it anonymously to Nicolai's competition for a new tragedy.[57] Still attributing it to 'a young tragedian' of his acquaintance, he further explained to Nicolai:[58]

[49] See Fick (2010) 328–32
[50] See GEL: *EG*.Erläuterungen und Dokumente, ed. Müller, 34–43; also Riedel (1976) 111.
[51] LM VI, 72–120. [52] LM VII, 50. [53] GEL: *EG*, ed. Bauer, 165–8.
[54] Ibid. 169–74; B VII, 840–3; Lamport (1980) *passim*. [55] See Kettner *passim*.
[56] See Woesler 166 and GEL: *EG*. Erläuterungen und Dokumente, ed. Müller, 38.
[57] See L. to Mendelssohn, 22 October 1757; also L. to Nicolai, 25 November 1757.
[58] To Nicolai, 21 January 1758.

> His present subject is a domestic [*bürgerliche*] Virginia entitled *Emilia Galotti*. For he has separated the story of the Roman Virginia from everything of interest to the state, in the belief that the fate of a daughter killed by a father who values her virtue more highly than her life is tragic enough in itself, and sufficiently able to stir the heart in general, even if it does not lead to the overthrow of the entire political constitution. His plan is for only three acts, and he will not hesitate to make use of all the liberties of the English stage.

Nicolai, who was subsequently shown this plan, confirmed that it consisted of only three acts, and noted that it did not yet include the figure of Orsina.[59] Lessing's use of the term *bürgerlich* also suggests that his plan was for a domestic tragedy akin in nature to *Miss Sara Sampson*, which bore that subtitle; but the subtitle of the completed version of 1772 is simply 'a tragedy in five acts'. As already mentioned, he also worked on a stage version of the play, in five acts, during his years in Hamburg; but it was neither performed nor, in Lessing's opinion, suitable for publication.[60] Both early versions are now lost, and the final version, far from taking all the liberties of the English stage, sticks closely (apart from two local changes of place) to the classical unities.

Lessing wrote the first three acts of the final version towards the end of 1771 and in the first two months of 1772. He worked initially in the deserted palace of Wolfenbüttel with its fading courtly splendours, and in the new year mainly in Brunswick,[61] where he assisted Döbbelin with casting and rehearsals as he struggled to complete the play. His brother Karl, who supervised its printing in Berlin, had received the first three acts and a substantial portion of Act IV by 10 February;[62] but Lessing clearly had considerable difficulty with the remaining portion, telling his publisher on 25 January: 'The nearer I come to the end, the more dissatisfied I am myself with it.'[63] He at last sent Voss the missing scenes on 1 March,[64] and received bound copies around 14 March, the day after the first performance; manuscript or proof copies were presumably used at the rehearsals.[65] The complex history of the surviving manuscripts and early editions has recently been fully unravelled in the critical edition by Elke Monika Bauer.[66]

In modernizing the ancient story, Lessing sets his play not in Germany but in Italy—not in order to highlight specifically Italian problems, but doubtless to afford some measure of detachment and avoid any allusion to particular German states or rulers. And although the Gonzaga family did indeed rule in Guastalla and Sabionetta in the seventeenth century and all the other personal names are authentically Italian,[67] the individuals concerned are obviously fictitious and the socio-political context, with its mixture of absolutist and Enlightenment attitudes, is plainly that of Lessing's age:[68] as a contemporary critic noticed, the characters are 'all people of our time'.[69]

The opening act is a brilliant piece of exposition, introducing prince Hettore Gonzaga and his two advisers—the dominant Marinelli, whose very name hints at

[59] D 193–4. [60] L. to Karl L., 10 February 1772. [61] See PO XX, Part 25, 17.
[62] B VII, 835. [63] L. to Voss, 25 January 1772. [64] To Karl Lessing, 1 March 1772.
[65] GEL: *EG*, ed. Bauer, 190. [66] Ibid. 81–164. [67] Ibid. 170–80.
[68] See Lützeler 102–6. [69] B VII, 899.

his Machiavellian principles, and the humane Rota, whose serious business is put aside for another day. The prince's reactions, in his racy dialogue with the artist Conti, to the portraits of his former mistress Orsina and his intended mistress Emilia Galotti, show in the most graphic manner possible how the taste of this aesthete and hedonist has recently shifted from a sophisticated courtesan to an unspoiled beauty of sheltered upbringing and rural origin. His sudden discovery that the object of his desire is to be married that very day plunges him, and Marinelli, into hectic activity which does not let up until the end of the play. The second act, which is largely devoted to the Galottis, shows how they, too, are poised between two worlds: the mother, Claudia, is proud of having introduced her daughter to court society and secured a desirable match for her in Count Appiani, whereas the father, Odoardo, and his future son-in-law are both impatient to leave the corrupt milieu of the court and return for good to their rural retreats. But as they prepare to leave for the country wedding, the intrigues of Marinelli and his hired assassins begin to close around them.

From its first performance, the play stood out for its stylistic originality and contrast with tragic conventions. The colloquial informality, bluntness, and even coarseness of its language (*Hofgeschmeiss*, *Dich Kuppler!*, *ein ganzer Affe*, etc.) gave the dialogue a natural quality quite unlike the usual tragic register,[70] as did those disjointed outbursts of passion (e.g. Act III, Scene 6) which the Storm and Stress movement would shortly emulate. Only occasionally, as in some of Orsina's speeches, does the rhetorical declamation of classical tragedy make itself heard,[71] and the literary references and poetic metaphors of Emilia and her father in the closing scenes are, by common consent, strained and artificial.[72] But apart from Emilia's animated account of her meeting with the prince in church, there are no long narratives, and the nine monologues (of the prince, Claudia, Marinelli and Odoardo) are short, brisk, and spontaneous.

The most prominent feature of the play's expression is the terse, urgent, and forceful dialogue of most of the scenes, propelling the action rapidly forward and reflecting the pressures the characters are under. The quick-fire exchanges of the first act, full of wit, repartee and aphoristic, even epigrammatic formulations, are highly appropriate to the prince and his cultivated entourage. But these features are less in keeping with the world of Emilia and her parents, where we do not always find that spontaneous expression of emotions which—as in Emilia's halting account of the incident in church—we expect at moments of crisis; all too often, the characters reflect, argue, and even philosophize about their feelings with a degree of self-consciousness difficult to reconcile with their dire predicament.[73] In short, like *Miss Sara Sampson*, *Emilia Galotti* is a drama of transition from older, more obviously artificial conventions to a higher degree of realism, and the two divergent tendencies are sometimes conspicuously at variance.

[70] See Woesler 168; GEL: *EG*, ed. Bauer, 482; cf. Karl Lessing to L., 3 February 1772.
[71] See, for example, LM II, 427–8 and 436–7.
[72] For example, Schröder (1972) 206–8; G.-M. Schulz 295.
[73] See Dvoretzky (1963) 24; E. Schmidt II, 36; GEL: *EG*, ed. Bauer, 414 and 421.

Nevertheless, *Emilia Galotti* is a much more realistic drama than *Miss Sara Sampson*. There are far more stage directions in the later play, and the characters are individualized and fully delineated; with the exception of Marinelli, whose consistently villainous behaviour is in keeping with his role as Machiavellian enabler, none of them is of the 'unmixed' type which Lessing rejected. Unlike the characters of *Miss Sara Sampson*, they are also set in a precisely defined social context which, as will shortly be seen, accounts for much of their behaviour and attitudes.

Strange though it may seem today, many of Lessing's contemporaries hailed the play as Shakespearean in character.[74] Bearing in mind that Shakespeare, at that time, was known in Germany chiefly through Wieland's prose translations, it is not difficult to see how, in contrast to classical tragedy, Lessing's vividly drawn characters, his scenes of near-madness, his taut action, brisk dialogue and vivid, often colloquial language seemed closer to Shakespeare's tragedies than any other home-grown productions.

As to the play's structure, it appears at first sight to have many classical features. The first act, dominated by the prince, is balanced by the fifth act, in which Odoardo Galotti predominates; between these two figures stands the hapless Emilia, whose fate they determine. The two contrasting groups of court and family are held in balance throughout. Every act consists of eight scenes, except for the second, which has eleven. The play falls into two halves, separated by the central turning point or peripeteia of Appiani's murder and Emilia's abduction, and the fourth act contains the anagnorisis as Odoardo discovers that the prince and Marinelli are responsible for Appiani's death; the same act also contains the traditional retardation before the final catastrophe, as Orsina supplies further details of the conspiracy and Odoardo attempts to secure his daughter's release and considers how to react to the crisis.

These formal attributes, essentially classical in character, mask some decidedly non-classical features. The peripeteia, in which the Galotti family's future is effectively destroyed, is itself a disaster of the first magnitude. One early critic duly observed that the play has two catastrophes,[75] and there is no doubt that the remainder of the action merely analyses out the consequences of the first of these, as distinct from any inner necessity inherent from the beginning. Or to put it differently, the first catastrophe follows directly from an intrigue—a feature more typical of comedy than tragedy—and the second from the same intrigue going wrong. The nearest thing we have to fate is the evil figure of Marinelli, the only character who appears in every act and whose baleful influence is present throughout. Marinelli is in fact allotted twenty per cent of the text, second only to the prince, who has twenty-two per cent, whereas the apparent heroine Emilia has only nine per cent—even less than Orsina—and makes relatively brief appearances in only three of the acts.[76] Lessing himself suggested on one occasion that Emilia

[74] See, for example, Ebert to L., 14 March 1772; Gleim to L., 24 March 1772; GEL: *EG*, ed. Bauer 440,463, 499.

[75] Jakob Mauvillon, in B VII, 903.

[76] Statistics from Werner/Lerchner 42–3.

may not be the main figure.[77] But since, like her prototype Virginia, she plainly suffers the most obviously tragic fate (on her wedding day, she successively loses her bridegroom and her life), whereas Odoardo, the only alternative candidate for the role of hero, merely carries out his daughter's instructions and remains alive at the end, the alternative interpretation raises more questions than it answers.

The action does, at any rate, follow a remorseless chain of cause and effect as prescribed by Lessing's tragic theory in the *Hamburg Dramaturgy* (at least until the concluding scenes). The individuals concerned all react in keeping with their character and with principles conditioned by their position in society—the latter to such an extent that the play has been said to embody a social determinism more reminiscent of Storm and Stress drama than of Lessing's own theory of individual character as basic.[78] Once the initial intrigue is set in motion, the action is determined by the characteristic responses of the protagonists and the succession of errors and misunderstandings to which these, together with external circumstances, give rise.[79]

But on closer examination, the role of external circumstances, in the shape of unforeseen and unforeseeable coincidences, assumes much greater proportions here than are commonly encountered in tragedy. These coincidences, which have often been noticed and are fully documented elsewhere,[80] are too numerous to list in full here. They include, for example, the delivery of Emilia's portrait to the prince on this particular day, the fact that he learns of the wedding only at the last minute and so feels compelled to take drastic action, his failure to read Orsina's letter, the presence of a criminal servant in the Galotti household, Emilia's unaccompanied visit to church, the arrival of Orsina (with a dagger) at the same time as Odoardo, and Emilia's reappearance just as Odoardo is about to leave her to her fate. None of these is in itself improbable, and might easily be encountered in ordinary life. But their remarkable frequency in this play, right up to the final act, is certainly unusual—both in tragedy at large, which normally entails a degree of inner necessity incompatible with numerous coincidences, and in real life, which provides the model for realistic tragedy of the kind which Lessing is writing. He was undoubtedly aware of this problem, for his characters themselves frequently refer to coincidences (*Zufälle*). But since such references are regularly inaccurate—they are often ironic (as when the speakers, or at least the spectators, know perfectly well that the events in question were deliberately planned)[81] or ascribed to a higher agency (as when Orsina wrongly believes that her meeting the prince at Dosalo was not a coincidence)—it would seem that Lessing is deliberately blurring the distinction between coincidence and necessity, perhaps in order to render the implausible accumulation of coincidences less incongruous.

Like his use of an intrigue to drive the action, Lessing's heavy reliance on coincidence is a familiar feature not so much of tragedy as of comedy: one need only think of *Minna von Barnhelm*, where outside interventions decisively influence the

[77] To Karl L., 10 February 1772. [78] McInnes 320–1. [79] See Steinmetz (1987) 100–1.
[80] See Guthke (1981b) 113–14; Nolte 232; Steinmetz (1987) 106.
[81] See, for example, LM II, 416–17 and 422–3.

action. This implies, in the case of *Emilia Galotti*, that the actions of the characters need not have led to the tragic conclusion if external circumstances had been even slightly different.[82] But on reflection, such features are perhaps not surprising, for traditional genre distinctions were currently in flux, and the ancestry of Lessing's play includes the domestic tragedy, which in turn owed more to serious or sentimental comedy than to classical tragedy. Nevertheless, the relationship of *Emilia Galotti* to comedy is in several respects closer than that of *Miss Sara Sampson*, so much so that many who saw it were puzzled or disconcerted to find that, instead of sentimental tears, the play seemed at times to elicit laughter. One such spectator was the Emperor Joseph II, who saw the play twice and commented favourably on it, but added:[83]

> I must, however, admit that I have never in my life laughed so much at a tragedy. And I may add that I have never in my life heard so much laughter at a tragedy, sometimes at points where I should have thought that tears would have been more appropriate.

Several reviewers and critics, including Ramler, likewise commented on the play's bitter humour and on the sometimes inapposite hilarity of audiences, as at the moment when Emilia begs her father to give her the dagger and he replies: 'Child, this is no hairpin.'[84] Grim or sardonic laughter is perhaps most appropriate at the confrontation of Appiani with Marinelli, when the latter's impertinence gradually breaks down the conventions of courtly politeness until Appiani bluntly calls him 'a perfect ape'—or again, when Marinelli's later accounts of his relationship with Appiani and his feigned dismay at Appiani's death are a precise reversal of the truth.[85] Such devices are, of course, the stuff of comedy; but the dire circumstances in which they are employed lend them a quality not of relaxed amusement but rather of black humour.

The above account has focused on the play's formal features and external causality. The following section will consider the more problematic question of the characters' subjective states and the motives or internal causes of their actions. As already mentioned, all of the characters, apart from Marinelli, are complex individuals (and even Marinelli is more than a traditional type). All of them are in a labile state, torn between conflicting impulses—the prince between passion and duty, Emilia between emotional insecurity and moral resolution, Odoardo between moral rigorism and deference to authority, Claudia between attraction to the court and devotion to family virtue, and Orsina between love for the prince and desire for revenge. Each is capable of moving in either of two directions under the pressure of rapidly changing circumstances. This pressure is such that they have little time to reflect, and with few exceptions, their fast-moving, laconic dialogues afford only limited insight into their changing psychological states. But at least until the final scene of the third act, the motivation of the main characters is relatively

[82] See Steinmetz (1987) 110–11.
[83] Eva König to L., 15 July 1772 (see LM XX, 187; the text in B XI/2, 42 is defective).
[84] B VII, 884; Steinmetz (ed.) (1969) 105; Barner et al. (1987) 361.
[85] See on this GEL: *EG*. Erläuterungen und Dokumente, ed. Müller, 45–7.

consistent and straightforward: each of them—apart from the prince, who has now abandoned his responsibilities—is dominated by the first term in the relevant pair of impulses listed above.

As the effects of Appiani's murder and Emilia's abduction are brought home to the Galotti family, the most perplexing feature of their responses, as various critics have noticed, is the relative passivity of Odoardo and Emilia in particular, and the extent to which they appear to be motivated less by the internal passions which such a disaster might be expected to arouse than by the effects of their own continuing dialogue.[86] In other words, their behaviour is reactive rather than active, and they react more like rational participants in a formal debate than individuals *in extremis*. Emilia's literary references and precise analysis of her own professed weakness in the concluding scenes are the most notorious, but by no means the only examples of this tendency. The overall effect is to leave us in doubt as to the nature and strength of the inner motives which drive Emilia and her father to their horrendous final act.

With Emilia in particular, there is no reason to believe, until near the end of the play, that she is anything other than a dutiful daughter and pious and innocent girl, terrified by the prince's advances in church and subsequently shocked by the murderous assault and her supposed 'rescue' by the prince's retainers. But at the end of the fourth act, her mother suddenly informs us that she is 'the most timorous and resolute of our sex, never in command of her initial reactions, but after the least reflection adapting to everything and ready for anything'.[87] And in the penultimate scene, Emilia herself tells us that she is sexually vulnerable and by no means proof against seduction, having struggled for weeks on a previous occasion to control her libidinous impulses after a visit to the glamorous household of the prince's chancellor Grimaldi, to which she is now about to be confined. We barely have time to adjust to this more complex character than that of the timid and virtuous girl we earlier saw—she also proceeds to stress her strength of will and ability to resist coercion—before we are confronted with her suicidal demands and death at the hands of her father.[88] It is no wonder that critics, from the start, were puzzled by these eleventh-hour revelations,[89] and by the fact that her bridegroom's murder appears to have no place in her concluding reflections.[90]

Doubts and uncertainties of this kind surround the endlessly debated question of what, if any, tragic fault or guilt attaches to Emilia such as might help us to make sense of her death.[91] According to her own statements, the prince's improper advances in church made her feel party to his guilt, and she later regards herself as guilty because she fears she will be unable to resist her own sexual promptings: 'I can answer for nothing. I am good for nothing.' But although eighteenth-century literature is full of young women, from Clarissa to Goethe's Gretchen, who die

[86] See, for example, Schröder (1972) 204–8; Ter-Nedden 247–8.
[87] LM II, 437–8.
[88] See Wells *passim*; R. Meyer (1973) 321–3 and 342.
[89] See, for example, Nicolai to L., 7 April 1772.
[90] For example, Matthias Claudius in B VII, 892.
[91] See, for example, Weigand; Steinhauer; Hatfield. On the vexed question of Emilia's suicidal inclinations—and on L's views on suicide in general—see Guthke (forthcoming in LYB) *passim*.

after being seduced or dishonoured, it has none who die merely because they feel sexually vulnerable.[92] And although it may well be the case that Emilia is terrified on experiencing urges which her religious upbringing has consistently repressed, that same religious upbringing must also have told her that suicide and infanticide are deadly sins. To feel temptation is not to yield to it, and any guilt she may feel can at most be hypothetical and consequently out of all proportion to her fate.

As for the claim of Goethe and others that Emilia is secretly in love with the prince,[93] the evidence points rather in the opposite direction. Emilia's earlier account of the prince's behaviour in church suggests not sexual attraction but only fear and helplessness, as confirmed by the prince's own report that 'She stood there dumb and downcast and trembling; like a criminal hearing her sentence of death.'[94] Nor is it justifiable to argue, on the basis of her short but affectionate meeting with Appiani, that her relationship to him is conventional and lacking in emotional substance.[95] The problem of all such hypotheses is that there is too little information on Emilia's inner state to substantiate them, and unlike the prince and Odoardo, she delivers no monologues to enlighten us. The same applies to the claim that she merely feigns guilt or weakness in order to incite her father to kill her:[96] this merely replaces the initial problem with the new problem of what possible motive she could have for wishing to die if she felt no weakness in the first place. Psychoanalytical interpretations have so far proved equally unhelpful: to postulate a conflict between Emilia's super-ego and id[97] is merely to apply Freudian labels to her moral principles and sexual urges respectively while telling us nothing new about their operation, and to maintain that Odoardo's relationship to his daughter is incestuous and that she chooses death to avoid assuming the mother role[98] virtually renders the rest of the characters, and most of the action, superfluous.

Most of the difficulty we encounter in seeking a pattern of guilt and atonement in *Emilia Galotti* is due to Emilia's almost complete passivity[99] until her sudden access of willpower and incitement of her father to kill her in the concluding scenes; and when she does so incite him, she does so ostensibly to preserve her virtue rather than to atone for its loss, thereby underlining her fundamental innocence. Her simultaneous confession of potentially sinful desires does not sit easily with this stance—or, indeed, with her apparently blameless conduct throughout the play. It serves merely to add a touch of Richardsonian pathos to her predicament—considerably diluted, of course, by our awareness that Emilia is not actually, but only potentially, a fallen woman. Whichever way we turn, an irreducible disparity remains between the timorous and seemingly blameless Emilia of the first four acts and the resolute and potentially guilty Emilia of the final scenes.

Similar paradoxes can be detected in the character of Odoardo. The fact that he was generally seen in a positive light by earlier generations but much more negatively in recent times[100] is easily enough accounted for: this discrepancy merely

[92] See Steinmetz (1987) 89. [93] See Steinmetz (ed.) (1969) 230–1; Dvoretzky (1963) 17.
[94] LM II, 414; cf. Sasse (1988) 196–7 and 199. [95] As in Mauser (1990) 182.
[96] See, for example, Klemme 51. [97] As, for example, in Neumann 49.
[98] See Prutti 330. [99] Cf. Wurst 128–9. [100] See Durzak (1970b) 87.

reflects the change in attitudes towards authoritarian parents in the course of the twentieth century. But the contrast between Odoardo's rugged independence and uncompromising morality in the earlier acts and his growing hesitancy and even subservience in the last act—by which time his wife has shown more readiness than he to denounce the ruler's injustice—is harder to explain. It is not enough to say that, as a soldier, he hesitates to go against the prince as his supreme commander and head of state,[101] for we know that he had earlier put himself forward as the chief opponent of the prince's territorial ambitions. It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that his change of personality from active upholder of his rights to passive waverer must be connected with Emilia's parallel change, in the concluding scenes, from passive and dutiful daughter to active instigator of her own execution at her father's hands. It has already been noted that Lessing had difficulties with the final act, and that he delivered it to his publisher at the last minute after several weeks' delay. As one critic has suggested,[102] he probably realized, when it was too late to change those parts of the play that were already in print (the first three acts and most of the fourth), that Emilia had to appear less than wholly innocent yet resolute enough to demand her own death if her father was not to appear a brutal murderer, and that Odoardo had to appear less inflexibly moralistic if he were to be receptive to any such proposition.[103] This hypothesis is confirmed by Lessing's reply to his brother Karl's report that Moses Mendelssohn had detected a similar inconsistency in the prince—as active and virtuous in the opening scenes and an idle voluptuary at the end.[104] Lessing acknowledged the inconsistency, and admitted that he had planned the opening scenes before deciding what part the prince would play in the conclusion.[105] It therefore seems likely that, in this case, his old habit of sending the printer successive instalments of his work as he wrote it caused problems which there was insufficient time to rectify: his reluctance to begin work on the play until the last moment had left him no room for manoeuvre. As to the possibility of revising the play for a new edition, he reportedly said that such a revision would merely create new problems and alter the character of the play more than he wished; a further obstacle was that 'aversion to going over the same thing twice' with which his friends were familiar, and which had recently led him to hand the revision of his early poetry over to Ramler when a new edition was prepared in 1771.[106]

If, then, Emilia has no identifiable guilt of sufficient magnitude to make her desire for death appear justified, what other means does Lessing employ to motivate the catastrophe? She does not, as one might expect, cite grief at her bridegroom's murder, which would be eminently understandable, as a reason for her wish to die—presumably because this would conflict with that declaration of sexual vulnerability which Lessing puts into her mouth in order to furnish her father with a motive for defending her virtue. Nor does she appear like someone in despair:[107] her firm resolution, the learned references and complex, even casuistical

[101] Ibid. 88; cf. Lützeler 108. [102] R. Meyer (1973) 335–6 and 340.
[103] See Nolte 230. [104] Karl Lessing to L., 12 March 1772.
[105] L. to Karl Lessing, 22 April 1772. [106] D 493 and 564. [107] See Sasse (1988) 208.

arguments she employs to incite her father to kill her indicate someone very much in control of their faculties. Yet on the one hand, she cites the precedent of female martyrs who drowned themselves (according to St Augustine) to preserve their virtue. It has, however, been shown that this reference is inaccurate, for those in question were not canonized as Emilia suggests, and Augustine suspends judgement on them since he could not be sure whether or not they were moved by divine grace. For voluntary martyrdom was expressly forbidden by the early church, and the precedent is in any case inappropriate to Emilia's case, because she cites her weakness rather than religious faith as the reason for her wish to die.[108] On the other hand, she sees no incongruity in also citing a pagan precedent (that of the Roman Virginia and her father) as an incentive for Odoardo to commit an act which no Christian doctrine could conceivably justify; nor does she hesitate to couple these references with the taunt that her father wishes her to become a whore (this word is not explicitly used, but clearly implied).[109] Some critics have nevertheless argued that her death should be seen as a moral triumph, as a defence not so much of her chastity as of her moral autonomy, either in a spirit of stoic heroism, or in an attitude foreshadowing German Idealism.[110] But we know that Lessing consistently rejected Stoic heroes and disapproved of suicide as showing a lack of faith in providence,[111] and it would require considerable ingenuity to reconcile Emilia's death from fear of seduction with obedience to the categorical imperative.

The fact that Emilia offers multiple, even mutually incompatible reasons why she should die, including some (such as the analogy with Christian martyrs) which Lessing can scarcely have considered valid himself, plainly indicates his unease over her motivation and that of her father. It is no wonder that the concluding scenes, after the vivid and generally convincing action which precedes them, have long been the despair of theatre directors: as one early critic put it (citing Lessing's own *Hamburg Dramaturgy* against him), Emilia 'dies of the fifth act'.[112] One can only conclude, as did many of Lessing's contemporaries,[113] that he did not succeed in modernizing the death of Virginia in a fully credible way while omitting the history of oppression which drove her father to his desperate (though in Roman law legitimate) act and his fellow-citizens to revolution. It is indeed debatable whether Odoardo's act, even with the willing complicity of his daughter, could ever be made to appear justified either in a Christian context or in that of secular human rights: however moral the end, it cannot justify so flagrantly immoral an act as the murder of a daughter.

Another problem is that of the play's precise dramatic genre. In his early plan of 1758, Lessing had described it as 'a domestic Virginia' (*eine bürgerliche Virginia*), and in most literary histories until recent times, it has indeed been described as a *bürgerliches Trauerspiel* or domestic tragedy. But in the finished version, Lessing no longer described it as such. At the same time, he dropped the adjective *bürgerlich*,

[108] See C. Walker (1988) *passim*; also Dannenberg/Vollhardt 66–8.
[109] LM II, 449.
[110] Cf. Pütz 200; Jung-Hofmann 246–7; Albrecht (1997) 78.
[111] See L. to Gerstenberg, 25 February 1768.
[112] J. J. von Hagen in GEL: *EG*, ed. Bauer, 226.
[113] See, for example, Nicolai to L., 7 April 1772; D 406; GEL: *EG*, ed. Bauer, 709.

originally included in the subtitle of *Miss Sara Sampson*, from the new edition of that play in his collected tragedies of 1772—perhaps because he thought the term was no longer necessary or had outlived its usefulness, for it had meanwhile been applied to numerous mediocre productions with which he may not have wished to associate himself. But some of the early commentators also realized that the play was not a domestic tragedy in the usual sense of that term. The drama critic C. H. Schmid described it, in 1773, as belonging to 'an intermediate genre between the domestic and heroic tragedy',[114] and in his lectures of 1809–11, A. W. Schlegel declared: 'It is not really a domestic tragedy, but a courtly tragedy in a colloquial idiom.'[115] Ordinary spectators were often unsure how to react, as in their outbursts of laughter at inappropriate places. They expected Lessing's new tragedy to be in the same vein as *Miss Sara Sampson*, and were perplexed to find that they could not readily identify with the characters and that there were no scenes of tearful sentiment:[116] the initial signals that the prince is a man of feeling are soon negated as his ruthless adviser takes over.

Recent critics are much more aware of the play's complexity and critical tendency, both in their recognition of its affinities with comedy and in their greater awareness of its socio-political content. It creates distance and invites reflection, and its ending is disconcerting and disturbing rather than affecting and cathartic.[117] Its exposition is even longer than that of *Minna von Barnhelm*, for vital new information on Emilia's character and inner state is supplied as late as the last scene of Act IV and even in the final scenes.[118] To a limited extent, it conforms to the tragic theory of the *Hamburg Dramaturgy*, especially in its objective depiction of reality: the unities are broadly adhered to, a rigorous causal sequence is presented, the characters (apart from Marinelli) are neither wholly good nor wholly bad, and they are driven for the most part by their passions. A convincing illusion of reality is thereby created, at least until the final scenes.

But as for the emotional effect which the drama is supposed to produce, *Emilia Galotti*, like so many of Lessing's dramas, does not conform to his dramatic theory. Neither the play itself nor the reactions of audiences from Lessing's time to the present suggests that pity and fear are the main emotions evoked, or that a morally edifying catharsis takes place.[119] On the contrary, puzzlement, shock, and dismay are more typical reactions, along with a feeling that the outcome could, and should, have been other than it is.[120] But if we ask why this is so, we cannot escape the conclusion that the causes of the tragedy are ultimately to be found not in the psychology of the characters concerned, but—as in the original story of Virginia—in the nature of the society they live in. What we see is a conflict between two irreconcilable groups and ideologies, each of which is internally divided.[121] The two parties, the Galottis on the one hand and the prince and his

[114] GEL: *EG*, ed. Bauer, 536. [115] GEL: *EG*. Eräuterungen und Dokumente, ed. Müller, 74.
[116] See Schulte-Sasse 66–7; Grimm (1977) 182.
[117] For example, Barner (1983) 100; Werner (1984b) 144.
[118] See Nolte 232; R. Meyer (1973) 342.
[119] Cf. Nolte 221 and 226; Barner et al. (1987) 220. [120] See Lamport (1981b) 189.
[121] See Eibl (1977) 160–1; Sasse (1988) 181; Werner (1984b) 144.

circle on the other, can function satisfactorily together only by keeping their interaction to a minimum.

A common misunderstanding, especially in the 1960s and 1970s when Marxist models of society were widely accepted, was to interpret the difference between the two groups as one of class, namely the middle class or bourgeoisie on the one hand and the aristocracy on the other. It is now generally agreed, however, that the Galottis come from the minor rural nobility.[122] Odoardo is a landowner who publicly opposed the prince's territorial ambitions, which would be unthinkable if he were a commoner; and if Lessing had wished to present him as the latter, he would have identified him clearly as such in order to counteract the natural assumption of his audiences that he must be a nobleman. The crucial distinctions in this play are not those of class, but those of ruler and subjects, public and private spheres, and above all court and nuclear family with their mutually incompatible values.[123]

The values of the Galotti family, in keeping with their rural background, are conservative, Christian, and patriarchal.[124] Odoardo in particular has agreed only with reluctance to his wife Claudia residing for a time in Guastalla, the capital of the prince's small domain, in order to introduce their daughter to the fashionable world associated with the court, which Odoardo regards as morally degenerate. Claudia's strategy appears to have paid off, for Emilia has recently met and become engaged to Count Appiani, a member of the higher aristocracy who shares Odoardo's independent spirit and aversion to court society. Caught between her father's disapproval of the court and her mother's attraction to it, Emilia becomes an unwitting accessory to the prince's designs when, at her mother's insistence, she fails to inform her father of the prince's amorous attentions and thereby denies him the opportunity to avert the disaster. Thus the family's internal tensions contribute directly to its undoing.

The positive counterpart to the courtly values which Odoardo and Appiani reject is not the sentimental domesticity of the emergent middle class, but the much older ideal of patriarchal autonomy and rural simplicity to which both men plan shortly to return (significantly, Appiani comes from the alpine valleys). Though kept alive since Renaissance times by the tradition of court criticism (*Hofkritik*) as expounded by Antonio de Guevara and others[125]—Lessing had reviewed Guevara's work in 1751—and powerfully reformulated by Rousseau, this ancient topos goes back to the Stoic conception of natural living. It is a regular feature of bucolic verse from Horace to Haller and of the nostalgic republicanism of the eighteenth century.

Odoardo's moral rigorism, that 'stern' or 'rugged virtue' of which his wife complains, is too extreme and uncompromising to qualify as an embodiment of Lessing's own ideal of parental authority.[126] Already in his earliest plan for the play, Lessing had described him as a father 'who values her [his daughter's] virtue more

[122] See, for example, Eibl (1977) 150; Lützeler 107; Werner/Lerchner 41–2; Barner et al. (1987) 207; Mauser (1990)194; Sanna 73–4.

[123] Cf. Lützeler 116; Barner et al. (1987) 207.

[124] See Jung-Hofmann 244.

[125] See Kiesel 220–33; LM IV, 347–8.

[126] See Guthke (2006) 95–6.

than her life'[127]—an attitude radically opposed to that of the benevolent Sir William in *Miss Sara Sampson*, of which Lessing undoubtedly approved. Odoardo's puritanical principles, and the fact that he seems more anxious to visit his future son-in-law than to lend his daughter his support on the morning of her wedding,[128] betray a lack of concern for her welfare; this helps to explain why she is unable to cope with a threat which her mother dare not allow her to mention to him. Odoardo's oppressive authority, no less than Claudia's vanity, has led to a disastrous breakdown in communication within the family.[129] But to present Emilia as a victim of the male power struggle who is wrongfully denied the right of free self-determination[130] is to apply anachronistic criteria to the eighteenth-century context. To be sure, Emilia is unjustly treated and let down by both her parents. But Lessing held no brief for the emancipation of unmarried girls, for it was with specific reference to Emilia that he told his brother: 'I know of no higher virtues in an unmarried girl than piety and obedience.'[131]

In contrast to the world of the Galottis, that of the court and its main representatives, the prince and Marinelli, is governed by very different principles. Lessing, who detested hierarchy and ceremonial of every kind, had no time for courts in general, declaring in the *Hamburg Dramaturgy* that 'the court is not exactly the place where a poet can study nature';[132] his antipathy even to the relatively liberal court of Brunswick was evident almost from the start. Initial appearances suggest that the regime at Guastalla, too, has liberal features: Hettore Gonzaga is aware of, and attempts to carry out, his official duties, declaring 'if we could help everyone, we would indeed be enviable', and he is strongly attracted to the simpler and more natural lifestyle of the girl with whom he has just fallen in love. He is also, however, an absolute ruler with the power of life and death, and the impatience with which he is willing to sign a death warrant without further scrutiny gives us an initial indication of just how dangerous this power might be if it were not exercised responsibly, as his conscientious adviser Camillo Rota clearly expects. But the brusqueness with which Rota is dismissed, and the prince's much closer relationship with the unscrupulous Marinelli—he at one point throws himself into Marinelli's arms[133]—soon leave us in no doubt that, at Guastalla, absolutism takes precedence over enlightenment: far from being the first servant of the state, Hettore Gonzaga does not hesitate to use the state's powers to realize his illicit desires.

Marinelli is a masterly exponent of the art of the possible. Whatever end the ruler chooses justifies whatever means instrumental reason can devise. The commercial metaphors which both the prince and Marinelli apply to those they propose to manipulate are especially revealing:[134] from buying the portrait of Emilia the prince readily switches to the idea of buying Emilia herself, and when it seems at first that her marriage cannot be prevented, Marinelli cynically observes: 'Goods that are unobtainable new can be bought secondhand: and such goods are not

[127] To Nicolai, 21 January 1758. [128] LM II, 396.
[129] See Eibl (1977) 152–3; Hillen *passim*. [130] See I. Stephan 16–17.
[131] To Karl Lessing, 10 February 1772. [132] LM X, 32.
[133] LM II, 389. [134] Cf. Durzak (1970b) 79–80.

infrequently all the cheaper.'[135] For all his sentimental reveries on Emilia's innocent beauty, two circumstances reveal the prince's true attitude towards women. In the first place, there is his former mistress Orsina, one of whose functions in the play is to show how rapidly he has become not just indifferent but openly contemptuous towards someone he admits he may genuinely have loved only a short time before. And secondly, when he hears that Emilia is about to be married, he casts on the floor the very portrait which, only moments earlier, he had gazed at with ecstasy.[136]

So far, we have encountered the prince as a man of considerable charm and amiability, a rococo hedonist of superficially good intentions but volatile passions. It is only when his wishes are crossed that we see the full extent of his moral deficiency. Not only does he give advance approval to whatever means Marinelli may employ to prevent Emilia from marrying; more seriously, after Appiani has been murdered, his initial shock soon gives way to guarded approval so long as the crime furthers his own ends and he cannot be publicly blamed for it: 'I, too, am not afraid of a little crime. Provided, my good friend, it is a discreet little crime, a salutary little crime.'[137] We witness here that inversion of the master-servant relationship which Hegel would later elucidate;[138] for Marinelli, not the prince, is now the dominant partner. But we should be wary of endorsing the view of some recent critics who, in our more tolerant age, present the prince as Marinelli's unfortunate victim.[139] It was, after all, the prince who chose Marinelli as his chief adviser in the first place, and who fully approves of Marinelli's tactics so long as they achieve the desired result. But the final verdict on the prince's moral character is not passed until the last scene of the play, when Odoardo forces him into the role of a judge who is himself guilty, and the prince, far from acknowledging his guilt, admits only to human weakness and shifts the blame to Marinelli, banishing him—one suspects only temporarily—as a scapegoat.

Thus, although Lessing twice claimed that, in omitting the revolution which concluded the story of Virginia, he had deprived the play of all political significance,[140] his words cannot be taken at face value. On the second occasion at least, they probably represent wishful thinking, for he was plainly apprehensive that the play might not get past the censor. Only a month before its first performance, he had secured exemption from censorship for his writings as librarian, but his own literary productions still had to be officially approved before publication.[141] When he sent the duke proof copies of the first three acts and part of the fourth for his approval, it suited his purpose very well that the politically sensitive final scenes had not yet been printed; he also made sure to stress that the play was merely a modernized Virginia, and that the performance could still be cancelled if the duke found it unsuitable.[142] Soon afterwards, he took care to inform the crown prince that much of the play had been written several years before (that is, before Lessing

[135] LM II, 385 and 390. [136] Cf. Ryder 325. [137] LM II, 390 and 423–4.
[138] Hegel III, 145–55. [139] See, for example, Schenkel 175; Ter-Nedden 188–9; Stauf 134–45.
[140] L. to Nicolai, 21 January 1758; L. to Karl Lessing, 1 March 1772.
[141] See Stickler 108. [142] L. to Duke Karl, early March 1772.

came to Brunswick).[143] He must, however, have known by this time that, even if the revolution were omitted, the theme could not be divorced from politics. For the Virginia story, to which Emilia herself alludes in the penultimate scene, was familiar to everyone, and the omission of the revolution in Lessing's version draws attention to it by its very absence. And although the prince tries at first to distinguish between his public duties and private inclinations, he is in person the chief legislator, chief executive, and head of the judiciary within his realm, and he cannot step out of the office he embodies: in short, he is the state, and all of his actions carry the state's authority with them.

It should also be remembered that the play contains numerous political comments, explicit as well as implicit, as when Appiani declares: 'Our ruler is not exactly a ruler one chooses for oneself', or when Odoardo reminds us that the prince is above the law, but not above the reach of those who disregard the law.[144] The most extreme criticisms of the prince are reserved, however, for Orsina, whose exclamation 'The prince is a murderer!' and promise to denounce him next day on the marketplace must have electrified audiences in Germany's minor principalities; and even if her motives are tainted by her desire for revenge, there is no denying the truth of her accusation. The prince, of course, is not and cannot be brought to justice; but the very fact that justice is denied and the play has an open ending underlines the inadequacy of a system which permits such grave abuses.

In the light of such evidence as the foregoing, few critics are now prepared to deny the play's fundamental political tendency, its criticism of the evils to which courtly absolutism can so easily lead.[145] But it is still routinely maintained that Lessing's contemporaries were in general unaware of this tendency, and that it remained largely unnoticed until after the French Revolution.[146] It is indeed the case that, during Lessing's lifetime, political issues were rarely discussed by literary critics in Germany, especially if they involved criticism of existing forms of government; the discussion of *Emilia Galotti* was no exception, inasmuch as it concentrated chiefly on formal and stylistic matters. But given these circumstances, it is astonishing how many commentators in the 1770s and 1780s do explicitly draw attention to the play's political tendency, publicly as well as in private letters. On at least four or five occasions, critics publicly indicate that the play contains a lesson for princes,[147] and Herder writes to the prince of Holstein-Gottorp that the play ought to be performed every Friday at all courts and residences.[148] At least three other publications speak of the play's 'political aim' or describe it as a satire on courts or princes,[149] and a further three individuals speak in private letters of the

[143] See L. to Ebert, 16 March 1772. [144] LM II, 407 and 441; cf. Scherpe 266–7.

[145] Ter-Nedden (166, 172, 188, 210, 232) is one of the few exceptions.

[146] See, for example, Rüskamp 332; Werner (1984b) 137–8; Barner et al. (1987) 363; GEL: *EG*, ed. Bauer, 198–9.

[147] For example, Ramler in GEL: ed. Bauer, 436 (1772); C. H. Schmid, ibid. 530 (1773); A. G. Meissner, ibid. 619–20 (1777); K. E. Schubert, ibid. 639–40 (1777); C. H. Schmid in Dvoretzky (1971–72) I, 59 (1785).

[148] In GEL: *EG*, ed. Bauer, 389 (1772).

[149] Ibid. 443 (1772); 681 (1779); A. von Klein, ibid. 713–14 (1781).

play's 'anti-despotic' tendency or marvel at Lessing's boldness in presenting such a work before courtly audiences.[150] J. J. Reiske's comment in a letter to Ebert is a good example:

> But really, between ourselves, Emilia Galotti leads me to think that our Lessing is sailing too close to the wind. Anyone who lives at court and depends on the court must choose less sensitive themes. The moral was preached much too loudly; and the ears of the powerful are always too delicate for them to tolerate such penetrating notes, and notes in a major key.

One of the most interesting reactions is that of Prince August of Gotha, brother of the reigning duke of that principality, who disapproved of the play not, as some suggested,[151] because he saw it as a critique of people like himself or his relatives. As his recently discovered marginalia to the text show, this liberal-minded prince's viewpoint was that of enlightened absolutism, and he found the gross misrule depicted in the play repugnant.[152] And although a rumour which circulated in Brunswick, when the play was first performed, to the effect that the character of Orsina was modelled on the crown prince's mistress Antonia de Branconi,[153] was patently absurd—this well-liked woman remained the prince's mistress for a further five years—it does at least suggest that some members of the public suspected the play of criticizing existing authority. It is also worth remembering that *Emilia Galotti* became a model for the frequent attacks on despotism in Storm and Stress drama.[154] This aspect is prominent not only in Schiller's *Intrigue and Love* (*Kabale und Liebe*) of 1784 but also in A. M. Sprickmann's *Eulalia* of 1777: in Sprickmann's tragedy, which is closely modelled on Lessing's play, the action is transposed from Italy to Germany and a Frenchman is given the role equivalent to that of Lessing's Marinelli.

Although political interpretations of *Emilia Galotti* after 1789, such as that of Herder in 1794, are often more detailed and specific,[155] they add little of substance to the equivalent but briefer comments of the previous two decades. All of these confirm that many people correctly discerned a hostility to courts and distrust of the absolutist state which is already evident in Lessing's bitter remarks on Prussia in the late 1760s and again, in more muted form, in his Masonic dialogues of the later 1770s. These sentiments were also very much in his mind during his early years in Wolfenbüttel.

One of the most obvious disparities between *Emilia Galotti* and Lessing's theory of tragedy as outlined in the *Hamburg Dramaturgy* is the absence of any kind of poetic justice or indication that a benevolent providence is ultimately in control. In this respect, the play is the exception among Lessing's major dramas, for all the others, including *Miss Sara Sampson*, leave us with the reassuring impression that all is ultimately for the best. There are, it is true, a number of references to a higher agency,

[150] Nicolai to L., 7 April 1772; Caroline Flachsland to Herder, June 1772 in Dvoretzky (1971–72) I, 106; Reiske to Ebert, 19 February 1773 in H. Schneider (1951) 122.
[151] GEL: *EG*, ed. Bauer, 198. [152] See Unger 14 and 22–3.
[153] F. L. W. Meyer in GEL: *EG*, ed. Bauer, 178–9. [154] See Guthke (2006) 99 and 102–3.
[155] For example Herder SWS XVII, 182–6; Goethe HA IX, 569.

above all when Orsina denies that there is any such thing as chance or coincidence (*Zufall*),[156] echoing Lessing's own Leibnizian belief that all events have their sufficient reason and are ultimately grounded in a providential plan. But since we know that Orsina's statement is based on a misunderstanding, for she still believes that she is destined to be reunited with the prince, her words are unwittingly ironic and radically ambiguous. Like other, more obviously Christian, references of this kind, such as Odoardo's appeal to the Day of Judgement in the final scene, they do not help to resolve the difficulties posed by the action itself, whose justification remains as opaque as before. It is true that Leibniz, at the end of his *Theodicy*, cites the story of Sextus, the violator of Lucretia, as evidence that even that tale of horror and crime is compatible with the best of possible worlds.[157] But whereas we can appreciate that the rape of Lucretia had a positive result in the founding of the Roman republic, Lessing has deprived the story of Virginia of its positive sequel, namely the overthrow of Appius and the Decemviri; and to accept Odoardo's assumption, just before he kills his daughter, that he is obeying God's will in what follows requires a counter-rational act of faith on our part, at variance with everything Lessing says in other contexts on the subject of providence. We are left with the fact that the play ends with what has been described as a 'victory of guilt over innocence'.[158]

In its bleak and pessimistic vision, *Emilia Galotti* occupies a unique place in Lessing's works. In a society that is unmistakably that of his own age, communication between rulers and ruled has broken down. The prince's position and split morality deny him access to the simpler life he admires in those outside his courtly circle, and the quest of Odoardo and Appiani to escape from all that the prince and his court represent is doomed to failure. The power of evil appears invincible, and virtue, so often triumphant in Lessing's dramas, is in this case internally fractured and unequal to the challenges it faces. No hope of moral improvement, of social and political progress, is left to console us, and no character in the play can be said without qualification to represent Lessing's more positive convictions. The final stage direction describes the prince's 'horror and despair' (*Entsetzen und Verzweiflung*), and Lessing's contemporaries speak of the shock (*Erschütterung*)[159] and terror (*Schrecken*)[160] they experienced at early performances. All of this is at variance not only with Lessing's tragic theory, but also with that faith in enlightenment which underpins nearly all of his works.

In all of these respects, this unsettling drama reflects the circumstances in which it was written. It was reluctantly undertaken at a time when Lessing was thoroughly disillusioned with the theatre, and completed under extreme pressure to meet a deadline imposed by others. It was completed in Brunswick during and immediately after the New Year festivities at court, which Lessing was obliged to attend and which invariably left him depressed and irascible.[161] Eva König, to

[156] LM II, 428. [157] Leibniz II/2, 266–9 (*Théodicée* III, §§416–17); Fick (1993) 139–40.
[158] See Hettner II, 320.
[159] For example, Moses Wessely and J. A. Ebert in B VII, 866–7 and 878.
[160] For example, Ramler in B VII, 884 and Herder SWS XVII, 186.
[161] Cf. L. to Eva König, 9 January 1772 and 8 January 1773; L. to Eschenburg, 4 January 1774; L. to Karl Lessing, 14 January 1775.

whom he had become engaged a few months before, called on him briefly towards the end of February on her way to Vienna and an uncertain future, adding to that depression with which, for a number of reasons, he was now regularly afflicted. It is true that, some years later, he completed the serenely optimistic *Nathan the Wise* under even more depressing circumstances; but by that time, he had turned away from the dismal present and found solace in his hopes for the long-term future of humanity. *Emilia Galotti* is a product of personal crisis, and of what Lessing had begun to perceive as the crisis of his age.[162] Unheroic, inconclusive, and open-ended, its dislocated consciousness foreshadows that of the present era.

In keeping with this background, it is a play of multiple ambiguities, loose ends and discrepancies, of riven and inconsistent characters, rigorous causality and perplexing coincidences, lucid dialogue and far from lucid psychology. It has generated a host of mutually incompatible interpretations, and is likely to continue to do so. But their value is inversely proportional to the degree of certainty and closure to which they aspire, for the play's peculiar fascination lies in its ability to generate questions without providing sufficient evidence for conclusive answers. In this respect, it looks forward to the rhetorical strategies of Lessing's later years, when he puts forward various apparent certainties and simultaneously calls them into question.

After hectic rehearsals at the court theatre in Brunswick, at which Lessing himself assisted, the play was at last performed on 13 March 1772 in celebration of the Duchess Philippine Charlotte's birthday. For unknown reasons, the duchess herself was not present, and few members of the court attended, although the crown prince attended incognito and followed the text with the help of an advance copy.[163] Pleading toothache and cold weather, Lessing remained in Wolfenbüttel.[164] These reasons, rather than any fear of an adverse reception, were almost certainly genuine, and he had in any case probably seen enough at rehearsals to predict how the performance would turn out. To judge from Ebert's report next day, the reception was ecstatic,[165] and nine further performances followed in Brunswick in the course of the year. That Lessing attended none of them was probably due to his aversion to public ovations,[166] but also to his stated conviction that he was still too close to the play to assess it critically and learn from so doing.[167] He did eventually see it in Vienna in 1775 and in a new production at Brunswick in 1779.

The first Berlin performance, by Koch's company and with advice from Karl Lessing, took place on 6 April 1772 to general acclaim.[168] Vienna followed with three successive performances on 4 to 6 July, after which the play became an annual fixture, on some occasions with an overture and musical intermezzos by Haydn and other composers.[169] Ekhof was greatly applauded as Odoardo in the Weimar

[162] Cf. Berthold Auerbach (1861) in Steinmetz (ed.) (1969) 369.
[163] Mauser (1990) 179; Hartmann 219.
[164] See L. to Ebert, 16 March 1772; to Eva König, 15 March 1772.
[165] Ebert to L., 14 March 1772. [166] LM IX, 336–7.
[167] To Karl Lessing, 22 April 1772.
[168] See U. Schulz 46; Nicolai to L., 7 April 1772; Karl Lessing to L., 15 February and 11 April 1772.
[169] See GEL: *EG*, ed. Bauer, 267–70 and 724.

production of 30 December and on various later occasions.[170] The play was performed approximately thirty-five times in eleven different German theatres during 1772, and around 240 times in Germany by the time of Lessing's death in 1781,[171] with further productions as far afield as Warsaw, St Petersburg, Amsterdam, Copenhagen, and Basel.[172] Schoolboys performed a Latin version, which was also published, in 1778 at the grammar school in Celle,[173] and an English version was performed on three occasions at Drury Lane in London in 1794, with Sarah Siddons in the role of Orsina.[174]

The play was no less successful in print. Voss issued several editions in the 1770s, including that in Lessing's collected tragedies, and at least eight pirated editions appeared by 1780.[175] Danish and Dutch translations were published during the same period, and the play was subsequently translated into numerous other languages, including Chinese, Finnish, Georgian, Greek, Hebrew, Hungarian, and Japanese.[176] The early reviews in Germany, mostly by professional critics, were overwhelmingly positive,[177] and the main criticisms came later, notably from writers such as Jacob Mauvillon and Anton von Klein, both of whom favoured heroic and classicistic models.[178] After the play's novelty wore off, the general public was on the whole less enthusiastic, for many were disappointed at the lack of that tearful sentiment they had come to expect.[179]

This supposed deficiency did not, however, prejudice the play's reception in subsequent German drama.[180] It had a greater influence on dramas of the Storm and Stress than any other single play, and its echoes can be detected in almost every play of note—not to mention a host of lesser productions—in the 1770s and early 1780s. Goethe's *Clavigo*, all of Schiller's first four plays, Leisewitz's *Julius von Tarent*, Wagner's *The Infanticide*, and many others bear its stamp, whether in language, characterization, situation, motifs, or other particulars,[181] and a series of copies and sequels, from Sprickmann's *Eulalia* to Ramdohr's *Odoardo and his Daughter* (1779), the anonymous *Bianka. A Pendant to Emilia Galotti* (1802) and Seckendorff's *Orsina* (1815), continued to appear for several decades.[182] Even Bodmer felt obliged to produce his customary parody, *Odoardo Galotti, Father of Emilia* (1778), in which the surviving characters indulge in mutual recriminations after Emilia's death.[183]

In the longer term, the unease which many early observers felt at the play's lack of spontaneous expression, its disputatious dialogue, its linear causality, and the stilted metaphors and literary references of its final scenes became permanent features of its reception—especially after Friedrich Schlegel famously described it as 'unquestionably a great example of dramatic algebra' and 'a purely intellectual

[170] Ibid. 273–4 and 726. [171] Ibid. 243 and 285. [172] Ibid. 718–65.
[173] Ibid. 275. [174] See Kenwood 203. [175] GEL: *EG*, ed. Bauer, 90–119.
[176] See Seifert (L.-Bibliographie) 254–343. [177] GEL: *EG*, ed.Bauer, 210–15.
[178] Ibid. 219–22 and 237–41. [179] B VII, 867.
[180] See Dvoretzky (1963) 43; B VII, 859. [181] Cf. E. Schmidt II, 45–7.
[182] GEL: *EG*, ed. Bauer, 70–1; GEL: *EG*. Erläuterungen und Dokumente, ed. Müller, 41.
[183] GEL: *EG*, ed. Bauer, 622–4; Dvoretzky (1963) 30; GEL: *EG*. Erläuterungen und Dokumente, ed. Müller, 30.

masterpiece, produced by sweat and toil'.[184] All of these features, more at home in comedy than in tragedy, must indeed be considered blemishes in a drama which aims to create a maximum illusion of reality. But these blemishes are more obvious to the critical analyst than to the theatregoer, and since total illusion has become the monopoly of feature films and television, we no longer assess stage drama—least of all that of earlier ages—by the accuracy with which it reproduces familiar reality. We may still find it difficult to accept Lessing's all-too-obvious adjustments to the psychology of the heroine and her father as he struggles, in the last two acts, to remotivate the anachronistic catastrophe. But the social and political tensions of *Emilia Galotti*, and the simultaneous failure of enlightened and older Christian values to avert disaster, can still engage and retain our attention.

[184] See Steinmetz (ed.) (1969) 182.

17

Philosophy and Theology 1770–1776; Marriage and Family Life; the Mannheim Theatre; Bereavement: 1776–1778

The frustrations and setbacks which Lessing experienced towards the end of his stay in Hamburg and during his first years in Wolfenbüttel had profound effects on his state of mind, initiating what might nowadays be described as a mid-life crisis. The failure of the Hamburg theatre and of his publishing partnership with Bode, his fortieth birthday and the onset of middle age, his mounting debts, the death of his father in 1770, the indefinite postponement of his marriage plans in 1771, his isolation and loneliness in Wolfenbüttel, and above all the loss of his status as an independent writer—all this deeply disturbed him and led him to re-examine his fundamental aims and convictions. Remarkably, his metaphysical optimism survived and even intensified in the writings of his final years; but anger and depression were now a regular feature of his daily existence.

After his move to Wolfenbüttel, his way of living remained outwardly unchanged. He continued, as before, to live for the moment, responding to circumstances rather than actively shaping them, obeying his alternate impulses to solitary study and social engagement, with periodic cravings for complete change followed by extended absences from Wolfenbüttel. But although he made no attempt to alter this rhythm, he did become more conscious of it and sought to rationalize and exploit its underlying dynamics. For example, he justified his outbursts of anger as an antidote to depression,[1] and declared of his repeated failure to see projects through:[2]

> Frequent changes of occupation are the one thing I have left to sustain me. This means, of course, that much is begun and little finished. But what harm is there in this? Even if I finished nothing more in my life, or indeed had never finished anything at all, would not the effect be just the same?

In keeping with such insights, he did not subscribe to the ideal of *Bildung*, the cultivation of the well-rounded, fully developed personality as advocated by Winckelmann and endorsed by nearly all of the leading figures of the German classical era such as Wieland, Herder, Goethe, Schiller, Moritz, and Wilhelm von

[1] L. to Eva König, 1 December 1773; also D 465.
[2] L. to Karl Lessing, 2 February 1774.

Humboldt.[3] Instead, he became ever more convinced that the purpose of life, and indeed of all constructive activity, lies not in any conclusive achievement or personal fulfilment, but rather in the process of activity itself. Such, he believed, are the imponderables in human existence that conscious plans count for little. We must follow our positive impulses and hope for the best, sustained not by personal ambition but by faith in an inscrutable but ultimately beneficent providence.

He did not, of course, cease to believe in some form of individual and collective progress. But the progress he believed in was not towards a finite or attainable end; it was rather a continuous movement towards an absolute truth and perfection to which we can never do more than approximate. This conviction, as will shortly be seen, now became a conscious part of his intellectual equipment, and it is largely responsible for the openness and ever-changing perspectives of his later writings on philosophical and religious themes.

Apart from these fundamental attitudes—and indeed partly because of them—Lessing's opinions on specific issues in his later years are often hard to identify. It is remarkable how often he defines himself and his role in society in negative terms: 'I am neither an actor nor a poet'; 'I am an amateur in theology and not a theologian'; 'I am not learned—I have never had any intention of becoming learned';[4] or, in metaphorical terms, 'I am really only a windmill, and not a giant. I stand there in my place, well outside the village, alone on a sandhill, and come to no one, and help no one, and accept help from no one.'[5] Perhaps the only occasion on which he defines his own role positively in later life—again by means of a metaphor—is when he tells Goeze, who had attacked him for publishing the *Fragments* of Reimarus, that his work as a librarian is like that of a botanist, whose task is to inform the public of every new discovery, irrespective of whether a given plant is useful or harmful; for 'useful and harmful are just as relative concepts as large and small'.[6] That is, his preferred role in society is now that of a mediator—between conflicting parties, or between such parties and the general public—and his mediation can only be effective if he remains neutral and does not commit himself exclusively to any of the parties concerned.

If, however, one of the parties in question threatens to become dominant and overwhelm the opposition, Lessing feels obliged, as he always had done, to defend the weaker party; for as his old friend Weisse once said of him: 'The spirit of contradiction is so characteristic of him that he would be the first to oppose his own opinions as soon as his paradoxical assertions met with general acceptance.'[7] For general acceptance can all too readily harden into prejudice or dogma, and once such prejudices become institutionalized, they take on a sectarian character. As he tells his brother:[8]

> I hate from the bottom of my heart all those who seek to establish sects. For it is not error, but sectarian error—or even sectarian truth—that creates human misfortune, or would do so if truth ever sought to establish a sect.

[3] For more details see Nisbet (2005a) 13–14. [4] LM X, 209; XIII, 109; XVI, 535.
[5] LM X, 429; cf. Strohschneider-Kohrs (1999c) *passim*. [6] LM XIII, 97.
[7] A (2003) 138. [8] To Karl Lessing, 30 April 1774.

It must at the same time be remembered that, in attacking dogmatic positions, Lessing's aim is not to iron out differences of opinion and promote ideological uniformity. On the contrary, his aim is to promote tolerance and respect for diversity of opinion.

With such considerations in mind, he is now more anxious than ever before to avoid committing himself to any fixed or dogmatic position,[9] for to do so would destroy the basic neutrality and freedom of movement that his position as mediator requires. His adoption of this role implies, of course, that he expects, and even seeks to provoke, ideological conflict, and there can be little doubt that, soon after he left Hamburg, he was inwardly preparing himself for the major controversy which would inevitably follow his planned publication of the *Fragments* of Reimarus. His attempt to preserve his neutrality, together with his belief in the relativity of all human insights, helps to explain the elusiveness, and even inconsistency, of his own ideological pronouncements. But since he is also committed to defending threatened or marginalized opinions, his neutrality is necessarily precarious, and he is for ever at risk of being marginalized himself—as indeed eventually happened.

But however elusive his own opinions on specific issues may be, there is nothing obscure or ambiguous about the moral, and by extension political, principles which underpin all his utterances on religious and philosophical topics throughout the 1770s. Nor are they new to this period. They are fundamental principles of the Enlightenment which he had upheld since his early years, and they figure more centrally in his later writings only because these are predominantly controversial in character and the controversies in question are all in some way concerned with freedom of expression and its limits. He therefore repeatedly defends the rights of the individual to freedom of thought, speech, publication, and religious or ideological allegiance; and like Kant in the following decade, he opposes all who seek to hold others in thraldom or tutelage. The only limit he recognizes to such rights is the duty to respect the same rights in others.

Lessing's combative stance in his later years is likewise nothing new. But whereas most of his earlier controversies related to antiquarian and literary issues, or (as in his 'vindications') to the defence of figures of the past, the issues on which he now takes his stand—above all, on the nature of religious truth and the limits of religious tolerance—are much more immediate and contentious. In this respect, his role in Germany is not unlike that of Voltaire in France; but unlike Voltaire, he received no public accolades for his efforts and did not live to see the triumph of his cause.

Lessing's preoccupation with religion dates from his receipt of the clandestine manuscript of Reimarus towards the end of his stay in Hamburg. The topical relevance of religious differences was also brought home to him by two incidents at around the same time, namely the dispute between Goeze and Alberti (on which he drafted a mock sermon, as already mentioned, in favour of the beleaguered Goeze), and more forcefully by an attack on his old friend Moses Mendelssohn.

[9] Cf. Kröger 102.

The Swiss clergyman Johann Kaspar Lavater, evangelical visionary and charismatic preacher, announced in his *Prospects of Eternity* (*Aussichten in die Ewigkeit*, 1768–72) that the millennial age was at hand, to be ushered in by a general conversion of the Jews. Lavater, who annoyed numerous people, including Goethe, by his proselytizing, proposed to hasten this process by making a Christian out of Mendelssohn, who had received him in a friendly manner some years before on his visits to Berlin. To this end, he translated into German extracts from the *Palingénésie philosophique* of his French-speaking compatriot, the naturalist and philosopher Charles Bonnet, and published them under the title *A Philosophical Investigation of the Proofs of Christianity* (1769); he dedicated the work to Mendelssohn, whom he challenged in his preface either to refute Bonnet's arguments or convert to Christianity.[10]

Lessing, who described Lavater as 'a fanatic [*Schwärmer*], as worthy of the madhouse as any',[11] learned at first hand of his friend's embarrassment when Mendelssohn visited Brunswick in October 1770 at the crown prince's invitation. He was doubtless informed that, after his visits to Mendelssohn in 1763, Lavater had spent several months with the liberal theologian Johann Joachim Spalding, who, like Johann Gottlieb Töllner and other Prussian neologists, hoped to convert the Jews to his own brand of Christianity, which discarded or glossed over the Trinity and other revealed doctrines in order to widen its appeal.[12] Such practices, which Lessing had condemned ten years before as intellectually dishonest when he encountered them in the writings of J. A. Cramer, can only have increased his hostility to the neologists, whose theology of compromise he would attack on several occasions during the following years.

Mendelssohn, whose tact and diplomacy contrasted starkly with Lavater's importunities, gained widespread public sympathy. In his subsequent exchanges with Lavater, he appealed for mutual tolerance, pointing out that the Jews did not seek to make converts and that Bonnet's 'proofs' of Christianity on the strength of its miracles and supernatural accreditation could be used to support almost any other religion.[13] But he refrained from publishing his draft of a hard-hitting rebuttal,[14] and privately explained to the crown prince of Brunswick (whose sympathetic interest confirms his enlightened attitudes) that he found Christianity less reasonable than Judaism because so many of its mysteries are rationally incomprehensible.[15]

Lavater's assault on Mendelssohn made a deep impression on Lessing, who knew that his friend was greatly disturbed and that his health was suffering. This no doubt strengthened his resolve to publish Reimarus' radical critique of revelation, the manuscript of which he gave to Mendelssohn on his departure for Berlin with the request that he might advise him on its possible publication. When Lavater committed a further indiscretion in a renewed response to Mendelssohn, Lessing urged his friend to reply in the bluntest possible terms, adding:[16]

[10] See Mendelssohn JA VII, 3; cf. Altmann (1973) 206–9. [11] To Nicolai, 2 January 1770.
[12] See Mendelssohn JA VII, xi and xiv–xv; also Wieckenberg (1979) 72 and G VII, 849–50.
[13] Mendelssohn JA VII, 7–17. [14] Ibid. 67–107.
[15] Ibid. 300–5. [16] To Mendelssohn, 9 January 1771.

> You alone are able and permitted to speak and write thus on this matter, and are therefore infinitely more fortunate than other honest people who can only seek to demolish this most execrable edifice of nonsense under the pretext of giving it new foundations.

It is unlikely that the 'most execrable edifice' to which Lessing refers denotes either Lutheran orthodoxy or Christianity as a whole;[17] it probably denotes the theology of Lavater, Bonnet, and all those who claimed to have infallible proofs of their religion's supremacy. But the imagery of buildings, construction, and demolition which Lessing takes over from Mendelssohn (who had warned against digging up the foundations of an established religion to see if they were sound) would become a recurrent feature of Lessing's own religious polemics throughout the following years.[18]

In the same letter (of January 1771) to Mendelssohn from which the above quotation is taken, Lessing makes the often-quoted remark that he may in the past have discarded too many truths, or 'prejudices', some of which he is now minded to retrieve:[19]

> But I have feared for some time that, in discarding certain prejudices, I have discarded along with them rather too much that I shall have to retrieve. The only thing that has prevented me from retrieving some of it is the fear of gradually bringing the whole collection of rubbish back in again.

It is generally agreed that this remark must refer to some of the Christian doctrines which—as in the Breslau religious fragments—he had rejected in earlier years.[20] And since he proceeds at once to discuss the work of Reimarus, conceding that the latter may have at times gone too far in his critique of the Bible, it seems probable that he is now prepared to reconsider whether Christian revelation might not after all include insights which should not be dismissed out of hand. This is all the more likely since he had only recently published that essay on Berenger of Tours which he knew would please his father, and had been deeply affected by his father's death soon afterwards. It is at least certain that, in the two essays on Leibniz which he published in 1773, he sought to make rational sense of some revealed doctrines—in this case, the doctrines of eternal punishment and the Trinity.

All this is part of Lessing's fundamental shift of attitude and interests around the time of his move to Wolfenbüttel,[21] as he re-examined his own basic principles and turned his attention to fundamental questions of religion and philosophy. A crucial part of this process was his renewed preoccupation with Leibniz, whom he discussed at length with the young Karl Wilhelm Jerusalem during the latter's stay in Wolfenbüttel from May 1770 to September 1771. He further immersed himself in Leibniz's work during the following year and again in 1773, when it seemed likely that he might, like Leibniz before him, become official historian to the house of Brunswick. Only a few of his notes on Leibniz's life and works survive,[22] but is it clear that he was familiar with Louis Dutens' six-volume edition of 1768 and

[17] Cf. Altmann (1973) 248.
[18] See Mendelssohn JA VII, 13–14; also Göbel (1971) 198–202.
[19] To Mendelssohn, 9 January 1771.
[20] See Pons (1964) 241–2; Allison (1966) 82.
[21] See Strohschneider-Kohrs (1991) 6–7.
[22] LM XV, 512–22.

with the important *Nouveaux essais*, first published in 1765 by R. E. Raspe with a preface by Lessing's old teacher Kästner.

In his studies of Leibniz, Lessing found philosophical support for some of his current convictions, among them his growing belief, voiced on a number of occasions from 1769 onwards, that the search for truth is preferable to, and more invigorating than, its possession.[23] Leibniz similarly declares (in his *Nouveaux essais*) that 'the happiness of created beings [...] never consists in complete attainment, which would make them insensate and stupefied, but in continual and uninterrupted progress towards greater goods'.[24] More fundamentally, in the first of his two essays on Leibniz, Lessing explicitly praises the latter's recognition that, although absolute truth is for ever beyond our reach, an element of truth is nevertheless present in the most diverse philosophical and theological positions; for since each monad views the universe from a different perspective, each will form a different, and inevitably partial, image of the whole. As Lessing puts it:[25]

> In his quest for truth, Leibniz never took any notice of accepted opinions; but in the firm belief that no opinion can be accepted unless it is in a certain respect, or in a certain sense true, he was often so accommodating as to turn the opinion over and over until he was able to bring that certain respect to light, and to make that certain sense comprehensible [...]. He willingly set his own system aside, and tried to lead each individual along the path to truth on which he found him.

What Lessing recognized in Leibniz's perspectivism, which is itself the product of a long German tradition of religious pluralism inaugurated by Nicholas of Cusa in the fifteenth century, was a strategy which would do justice to the mobility and openness of his own thinking.[26] It would allow him to discover a measure of truth in both revelation and natural religion, in orthodox Christianity and in the anti-Christian criticism of Reimarus. In particular, his repeated insistence, during the religious controversies of the following years, that the 'inner truth' of religion is accessible to all, and that it manifests itself in pre-rational form through feeling but is in principle capable of rationalization,[27] recalls Leibniz's contention that 'every feeling is the perception of a truth, and [...] natural feeling is the perception of an innate truth, though very often a confused one, just like the impressions of the external senses'.[28] In short, Leibniz's perspectivism provides philosophical backing for Lessing's principle of tolerance: for whereas no single viewpoint can claim to embody absolute truth, each may claim a relative validity. To this extent, the later Lessing can be described as a relativist.

In the last year of his life, he again pays tribute to the openness he admires in Leibniz's way of thinking, and the terms he uses might equally well be applied to himself:[29]

[23] See, for example, LM X, 351; XII, 40 and 294; XIII, 23–4. [24] Leibniz III/1, 290–3.
[25] LM XI, 470.
[26] Cf. Allison (1966) 128–30; on Lessing's perspectivism/pluralism and its historical significance see Nisbet (2010) *passim*.
[27] For example, LM XII, 428; XIII, 99, 123, 127–8; XVI, 297; cf. Kondylis 602 and 605.
[28] Leibniz III/1, 63. [29] D 503.

> Leibniz's conceptions of truth were such that he could not bear to have too narrow limits imposed on it. Many of his assertions are a product of this way of thinking, and it is often very difficult, even with the keenest perception, to discover what he really means. It is for that very reason that I value him so highly—for this grand manner of thinking, and not for this or that opinion which he only appeared to have, or may have had in reality.

For the same reason, it is notoriously difficult, in interpreting Lessing's later writings on philosophy and religion, to determine 'what he really means' or what opinion he 'may have had in reality'. So anxious is he to avoid dogmatic closure that he would rather appear inconsistent, or even self-contradictory, than do anything which might impede the continuing process of debate and enquiry. He accordingly approves, in his commonplace book, the view expressed by some Talmudic scholars that mutually incompatible interpretations of the same passages of Scripture should be regarded as equally true, provided they do not contradict already established truths.[30] To this extent, Lessing's perspectival relativism has gone beyond the hermeneutics of his time, which typically assumes that every text or utterance must have a single 'true' meaning. (Herder's historical hermeneutics subverts this assumption from a different angle.) For Lessing perceived that no hermeneutics can yield more than subjective certainty, and said a few years later of contentious scriptural passages:[31]

> What are the right concepts to which they *should* give rise? Who is to decide this? Hermeneutics? Everyone has his own hermeneutics. Which of them is true? Are they all true? Or is none of them true? And is this thing, this wretched, irksome thing, to be the test of inner truth? Then what should be its *own* test?

In his systematic doubt, which eschews all systems and applies no less to his own pronouncements than to those of others, the later Lessing goes beyond Leibniz and even his early mentor Bayle, from whom he first learned to practise suspense of judgement. As Karl S. Guthke puts it, he comes to doubt not only the emperor's new clothes, but his own clothes as well.[32] Yet for all that, he was never a complete sceptic. Truth is in principle discoverable and capable of rational formulation, and even if absolute certainty lies for ever beyond our reach, it is at least possible to point to and follow the direction in which it lies.

To analyse the self-relativizing ingenuity and stylistic virtuosity of Lessing's later writings—Nietzsche would describe him as 'the most seductive of German authors with regard to prose exposition'[33]—would mean going far beyond his studies of Leibniz and his philosophical reflections of the early 1770s; these matters can best be discussed in connection with the works of his later years. For the moment, it is enough to look briefly at his two essays of 1773 on Leibniz and ask how far they reflect his developing views on religion and philosophy.

The essay 'Leibniz on Eternal Punishment' ('Leibnitz von den ewigen Strafen') appeared in January 1773 in the first volume of Lessing's periodical *On History and*

[30] LM XV, 353–4; cf. Niewöhner 23–5. [31] LM XIII, 131.
[32] Guthke (2003) 12. [33] Nietzsche I, 296.

Literature.[34] Its ostensible purpose was to make known an unpublished Latin preface by Leibniz, written to accompany his planned edition of a rare work by the Socinian heretic Ernst Soner, first published in 1654, in which Soner had rejected the orthodox Christian doctrine of the eternal punishment of the damned. In his short and elegant preface, Leibniz rejects Soner's argument and defends the orthodox doctrine on the grounds that all actions, including sins, have infinite consequences.[35]

Lessing's motive for publishing this preface along with a lengthy commentary of his own was not just antiquarian curiosity. In the first place, he was no friend of Socinianism, which he regarded as inconsistent, because its adherents denied that Christ was the son of God yet in most cases continued to worship him. In addition, he disagreed with those theologians, especially the German neologists, who rejected the doctrine of eternal punishment, along with the doctrine of original sin which underlay it, as incompatible with a loving God.[36] One such theologian, the Berlin preacher and philosopher Johann August Eberhard, had reiterated this objection in his *New Apology for Socrates*, the first volume of which appeared in 1772. Eberhard was a close friend of Nicolai and on friendly terms with Lessing himself, whom he had visited in Hamburg.[37] But Lessing took exception to his claim, in the newly published work, that Leibniz had privately (or esoterically) rejected the doctrine of eternal punishment as incompatible with his own philosophical optimism, but publicly (or exoterically) defended it—for example in his *Theodicy*—in order to make his system more widely acceptable.[38] This procedure, as Lessing realized, was in fact more characteristic of the neologists, who claimed to believe in revelation while rejecting most of its substance, than of Leibniz; and his chief aim in 'Leibniz on Eternal Punishment' is to defend Leibniz's integrity and his merits as a philosopher.

As already noted, Lessing praises Leibniz for his realization that all theological and philosophical doctrines contain a variable and relative element of truth. He also points out that, by the same logic, good and evil are likewise relative and variable, so that no human being can be either wholly good or wholly evil. And since the human soul is immortal and nothing is without infinite consequences in the causally determined universe, the following conclusion is justified:[39]

> if it is true that the best human being still has much that is evil and that the worst human being is not entirely without goodness, the consequences of evil must follow the former into heaven and the consequences of good must accompany the latter even into hell; each must retain his hell in heaven, or find his heaven in hell.

The effect of this argument, in conjunction with Leibniz's principle of continuity whereby all transitions in the universe are gradual, is to abolish the rigid distinctions between good and evil, salvation and damnation, heaven and hell, so that the

[34] LM XI, 461–87. [35] LM XI, 465–6; cf. Leibniz II/1, 428–9 and II/2, 40–1 (*Théodicée*).
[36] On this see Aner 270–85; also McManners 143 and 176–90.
[37] See also L. to Nicolai, 21 October 1768; also L. to Mendelssohn, 5 November 1768.
[38] LM XI, 469–70 and 473. [39] LM XI, 483.

meaning of all of these concepts becomes variable and relative. This lends further support to Lessing's belief in tolerance, because it implies that, in ethical as well as cognitive respects, human beings differ only in degree, but not in kind.

There can be no doubt that these arguments of Lessing and Leibniz are formally compatible with the doctrine of eternal punishment—but only at the price of turning heaven and hell into states of mind and omitting all mention of original sin and divine grace. They are also logically more coherent than that of Eberhard, who, despite his rejection of eternal punishment, nevertheless remains closer in spirit to Christian thinking in affirming the objective existence of hell. Since Nicolai, Mendelssohn, and Lessing's brother Karl all agreed with the neologists in rejecting the doctrine of eternal punishment, they disapproved of Lessing's attack on Eberhard, seeing in it a further sign (as in his defence of Goeze against Alberti and his essay on Berenger) that he was taking sides with Lutheran orthodoxy against the progressive forces of neology.[40] (In keeping with this tendency, the hero of Nicolai's novel *Sebaldus Nothanker*, the first volume of which appeared in 1773, is a liberal clergyman persecuted by bigoted orthodoxy.) It is, of course, possible that, in preparation for the publication of Reimarus's *Fragments*, Lessing was seeking to demonstrate his orthodox credentials so as not to appear an ally or champion of Reimarus (who, incidentally, was vehemently opposed to the doctrine of eternal punishment).[41] But on some basic issues, especially in his desire to discover a rational sense in revealed doctrines instead of rejecting or tacitly abandoning most of them as the neologists did, Lessing was indeed closer to orthodoxy than to either Reimarus or the neologists. As he put it in a letter to his brother:[42]

> What have the orthodox got to do with me? I despise them just as much as you do; but I despise our new-fangled clergy even more, for they have far too little theology and not nearly enough philosophy. I am also convinced that, if we let these empty-heads flourish, they will in time be much more tyrannical than the orthodox ever were.

Lessing's second essay on Leibniz, published in the second volume of *On History and Literature* in October 1773, is entitled 'Andreas Wissowatius's Objections to the Holy Trinity' ('Des Andreas Wissowatius Einwürfe wider die Dreieinigkeit').[43] It consists of a series of propositions, set out in syllogistic form, by the Polish Socinian Andras Wiszowaty, purporting to demonstrate that Jesus Christ was not the son of God and that the doctrine of the Trinity is therefore without substance. Leibniz's replies of 1669, refuting each of Wiszowaty's propositions, are inserted at the appropriate points, creating the effect of a dialogue. Both texts are in Latin and are taken from manuscripts in the ducal library.[44]

Although Lessing maintains that only Leibniz's replies, which make little sense without the propositions of Wiszowaty to which they refer, have hitherto been published (in Dutens' edition of Leibniz's works), he was fully aware that both

[40] See Karl L. to L., 16 January 1773; Nicolai to L., 26 April and 13 August 1773.
[41] Reimarus I, 49–50.
[42] To Karl L., 8 April 1773; cf. L. to Karl L., 20 March 1777.
[43] LM XII, 70–99.
[44] German translation in B VII, 1133–55.

works had already appeared in print on more than one occasion. But as he told his old teacher Kästner,[45] he had his own reasons for feigning ignorance of this fact—presumably because his own edition gave him another opportunity to celebrate Leibniz and take issue with the neologists. He accordingly renews his attack on those (such as Eberhard) who had accused Leibniz of feigning orthodoxy in order to make his own philosophy more palatable, and praises Leibniz for arguing that the dogma of the Trinity, though free from internal contradiction and not contrary to reason, is a mystery which cannot be rationally demonstrated. Coming from one who had once attempted to do precisely that (in his early fragment *The Christianity of Reason*) and who would again attempt to do so some three years later (in *The Education of the Human Race*), this is an astonishing statement. But significantly, Lessing also points out that Leibniz was aware (in his *Theodicy*) of the possibility 'that one may hope that someone will, in time, discover a hitherto unknown solution' to this mystery.[46] He thereby leaves the way open for his own rationalization of the Trinity three years later, but is meanwhile more concerned, in his essay on Leibniz, to draw a sharp line between theology and philosophy, faith and reason—a line which he accuses the neologists of failing to respect.

Leibniz's attack on the Socinians provides Lessing with a model for his own attack on the neologists, whose aversion to the Trinity puts them in the same category as the seventeenth-century Socinians. He declares that, like Leibniz, he has more respect for those Socinians who took their criticism of the Trinity to its logical conclusion and became outright unitarians, than for those who denied the Trinity while continuing to worship Christ. And he adds for good measure that, once Christ's divinity is denied, there is more to be said for the Islamic faith than for what is left of Christianity, given that Mohammed made no statements which might suggest that he was himself of divine nature.[47]

As in his previous essay on Leibniz, Lessing again endorses Leibniz's support for Christian orthodoxy, and his Berlin friends and other readers once more concluded that his aim was to ingratiate himself with orthodox Lutheranism.[48] In his reply to Mendelssohn, he justifies his procedure by declaring that it is better to defend an unphilosophic cause philosophically (as Leibniz had done) than to discard or reform it in an unphilosophic manner.[49] And as his subsequent writings on religion confirm, he has in fact no objections to rational analysis of religion or to reformulating its central doctrines in rational terms. But that, in his opinion, is precisely what the neologists have failed to do: they have watered down their orthodox heritage and claimed dogmatic certainty for the incoherent mixture of revelation and natural religion they are left with.[50] In these circumstances, Lessing is in no doubt whose side he is on. In a revealing letter to his brother, he defines the relationship between orthodoxy and neology in an elaborate series of metaphors:[51] they are

[45] See LM XVIII, 91 n. 1; also G VII, 796–7.
[46] LM XII, 90; cf. Leibniz II/1, 200–5.
[47] LM XII, 94–5.
[48] See Mendelssohn and Nicolai to L., 1 February 1774; also B VII, 1097 and 1129–30.
[49] To Mendelssohn, 1 May 1774.
[50] On this see Aner 24 and 188.
[51] To Karl L., 2 February 1774.

respectively like dirty water and liquid manure; or (in those architectural metaphors of which Lessing is so fond) theology and philosophy are like two rooms which lose their separate usefulness when the wall between them is torn down; or the neologists are like a neighbour whose house (i.e. orthodoxy) is collapsing, and instead of demolishing it and rebuilding, the neighbour attempts to shore it up and underpin it, thereby putting the adjoining house (i.e. philosophy) at equal risk. In other words, the neologists are inadequate both as theologians (for retaining the concept of revelation while emptying it of most of its content) and as philosophers (for claiming rational certainty for their arbitrary selection of dogmas). Thus, despite all his disagreements with orthodoxy, which go back to his early disputes with his father and his 'vindications' of Luther's critics twenty years before, Lessing has more respect for it than for its neologist reformers. For as he tells his brother:

> I know nothing in the world on which human perspicacity has proved and exercised itself more than on this. The religious system which now seeks to replace it is a hotchpotch created by bunglers and half-baked philosophers, with far more influence on reason and philosophy than the old system claims to exert.

By this time, both Lessing and his friends were expecting some kind of counterattack from neologists such as Wilhelm Abraham Teller of Berlin,[52] and it is probable that Lessing hoped to provoke just such an attack as a prelude to his publication of extracts from the work of Reimarus. This hypothesis is confirmed by four fragments written around 1773 or 1774, all of which take issue with neology or its leading exponents. One of them, entitled *Hilkias*, is directed at J. F. W. Jerusalem,[53] but since it deals not with central doctrines of neology but with a specific question on the origins of the Old Testament canon, it may well have nothing to do with Jerusalem's work as a leading neologist. The second fragment, entitled *On Arianism* (*Vom Arianismus*),[54] deals explicitly with a work by Johann Gottlieb Töllner, published in 1772, in which Töllner had described Arianism (or unitarianism) as 'an innocent or harmless error' and declared that the Trinity is not an essential article of Christian faith, but rather an obstacle to converting the Jews and Moslems.[55] In his brief and fragmentary response, Lessing—no doubt ironically—declares that Töllner's pronouncements are not to be taken at face value, but are rather like the strategy of a physician who, on discovering a case of the plague, puts it about that it is a less serious disease in order to avert panic and give him time to prevent its spread.

The third fragment, *On Arianism, by Philalethes the Middle One* (*Über den Arianismus, von Philalethes dem Mittleren*),[56] is directed at the leading neologist Teller. It consists of an unfinished preface, by the fourth of seven brothers, to a planned dialogue between all seven, the first three of whom represent the recognized Christian confessions of the Holy Roman Empire (i.e. Catholicism, Lutheranism, and Calvinism). The youngest brother, named Thomas, is a doubter or sceptic, and the

[52] Loc. cit. [53] LM XVI, 245–50. [54] LM XVI, 251–2.
[55] See B VIII, 1076 and G VII, 850. [56] LM XVI, 252–3.

unnamed remaining brothers would presumably have represented Arianism and some other Christian heresy. The nature of the planned dialogue (possibly modelled on Jean Bodin's *Colloquium Heptaplomeres* of 1587, which also has seven speakers representing different shades of religious opinion) can only be guessed at, but there can be little doubt that Philalethes represents Teller's anti-Trinitarian position as an unsatisfactory theology of compromise.[57]

The fourth short piece is not, strictly speaking, a fragment but a self-contained dialogue, only 120 words in length, entitled *Hercules and Omphale*.[58] The two speakers, described only as A and B, discuss a painting depicting the myth of Hercules and the Lydian queen Omphale, who has prevailed upon the doting hero to exchange dress and functions with her: Hercules duly sits at the spinning wheel, bursting out of the queen's flimsy garments, while Omphale looks on imperiously, thrusting her distaff upon him. Speaker A in the dialogue identifies the pair as philosophy and theology, the former of which has been pressed into service by the latter as the unsuitable instrument of its own designs. The painting referred to is almost certainly Lucas Cranach's rendering of the myth, still on view in the former ducal collection in Brunswick;[59] but the idea for the dialogue probably came from Wieland's novel *Agathon*, in which the two figures (with Deianeira in place of Omphale) are described in similar language.[60] The motif of transvestism recalls Lessing's similar image in *Pope a Metaphysician!*, in which poets and philosophers are warned not to confuse their respective roles.[61] In *Hercules and Omphale*, his love of clear distinctions is again in evidence, this time probably reinforced by Spinoza, who declares on several occasions in his *Tractatus* that 'philosophy should be separated from theology, and [. . .] neither should be subservient to the other, but each should keep her own unopposed dominion'.[62]

These are only a few of the implications of this richly allusive little dialogue, which marks an important stage in Lessing's growing preference for images and metaphors, as distinct from precisely defined (and for that reason more restrictive) rational concepts, in dealing with theological issues. The fact that he himself attempts a few years later (in *The Education of the Human Race*) to rationalize religious mysteries does not necessarily conflict with his strictures, in the dialogue, against the neologists for doing just that. For in contrast to his own tentative and non-dogmatic speculations, what he objects to in the dialogue is the dogmatic stance of neology (the imperious Omphale) in misusing philosophy (the clumsy Hercules) to provide inadequate support for its arbitrary pronouncements.

Lessing's opposition to the neologists will be touched on again later in connection with his publication of the *Fragments* of Reimarus. As for his attitude to Socinianism and Arianism, one incident in the early 1770s remains to be clarified. In March 1771, he received from Nicolai, at his own request, a copy of the curious novel *The Life of John Buncle, Esq.* by the Anglo-Irish writer Thomas Amory.[63] The

[57] See B VIII, 1077–8 and G VII, 850–1. [58] LM XVI, 254.
[59] See Schröder (1972) 93–105; also B VIII, 1080–1 and G VII, 740–1.
[60] See Wieland (1986–) III, 349. [61] LM VI, 415.
[62] Spinoza I, 347. [63] See Nicolai to L., 8 March 1771.

Fig. 36. 'Hercules and Omphale', painting by Lucas Cranach.

eponymous hero of the novel, a serial polygamist with numerous eccentricities, holds staunchly unitarian beliefs on which he discourses at length to his successive wives.[64] On his visit to Berlin in the autumn of 1771, Lessing told Nicolai that he planned to translate the work, but he must have abandoned this idea soon afterwards, for he told his brother before the end of the year that it was not worthy of translation.[65] Nicolai, Mendelssohn, and their Berlin associates liked the novel chiefly for its unitarian sympathies, which Lessing seems initially to have shared—presumably because at that time, when his religious views were still in flux, he preferred outright unitarianism to the half-measure of Socinianism. But he told Nicolai some eight years later that, if he were to translate the novel now, he would do so only in order to demonstrate, in an editorial commentary, 'that the Arian system is infinitely more absurd and blasphemous than that of orthodoxy'.[66] Some allowance must be made for the fact that, with this remark, he probably intended to distance himself in no uncertain terms from Nicolai's neologistic leanings. But it also suggests that, when pressed, he still felt a greater affinity to orthodoxy than to any other tendency within the Lutheran church of his time.[67]

Apart from his growing conviction, reinforced by his studies of Leibniz, that all human insights are relative and all achievements provisional, another major change takes place, in the late 1760s and early 1770s, in Lessing's view of the present age—and, by extension, in his attitude towards the future. His disillusion with the public

[64] See Nisbet (1993b) *passim*.
[65] D 309; L. to Karl L., 31 December 1771.
[66] To Nicolai, 30 March 1779.
[67] Cf. Pons (1964) 265.

sphere, and with the Prussian state in particular, is already apparent in *Minna von Barnhelm*, in which the hero and heroine resolve to withdraw from public life into rural tranquillity.[68] This same disillusion led him to indicate, in his famous outburst against the Prussian regime in a letter of 1769 to Nicolai, why he found it impossible to live in Prussia.

In republican Hamburg, he plainly felt more at ease. But when his project for an authors' publishing consortium failed and his hopes for a cultural revival in Germany, pioneered by the Hamburg national theatre, were rudely shattered, his disillusion with the literary public, together with his new responsibilities as librarian in Wolfenbüttel, led him to redirect his energies towards scholarship and the learned community.[69] In his one major literary work in the first half of the new decade, *Emilia Galotti*, the attempt of the Galotti family and their ally Appiani to escape from the public sphere is systematically frustrated: there is no escape from the court, whose baleful influence extends even into the private sphere. That same claustrophobic feeling which Lessing had experienced towards the end of his stay in Prussia had returned, and its political basis is confirmed by a remark whose significance seems hitherto to have been overlooked. It occurs in that important letter of January 1771 to Mendelssohn in which he talks of retrieving certain truths which he may have prematurely discarded.

Towards the end of 1770, Lessing received a copy of a work by Adam Ferguson which Mendelssohn had recommended to him.[70] It is now generally agreed that the work in question must have been Ferguson's *Essay on the History of Civil Society* (1767),[71] since Lessing had specifically requested the original English edition in preference to the German translation (of 1768),[72] whereas Ferguson's other major work, the *Institutes of Moral Philosophy. For the Use of Students in the College of Edinburgh* (1769), was not translated into German until 1772. In thanking Mendelssohn for this book in the letter of January 1771, Lessing significantly adds:[73]

> I can see from the initial table of contents that it is a book of the kind I have lacked here, where I have for the most part only such books as sooner or later deaden the mind and kill the time. If one stops thinking for long enough, one can eventually no longer think at all. But is it really good to think about and take a serious interest in truths with which we currently live in contradiction, and for our own peace must continue to do so? And I can already see some such truths from afar in the English writer.

To determine what those 'truths with which we currently live in contradiction' are, it is necessary to consider both the circumstances in which Lessing wrote his letter and the table of contents of Ferguson's *Essay on the History of Civil Society*.

Lessing's letter was written soon after he had spent a fortnight in Brunswick, during which he attended the protracted New Year festivities at court, an occasion

[68] See also L. to Nicolai, 25 August 1769.
[69] On this see Barner (1986) 622 and (1984b) 83.
[70] See Mendelssohn to L., 29 November 1770.
[71] See, for example, Pons (1964) 240; Altmann (1973) 252; Allison (1966) 185–6; Strohschneider-Kohrs (1991) 132; B XI/2, 904.
[72] L. to Karl L., 11 November 1770.
[73] To Mendelssohn, 9 January 1771.

which he heartily loathed and about which he complains, directly or indirectly, in every January from 1771 to 1775. Three days before, he had also performed the tiresome duty of conducting two Swedish princes, accompanied by Karl Wilhelm Ferdinand, round the library.[74] With these considerations in mind, it is not difficult to detect which headings in Ferguson's table of contents would have struck him most forcibly: they include in particular 'Of the Corruption incident to Polished Nations', 'Of Corruption, as it tends to Political Slavery', and 'Of the Progress and Termination of Despotism'.[75] (In comparison, the table of contents of Ferguson's *Institutes*, which Lessing ordered for the library in 1772,[76] is an uncontroversial list of basic topics in moral philosophy, law, and political theory, in keeping with the book's elementary nature as a compendium for students.) Lessing's remarks on Ferguson also date from around the same period as the entry 'German Freedom' ('Deutsche Freiheit') in his commonplace book, in which he traces the decline of estates parliaments (*Landstände*) as a curb on arbitrary despotism in Germany and asks:[77]

> why should the estates not now be granted all the rights they enjoyed three or four centuries ago? [. . .] Ought we not at least to protest continually in our writings against these unjust changes, instead of endorsing the actions of rulers by sycophantic indulgence and excuses?

These comments, along with the political substance of *Emilia Galotti* and what we already know of Lessing's state of mind in his early years in Wolfenbüttel, show just how deep his disaffection with the political dispensation had become, despite the fact that the state he lived in was one of the most liberal in Germany. This disaffection helps to explain why, in his later writings in general, his interest shifted decisively away from the immediate present—not just to the past, which had always been the focus of his scholarly interests, but also to the long-term future.[78] As his hopes for progress in the present receded, he began to look increasingly to posterity. The public he henceforth addressed, in his theological polemics of the later 1770s and in the major works of his final years, was no longer just the literary or scholarly public of Germany, but more often that of mankind, present and future, as a whole. Appropriately enough, it was chiefly through these late works that he did eventually reach an international audience over the next two centuries.

The only other work not so far mentioned which Lessing published before he set off on his travels in 1775 is the fragment from Reimarus entitled 'On the Toleration of Deists', which appeared in 1774 in the third volume of *On History and Literature*. This, along with the rest of Reimarus's *Fragments*, will be discussed in the following chapter. Apart from his editorial comments on the *Fragments*, most of what he wrote in 1776 on his return to Wolfenbüttel consists of works or drafts of works published in full in later years, namely *The Education of the Human Race*, the dialogues *Ernst and Falk*, and *Nathan the Wise*. During that busy year, in which

[74] L. to Karl L., 8 January 1771; D 454. [75] Ferguson (1995) 5 (see Bibliog. 'Primary literature').
[76] See R/S (2004) 73 No. 141. [77] LM XV, 228. [78] Cf. Grimm (1992) 63.

he made two journeys to Hamburg, married Eva König, and moved house in Wolfenbüttel, he completed two further assignments which throw light on his intellectual development, namely a posthumous edition of the younger Jerusalem's essays and the short philosophical study *On a Timely Task* (*Über eine zeitige Aufgabe*).

Karl Wilhelm Jerusalem, son of the theologian J. F. W. Jerusalem, was born in 1747.[79] After studying law at Leipzig and Göttingen, he took up a post at the justice department (*Justizkanzlei*) in Wolfenbüttel in June 1770, little more than a month after Lessing's arrival.[80] A keen student of philosophy, he met Lessing on his visits to the ducal library and became one of several young men (including Eschenburg, Leisewitz, and Jacobi) with whom Lessing formed close friendships during the last decade of his life. Jerusalem showed promise as a lawyer, and in September 1771, he was appointed secretary to the Brunswick legation at the Supreme Court (*Reichskammergericht*) of the Holy Roman Empire in Wetzlar. Like his predecessor in that post, he soon clashed with his difficult superior, the Brunswick legate J. J. von Höfler, and both he and Höfler were reprimanded by Duke Karl. His increasing loneliness and melancholy, compounded by an unrequited passion for the wife of a colleague, drove him to suicide on 30 October 1772.

This sad affair would soon have been forgotten but for the appearance of Goethe's immensely successful novel *The Sorrows of Werther* in late September 1774. Although most of the events in the novel were based on Goethe's personal experiences in Wetzlar, the public at large at once identified Goethe's hero with Jerusalem, whose suicide had indeed served as a model for that of Werther. Like others who had known Jerusalem, Lessing was outraged at what seemed a gross travesty of his friend, and since Werther (like Jerusalem himself) dies with a copy of *Emilia Galotti* open on his desk, he also felt personally affronted. As he told his old friend Weisse in Leipzig, Jerusalem 'was never a sentimental fool, but a genuine, thoughtful, and cool philosopher'.[81] And while he was by no means blind to the merits of Goethe's novel, he declared to Eschenburg, who had also been close to Jerusalem:[82]

> don't you think it needs a cool little epilogue? [. . .] if our Jerusalem's mind had indeed been fully in this state, I would almost be obliged—to despise him. Do you really think that a Roman or Greek youth would have taken his life in *this* way and for *this* reason? Certainly not! They knew how to guard themselves against the transports of love by quite different means [. . .]. To produce such puny heroes, such miserable and eccentric paragons, was the exclusive prerogative of Christian education, which so nicely manages to transform a physical need into a spiritual virtue. So, dear Goethe, give us another little chapter at the end; and the more cynical, the better!

Lessing saw in Goethe's hero another feckless sentimentalist like St-Preux in Rousseau's *La Nouvelle Héloïse*, whose conduct he had ridiculed in his *Hamburg Dramaturgy*[83] (and who was, in fact, the main literary model for Goethe's Werther).

[79] On Jerusalem see H. Schneider 94–109; also Paulin (1999) *passim*. [80] See Raabe (1997) 92.
[81] D 342. [82] To Eschenburg, 26 October 1774. [83] LM IX, 217–18.

He considered writing a satirical drama entitled *The Worthier Werther* (*Werther, der Bessere*), and according to Weisse, it was only Lessing's extended absence in Italy that saved Goethe from his literary wrath.[84]

Lessing was nevertheless determined to rescue his young friend's memory, and his edition of Jerusalem's essays—and more particularly, his preface to that edition—is essentially another 'vindication' of an individual who, in his opinion, had been misjudged or misrepresented by posterity.[85] He planned the edition at the end of 1774 on discovering that both he and Eschenburg possessed copies of unpublished essays on philosophical subjects by Jerusalem.[86] After Jerusalem's father gave his permission, a selection of five items was printed in the first months of 1775.[87] (Material considered unsuitable, such as an unpublished defence of suicide, was omitted.)[88] Publication was then delayed until Lessing completed his editorial preface and postscript on his return from Italy, and the work finally appeared in April 1776.[89]

Jerusalem's essays, on a variety of philosophical topics, are the work of an intelligent amateur with some knowledge of works by Leibniz and Mendelssohn. The last three are in letter form, and since they refer to, and amplify, earlier discussions and disagreements between the author and the addressee, it is likely that they were addressed to Lessing and sent to him after Jerusalem's departure for Wetzlar. The first two essays, prompted by the Berlin Academy's essay competition on the origin of language won by Herder in 1770, deal respectively with the origin of language and with that of abstract concepts, treating both as the result of natural processes. Both essays reflect Leibniz's and Mendelssohn's interest in the pre-rational sources of rational thought. The fourth deals with the physical basis of sensuous pleasure and the fifth with the pleasure aroused by mixed emotions, both with reference to Mendelssohn's letters *On the Sentiments* (*Über die Empfindungen*).

The third essay, the longest in the collection, is also the most substantial. Entitled 'On Freedom' ('Über die Freiheit'), it argues that, since every human action has a sufficient reason, none can properly be described as free; and since moral actions are determined by our relative degree of insight into their moral value, they must likewise be regarded as necessary. Though Jerusalem denies that this view rules out moral responsibility, he explicitly rejects Leibniz's distinction between 'hypothetical' and 'absolute' necessity, the former of which leaves room for moral choice whereas the latter leaves none.[90] This leaves him with a radical form of determinism which is difficult to reconcile with his residual concessions to Leibnizian optimism, as when he declares that it was better for God to create villains than not to do so, and that we are all destined to reach higher degrees of perfection in the life to come. The essay also foreshadows Lessing's reflections on the gradual difference between salvation and damnation in his own essay on Leibniz and eternal punishment.

[84] LM III, 472–3; Dvoretzky (1971–72) I, 25.
[85] See Birus 193.
[86] See L. to Eschenburg, 26 December 1774.
[87] See L. to Karl Lessing, 26 March 1775.
[88] See Schrader 150.
[89] LM XII, 291–300 (L's preface); B VIII, 140–65 (Jerusalem's essays).
[90] B VIII, 145; cf. Leibniz II/1, 263–4 and III/1, 263–4.

The real importance of the edition lies, however, in Lessing's preface and postscript. The preface serves primarily to set the record straight on Jerusalem's personality, implicitly contrasting it with the immoderate enthusiasms of Werther and the Storm and Stress. (Lessing here renews his earlier strictures in the *Hamburg Dramaturgy* on self-proclaimed genius.) Jerusalem, he declares, maintained the right balance between head and heart, light and heat, rules and inspiration, both sides of which are equally necessary in the pursuit of truth. And even if the two friends' conversations did not always yield tangible results but often ended in disagreement, the search for truth itself, as Lessing now likes to emphasize, is what really counts: 'The pleasure of a hunt is always worth more than the kill; and disunity which arises merely because each person looks for the truth from a different angle is unity in fundamentals.'[91]

Lessing's specific comments, at the end of the volume, on the individual essays also yield insights into his own intellectual development, foreshadowing some of the central ideas and preoccupations of his later works. Thus his comments on the interaction of natural forces and higher guidance in the evolution of language look forward to the basic hypothesis of *The Education of the Human Race*, written shortly afterwards. His comments on Jerusalem's essay 'On Freedom', which stress the affinities rather than the differences between Jerusalem's radical determinism and Lessing's own, Leibnizian variant, point ahead to his denial of free will in his late conversations with Jacobi:[92]

> Compulsion and necessity whereby our conception of the best operates—how much more welcome are they to me than the bare capacity to act now one way and now another under the same circumstances! I thank the creator that I *must*; that I must act for the *best*!

And when he suggests that the difficulties raised by Jerusalem's determinism might be resolved by 'a second system, equally strange to ordinary eyes',[93] most commentators maintain that he is referring to the hypothesis of metempsychosis, of the transmigration of souls, which he develops more explicitly in *The Education of the Human Race* and according to which apparent moral injustices in the present life may be rectified in a future existence.[94] If so, we have here one of the first signs of that preoccupation with the long-term future, indeed with eternity, which distinguishes the major works of Lessing's final years. (It is possible, though less likely, that the 'second system' may denote Spinoza's philosophically more rigorous form of determinism,[95] in which case Lessing's comment looks forward to his late conversations with Jacobi.)

In conclusion, it would be wrong not to mention the tact and sensitivity with which Lessing, who is more often noted for his blunt directness, handled the difficult assignment of this memorial to Jerusalem. It must have cost him a considerable effort to refrain from tackling Goethe head-on over what he saw as the hurtful

[91] LM XII, 294. [92] LM XII, 298; cf. D 502. [93] LM XII, 299.
[94] See, for example, B VIII, 877; G VIII, 690; Fick (2010) 521–2.
[95] As Cyranka 239–52 claims.

caricature of his late friend in *The Sorrows of Werther*. And it is hard to imagine that the elder Jerusalem was not agreeably moved when he received Lessing's edition with the handwritten inscription 'To the father, this legacy of the son is dedicated by the friend of both.'[96]

But this episode had another, more negative consequence. Goethe, who normally went out of his way to meet the leading personalities of his age, never visited Lessing, although the links between Weimar and Brunswick were close and the distance between them was inconsiderable. It seems that what stood out in his mind about Lessing during the latter's lifetime was his power as a critic, and he knew the fate that had befallen several writers who had ventured to cross him.[97] He was also well aware of Lessing's hostile reaction to *Werther*, for the coded censures in the preface to Jerusalem's essays will not have escaped him, and after Lessing's visit to Leipzig in 1775, Weisse told everyone he met or corresponded with about Lessing's indignation at the novel.[98] Had Goethe taken the plunge—and he would later lament his failure to do so[99]—there can be little doubt that Lessing would have received him cordially, as he invariably did with Klinger, Leisewitz, and other young writers of the Storm and Stress generation. One can only regret that what might have been a memorable encounter between these two remarkable figures never took place.

The last work to be considered here is the short, posthumously published essay *On a Timely Task* (*Über eine zeitige Aufgabe*).[100] It was written towards the end of 1776 or early in 1777 in response to the following question set by Wieland in his journal *Der Teutsche Merkur*:[101]

> Do the efforts of cold-blooded philosophers and Lucianic spirits to counter what they call 'enthusiasm' or 'fanaticism' [*Schwärmerei*] do more harm or good? And what limits ought the anti-Platonists and Lucians to observe in order to be useful?

This strange and convoluted question struck a chord with readers, and several writers, including Herder, responded. It raised a central issue of the late Enlightenment, namely the relationship between sensibility (including the cult of feeling in the Storm and Stress movement) and rationality. Lessing begins by analysing its imprecise terms in detail, eliminating those which seemed irrelevant and concluding: 'The task in question lacks definition, without which it is capable of endless solutions.' This negative verdict on the question itself, like his destructive analysis of the Berlin Academy's question in *Pope a Metaphysician!*, may explain why the essay was not submitted to its initiator: Lessing was now on friendly terms with Wieland and had no wish to offend him.

Despite these opening reservations, Lessing does proceed to address the central issue of the relationship between feeling and thought, with particular reference to philosophy and religion. The most striking feature of his remarks on philosophy is

[96] Birus 187.
[97] See, for example, Goethe to Oeser, 14 February 1769; on the following see Barner (2001) *passim*.
[98] D 340–7; Dvoretzky (1971–72) I, 25.
[99] Goethe to Frau von Stein, 20 February 1781; also Goethe HA IX, 327–8.
[100] LM XVI, 293–301. [101] See B VIII, 1109–10.

the importance he attaches to feeling, and even 'enthusiasm', as an inspiration for the philosopher himself, declaring: 'Once he has cooled down again, he attempts to clarify [*aufzuklären*] the obscure but lively feelings he experienced during his enthusiasm and turn them into distinct ideas.' His debt to Leibniz's reflections on the pre-rational sources of rational insight is once more in evidence, as is explicitly confirmed when he mentions with approval that Leibniz drew freely on 'speculative enthusiasts' (i.e. religious mystics) as a source of new ideas.

Lessing's positive weighting of 'enthusiasm' as an inspiration to religious as well as philosophical thought contrasts sharply with his critical response to the religious transports of Klopstock and others in earlier years; but it accords well with the speculations on religion and metaphysics which occur in his own later writings and conversations. In *The Education of the Human Race*, he himself cites the precedent of medieval mystics (such as Joachim of Fiore) whose speculations foreshadow his own hypothesis of the three ages of history.[102] In this, as in other respects, *On a Timely Task* marks the transition from the early Wolfenbüttel period to Lessing's last phase as a writer.

On a Timely Task is stylistically a memorable work, in the form of what Lessing once described as a 'one-sided dialogue'[103] as he thinks with pen in hand, balances antithetical concepts, and attempts to answer his own questions. He also declares:[104]

> I think only for my own instruction. If my thoughts finally satisfy me, I tear up the paper. If they do not satisfy me, I send it to the printer. If I am corrected, I can live with a small humiliation.

These words are not to be taken at face value—not least because Lessing neither tore up nor published the essay which contains them. They simply reformulate, in more dramatic terms, that basic maxim of his later thought according to which the never-ending pursuit of truth is more important than its possession.

Around the middle of October 1776, Lessing and Eva, accompanied by Eva's children Malchen, Engelbert, and Fritz, arrived in Wolfenbüttel and moved, as arranged, into the Meissner house on the palace square. The housemaid and cook Clara Gundermann,[105] together with a charwoman and manservant, completed their domestic establishment. After six years of loneliness and anxiety, the married couple had at last attained their goal, and there is ample evidence that their life together was one of happiness and fulfilment. Lessing's words to his brother, despite their characteristic understatement, leave no doubt about his feelings for his wife: 'If I assure you that I have always considered her the one woman in the world I felt able to live with, you can take it that she has everything I look for in a woman.'[106] Moses Mendelssohn, replying to a letter from Lessing, also detected a profound and welcome change in his friend's state of mind:[107]

[102] LM XIII, 433–44. [103] LM XVI, 487; cf. Schröder (1972) 13–15.
[104] LM XVI, 293–4.
[105] See Raabe (1997) 53; her name is given in different forms by different sources: for example, Danzel/Guhrauer II, 682 call her 'Clara Guntelwerner'.
[106] To Karl Lessing, 1 December 1776; cf. L. to Eva König, 3 November 1771.
[107] To L., 11 November 1777.

Fig. 37. Wolfenbüttel, Meissnerhaus (Lessing's residence from 1776 to 1777).

> You seem to me now to be in a tranquil and contented state which accords infinitely better with my way of thinking than that witty but also somewhat bitter humour which I thought I discerned in you some years ago.

Lessing and Eva readily shared their happiness with others: invitations went out to numerous friends and relatives, and casual visitors were equally welcome. The distinguished historian Ludwig Timotheus Spittler, at that time still a student, wrote to a friend of his visit to Wolfenbüttel:[108]

> I was in Wolfenbüttel for almost three weeks, and they were three of the happiest and most instructive in my life; for Lessing allowed me completely free access to his house and equally unhindered use of the library. I do not know if you are personally acquainted with Lessing. [...] One finds oneself imperceptibly on such a familiar footing with him that one cannot but forget what a great man one is dealing with. And if it were possible to find more philanthropy and active good will in anyone other than him, it would be in his wife. [...] The example of this great and worthy woman enormously increased my respect for her sex, and it may be that I was in Wolfenbüttel for too short a time to appreciate all her merits.

[108] D 437.

Lessing's brother Theophilus,[109] Moses Mendelssohn, François Cacault (translator of the *Hamburg Dramaturgy*),[110] Lessing's old friend Abel Seyler, and even the young Maximilian Klinger (whose turbulent drama *Sturm und Drang* gave the Storm and Stress movement its name)[111] were among the many whom the Lessings welcomed, and Eva was able to repay the hospitality which Frau Schuback had given her at the time of their wedding in Jork.[112] Among friends nearer home, their relationship with Eschenburg, who married K. A. Schmid's daughter in October 1777, was especially cordial.

The only major interruption to this happy existence was Lessing's visit to the Palatinate for around seven weeks during the first months of 1777. Under the Elector Karl Theodor, the Palatinate underwent a cultural renaissance in the 1770s, with emphasis on home-grown talent and German art and literature. Having dismissed his French theatre company in 1770, the Elector, in a wave of patriotic enthusiasm, founded a 'Deutsche Gesellschaft' in 1775 and constructed the so-called 'National Theatre' in Mannheim in 1775–76 for the performance of drama in German.[113] As the theatre neared completion and the time came to engage a German company, the thoughts of the Elector and his advisers naturally turned to Lessing.

After his negative experiences with the Hamburg National Theatre, Lessing was in no mood to involve himself in any comparable enterprise. But several circumstances prevented him from dismissing the approaches from Mannheim out of hand. In the first place, Eva held capital of over 10,000 talers, inherited from her parents, in the Palatinate, and if she chose to settle outside that state, she was legally obliged to forfeit one tenth of her capital to the Palatinate government. The possibility of settling in Mannheim, or at least of negotiating a rebate on the required payment, seemed to Lessing worth exploring.[114] Secondly, when he turned down the offer of a full-time job at the Mannheim theatre with a salary increase of over fifty per cent, the Mannheim authorities offered to engage him as a visiting adviser. Christian Friedrich Schwan (the Mannheim bookseller who later published two of Schiller's dramas) duly called on him on September 1776 to finalize an agreement, and Lessing became a member of the Mannheim Academy, with an annual pension of around 500 talers; in return, he agreed to submit a paper to the academy each year and to take part in its deliberations at least every two years, with full travel expenses. The academy's hope was that, in the longer term, he would take an active part in the theatre, and Schwan assured him that, in view of his status as an academician, his wife would not have to pay any tax on her capital.[115] Finally, in agreeing to visit Mannheim in January or February 1777, Lessing hoped that Eva might accompany him in order to visit her eldest son Theodor, who was still in medical care at Landau, not far from Heidelberg, and might be fit enough to return with them to Wolfenbüttel.[116]

[109] See A (2005) 424. [110] See B XII, 444. [111] D 435.
[112] A (2005) 429–30. [113] See R. Krebs 530–2 and Flemming (1948) 48.
[114] L. to Karl Lessing, 15 September 1776; see also B XI/2, 1116 and XII, 430.
[115] See L. to Eva König, 6 September 1776 and D 408.
[116] See L. to Eva König, 10 September 1776.

Even before he left for Mannheim, Lessing had heard enough about the new theatre to be deeply sceptical about its prospects. The actor J. H. F. Müller, who visited the Lessings in the autumn of 1776 on a recruiting mission for a rival enterprise in Vienna, reports that Lessing found the plan to make the Mannheim actors buy their own costumes unrealistic, and that he considered the population of Mannheim too small to make the theatre viable.[117] Lessing nevertheless agreed to seek actors for Mannheim, and asked his brother Karl to sound out any members of Döbbelin's company who were anxious to leave Berlin.[118] He himself wrote to Abel Seyler in Dresden to enquire whether he might be interested, and on finding that Seyler was dissatisfied with his current situation, he recommended him to Mannheim.[119] Lessing's advice was that the theatre's policy should be determined by the academy, with one of its members as director and Seyler as business manager; Seyler and a select number of his company, including Borchers, Brandes, and Grossmann, might initially serve as a cadre to train local actors for the troupe.[120]

Full of misgivings, Lessing set off on 17 January for Mannheim; Eva did not accompany him. He stopped on the way at Darmstadt, and welcomed his old friend Matthias Claudius and his wife at his inn;[121] Claudius had recently found employment there as a civil servant, but was already planning to return to Hamburg. Lessing arrived at Mannheim on 23 January and remained there for just over a month.

In his discussions on the future of the theatre, which was now in operation, Lessing continued to deal with Franz Karl von Hompesch, the finance minister with whom he had hitherto negotiated by letter. It soon became clear that Hompesch, unlike the straightforward Schwan, was an evasive diplomat whose attitude varied with the changing influence of liberal and conservative factions at court. His aim all along had been to recruit predominantly local actors, but when he realized that Lessing planned to stick to his agreement with Schwan and to his proposal that Seyler and some of his company should be appointed, he began to sideline him. To this end, he offered him the curatorship of Heidelberg University, thereby generating an enraged response from the conservative minister of education, who refused to countenance the appointment of a Protestant to senior office in the Catholic Palatinate. The Elector thereupon instructed Hompesch to withdraw the offer and send Lessing on his way.[122]

It was now obvious to Lessing that he was no longer taken seriously: he had to pay entrance to the theatre to attend a performance in his own honour; the matter of his remuneration as a member of the academy was quietly dropped; and his request that his wife be given exemption from the tax on her capital remained unanswered.[123] Two audiences with the Elector had little effect, for Karl Theodor habitually allowed himself to be manipulated by cabinet factions.[124] The newspapers

[117] D 414 and 416; L. to Schwan, 10 November 1776.
[118] To Karl Lessing, 26 September 1776.
[119] L. to Seyler, 16 December 1776; L. to Hompesch, 17 December 1776.
[120] See KGL 213–16; Flemming (1948) 50–1; Danzel/Guhrauer II, 555.
[121] See A (2005) 412.
[122] D 423–4.
[123] D 424–5; L. to Maler Müller, 1 March 1777.
[124] See A (2005) 415 and 420.

reported that Lessing had received generous gifts, including a gold medal; but it appears that he received only a set of copper medals representing the sequence of Electors Palatine.[125] And when Seyler and Grossmann presented themselves in Mannheim as previously arranged, they soon discovered that their services were no longer required: the conservative lobby had overturned Lessing's recommendations, and Theobald Marchand, a feeble devotee of French taste, was appointed director instead.[126]

When he threatened to make common cause with Lessing and expose Mannheim's duplicity to the public, Seyler received 1,000 talers in compensation. As for Lessing himself, it was not in his nature to sue for financial recompense. But when Hompesch, in his attempts to get rid of him, wrote a condescending letter implying that it was Lessing himself who had withdrawn from his commitment to Mannheim,[127] he received the kind of icily furious reply which Lessing reserved for those he suspected of trifling with him. After accusing Hompesch of treating him like a child, he continued:[128]

> I must at this point confess my weakness to Your Excellency. I can forgive a thousand spoken words before I forgive a single word in print. At the first syllable which anyone prints concerning my involvement in the Mannheim theatre and which *does not reflect the true state of affairs*, I shall directly reveal everything to the public.

Despite this inauspicious beginning, the Mannheim National Theatre did eventually become a successful enterprise. It is eloquent testimony to Karl Theodor's ineffectiveness as a ruler that his departure for Munich in 1778, when he acceded to the Electorship of Bavaria, did more for the Mannheim theatre than his active presence had ever done. He took Marchand with him, and W. H. von Dalberg, a member of the Mannheim administration, successfully applied for support and permission to run the theatre with himself as director, backed by a committee of management in which the actors were represented. Seyler was reengaged for a time, and a permanent company was recruited from the remnants of Ekhof's ensemble in Gotha, augmented by local talent. With the help of the young Schiller as dramatist and Iffland as actor and writer of sentimental family plays, the National Theatre soon attained a celebrity which no one could have predicted when Hompesch and Karl Theodor were in charge.[129] The chaotic events of 1777 were ably satirized in Wieland's novel *The History of the Abderites* (*Die Geschichte der Abderiten*) of 1780, in which Lessing appears in the guise of Euripides confronted with a company of bungling provincials.

For Lessing himself, the Mannheim experience confirmed his belief, as he later told his brother, 'that the German theatre is always disastrous for me, and that I can never become involved with it, however peripherally, without vexation and financial loss'.[130] His disenchantment also extended to contemporary German

[125] A (2005) 420; KGL 217. [126] R. Krebs 535.
[127] Hompesch to L., 7 April 1777. [128] L. to Hompesch, April 1777.
[129] See R. Krebs 537–41; Flemming (1948) 58–9. [130] To Karl Lessing, 20 March 1777.

drama, and he had already informed Weisse that he would write nothing more for the stage.[131] With rare exceptions such as Leisewitz's *Julius von Tarent*, he disliked most plays of the Storm and Stress, despite the fact that many of them were greatly influenced by his own work.[132] He disapproved in particular of Lenz's drama and dramatic theory, and had no good word for Goethe's *Götz von Berlichingen*.[133] As his religious conflict with Goeze gathered momentum in 1778, he even declared that, compared with 'the high comedy of polemics', all work for the theatre struck him as dull and insipid.[134] It is no coincidence that *Nathan the Wise*, the one drama which he did go on to write, was inspired by the religious conflict rather than by literary or theatrical considerations.

Lessing's stay in Mannheim had at least some positive aspects. He was favourably impressed by Schwan, who was in no way to blame for Lessing's irresponsible treatment by the Mannheim authorities. He enjoyed his reunion with Claudius, who came to see him again from Darmstadt and whose support he greatly appreciated during the religious conflict of the following year.[135] He took a special liking to the young writer and artist 'Maler' ('Painter') Müller, whose unconventional lifestyle and ebullient dramatization of episodes from the Faust legend appealed to his love of the idiosyncratic. Inspired, perhaps, by the fine collection of casts in the Mannheim gallery of antiquities, he expressed a wish to end his days with Müller in Italy, to which Müller emigrated soon afterwards.[136]

On 24 February, Lessing left Mannheim for Heidelberg, where he stayed for a week with Eva's eldest brother and his family. Since Eva's son Theodor was now restored to health, he was able to accompany his stepfather on the return journey to Wolfenbüttel.[137] They stopped on the way in Göttingen, where Lessing met several friends, including Kästner, Dietze, and possibly Heyne.[138] He also called on Lichtenberg, and indulged his fascination with electricity—first aroused in Hamburg by J. A. H. Reimarus and his lightning conductors—by experimenting for over half an hour with Lichtenberg's electrophorus, a device recently invented by Alessandro Volta.[139] The two travellers eventually reached Wolfenbüttel on or around 10 March. Soon after that date, Eva discovered she was pregnant.

Apart from a visit, for unknown reasons, to Hanover in September,[140] Lessing spent the rest of the year at home in Wolfenbüttel and Brunswick. Soon after his return from Mannheim, he heard from his sister in Kamenz that their mother, who had been ill throughout the winter, had died shortly before;[141] as so often in the past, he sent her money and expressions of sympathy. His brother Theophilus, who visited him in Wolfenbüttel later in the month, took their sister to live with him at Pirna near Dresden towards the end of the year.[142]

[131] D 341. [132] See Sauder (1999) 26. [133] D 340–1 and 346; Sauder (1999) 17–18.
[134] To Karl Lessing, 25 February 1778. [135] L. to Claudius, 19 April 1778.
[136] See also Ch. 14, p. 454 above. [137] A (2005) 420. [138] A (2005) 421–2.
[139] See A (2005) 422; Daiber 41; cf. LM XII, 428. [140] D 441.
[141] Dorothea Salome Lessing to L., 8 March 1777.
[142] See Theophilus Lessing to L., 3 November 1777.

Fig. 38. Wolfenbüttel, 'Lessinghaus' (from the rear; Lessing's residence from 1777 to 1781).

On the domestic front, the main event of the following months was the family's removal to new accommodation. Since the house they had originally been promised was dilapidated, another house close to the library, vacated by its occupant in July (the present Lessing House and museum), was designated as the official residence of the librarian and renovated during the following months.[143] Work was still being done on it when the family moved in shortly before Christmas, during or shortly after a visit by Mendelssohn and his wife.[144] On their departure for Berlin, the Mendelssohns took with them Eva's son Theodor, who was now contemplating a career in the Prussian army; Lessing's brother Karl had agreed to look after him while his future was debated.[145] By this time, Eva was in the last stages of pregnancy. On Christmas Day, she gave birth to a son. It was a difficult birth—a forceps delivery—and the state of mother and child soon gave cause for alarm. The baby was baptized at home on 27 December—not by Knittel or Ress, the senior clergymen at the principal church (Ress was already in conflict with Lessing over the *Fragments* of Reimarus), but by their junior colleague Johann Christoph Tutenberg;[146] Lessing's friend and physician J. F. J. Topp stood in as witness and godfather. Lessing called his son Traugott, the name of a paternal uncle and of two of his

[143] A (2005) 427–8 and 656. [144] See Raabe (1997) 56.
[145] A (2005) 434; Mendelssohn to L., 19 November 1777; L. to Karl Lessing, 20 September 1777.
[146] See D 444 and Raabe (1997) 103.

own brothers who had died in infancy;[147] the name is also suggestive of his personal piety, of that trust in providence which features in all the major works of his final years.

The child died a few hours after he was christened. The searing grief and terrible cynicism of Lessing's note thanking Eschenburg for his commiseration have made it perhaps the most celebrated letter of its kind in the German language:[148]

> I snatch a moment while my wife lies quite insensible to thank you for your kind concern. My joy was only brief. And I was so loath to lose him, this son! For he had such good sense! such good sense!—Can you believe that the few hours of my fatherhood were enough to make me such a jackass of a father! I know what I am saying.—Was it not good sense that they had to drag him into the world with iron forceps? that he was so soon revolted by it? [*dass er sobald Unrat merkte*] Was it not good sense that he seized the first opportunity to leave it again?—Of course the little rascal will drag his mother away after him!—For there is as yet little hope that I shall keep her.—I wished that I too might one day have it as good as other people. But it has not gone well for me.

With its echo of the old medical students' tag *inter urinas et faeces nascimur* (Lessing had briefly attended obstetrics classes at university),[149] this letter marks the return, in intensified form, of 'that witty but also somewhat bitter humour' whose disappearance Mendelssohn had welcomed after Lessing's marriage. On receiving Eschenburg's shocked reply, he explained: 'My failing is not so much despair as levity, which simply finds somewhat bitter and misanthropic expression at times.'[150] But as his religious polemics would shortly show, his bitterness ran deeper than he cared to admit.

In the last days of 1777, his hopes were briefly raised as Eva appeared to be recovering. But it was not to be: she relapsed and died on 10 January and was buried four days later.[151] As he wrote with stoic restraint to Eschenburg (for despite all his praise of the Greeks and their free expression of emotion, the Roman stoicism he so much deplored came far more naturally to him):[152]

> Yesterday morning my wife's remains finally disappeared from my sight.—If I could but purchase with half my remaining days the happiness of spending the other half in this woman's company, how gladly I would do so! But this cannot be: and I must simply begin once more to muddle my way through on my own. A good supply of the laudanum of literary and theological diversions will help me to survive quite tolerably from one day to the next.

As he himself realized, he would never be the same again, and Eva's death undoubtedly shortened his life. Under the circumstances, it is extraordinary how much he

[147] Danzel/Guhrauer I, 4; Hildebrandt (1982) 93–4; cf. also LM XVI, 88.
[148] To Eschenburg, 31 December 1777.
[149] A (2005) 75 and KGL 34.
[150] To Eschenburg, 7 January 1778.
[151] D 444.
[152] To Eschenburg, 14 January 1778 (for understandable reasons, the dates of L's letters and of the events to which they refer at this time are not always reliable).

31 Dec. 1777

1

Mein Lieber, Eschenburg!

Ich ergreife den Augenblick, da mir eine Frau ganze Stunden Bedenkzeit läßt, um Ihnen für Ihren gütigen Beifall zu danken. Meine Freude war nur kurz; und ich war so ein armer, armer Vater! denn er hatte so viel Vergnügen! so viel Vergnügen! — Glauben Sie nicht, daß der wenigen Stunden, in einem Vaterschoße, mich sehr zu so einem artigen Vater gemacht haben! Ich weiß, was ich sage. — Aber es muß Vergnügen, daß man ihn mit vielen Jahren auch der Welt zeigen müßte? daß er selbst Urtheil merkte? — Aber es muß Vergnügen, daß er der erste Gegenstand ergötzt, sich wieder dem zu nähern, — traurig genug mir der kleine Unglücksbote auf der Mutter mit fort! — demnach ist wenig Hoffnung, daß ich sie erhalten werde. — Ich wollte es wäre nur einmal so gut für den, wie andere Menschen. Aber es ist mir schlecht bekommen.

Lessing.

Fig. 39. Lessing's letter to Eschenburg, 31 December 1777, on the death of his son.

would achieve in his few remaining years. But his immediate concern was the welfare of the orphaned children. He advised his brother in Berlin on how to break the news to Theodor, whose wish, as expected, was to return home as soon as possible.[153] He then moved into the room at the rear of the house in which Eva had died,[154] and turned his attention to the hostile responses of the theologians to the *Fragments* of Reimarus.

[153] To Karl Lessing, 12 January 1778.

[154] See Raabe (1997) 57–8.

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18

Reimarus, Goeze, and the Theological Conflict: 1776–1779

The eighteenth century was a time of rapid and fundamental change in religious thought. The chief motors of this change were the closely linked concepts of nature and reason, both of them secular in origin and deriving much of their authority from the scientific revolution of the previous century. The quest for a rational basis for religion, though a common concern of the Enlightenment, had particular urgency in the German empire, where three Christian confessions competed for recognition.

In the opinion of most thinkers, this rational basis was to be found in natural religion.[1] Few disagreed that its central tenets—the existence of a wise and benevolent God, the freedom of human beings to choose between good and evil, and the immortality of the soul with rewards and punishments in the afterlife—could be demonstrated as natural truths by means of reason. But beyond these articles of rational belief lay the realm of revelation, whose uneasy relationship with reason was a constant source of argument and speculation. Some were content, like Leibniz and Wolff, to accept that, while Christian mysteries such as the Trinity, original sin, and the vicarious satisfaction could not be demonstrated, they could at least be defended as above, though not contrary to reason. Others, among them the German neologists, progressively discarded most doctrines of this kind, retaining only those elements of traditional dogmatics which the individual theologian believed were compatible with reason and the rules of evidence. More radically still, other thinkers, beginning with the English deists of the early eighteenth century such as John Toland and Matthew Tindal, took the view that, since natural religion incorporates all the basic truths on which salvation depends, revealed religion is superfluous and in any case unverifiable. This line of thinking, whose chief exponent in Germany was Hermann Samuel Reimarus, was eventually eclipsed by the critical philosophies of Hume and Kant, in which reason finally devoured its own children: natural religion and rational theology were now pronounced philosophically unsustainable, and in Kant's case, the propositions of natural religion survived only as regulative supports for practical morality.

In parallel with these developments, the Bible, as the textual basis of revealed religion, was subjected to ever more rigorous philological and historical scrutiny. The doctrine of literal inspiration, fundamental to Lutheran orthodoxy, had already

[1] On the following, see Byrne *passim*.

been undermined by Spinoza's *Theologico-Political Treatise* (1670), Richard Simon's *Histoire critique du Vieux Testament* (1678), and other works which showed by close textual analysis that the scriptural canon had been compiled over a long period of time and from a variety of oral and written sources, some of them corrupt or inaccurate. It followed from this that the Bible could and should be treated like any historical document of secular origin, and that its reports of miraculous events should be treated with scepticism. In the first half of the eighteenth century, the foremost German exponent of this line of enquiry was once again Reimarus, for whom textual criticism and naturalistic explanation became means of discrediting the empirical basis of revealed religion.

In this ongoing interplay of philosophy and theology, reason and revelation, textual criticism and scriptural testimony, it became ever more obvious that some authority beyond rational demonstration and biblical evidence was necessary to underpin Christian faith. In the Protestant world, Schleiermacher found this authority in pre-rational emotional commitment, while Catholics continued to rely, as before, on church tradition. Reimarus and Lessing are key figures in these developments, and Lessing's publication of Reimarus's *Fragments* generated one of the most far-reaching conflicts in the history of Lutheran Christianity. But while Reimarus set out to demolish Christianity altogether, Lessing made most of the positions outlined above the object of open-ended discussion. Before Lessing's own opinions are considered, some account must be first be given of the work of Reimarus, and of the extracts from it which Lessing published.

Reimarus's *Apologia or Defence of the Rational Worshippers of God* (*Apologie oder Schutzschrift für die vernünftigen Verehrer Gottes*) is a systematic assault on the Bible, which it presents as a tissue of fraud and imposture, employed throughout the ages by the priesthood to exploit and tyrannize the faithful. The scandal which arose after Lessing published his extracts from it was intense and long-lasting: a proposal a century later to include a tribute to Reimarus on the plinth of the Lessing memorial in Hamburg, though ultimately successful, generated enough opposition to delay the memorial's completion, and the *Apologia* itself was not published in its entirety for a further hundred years.[2] These circumstances call for some explanation, for few of Reimarus' arguments were new: the deists in England and Holbach's circle in France—not to mention the mass of clandestine anti-religious literature circulating in Europe throughout the eighteenth century—were no less radical, and Reimarus drew on at least the first and third of these sources. The magnitude of the scandal was certainly due in part to the fact that the German Enlightenment was more conservative than that of France or Britain, primarily because nearly all its leading thinkers, unlike those of France and Britain, were state employees. The *Apologia* was also remarkable for its length and thoroughness: the complete edition of 1972 runs to well over 1,500 pages. But above all, the identity of the author, widely rumoured from the start and finally confirmed in 1814, came as a shock to all who remembered Reimarus as a pillar of Hamburg society and a distinguished

[2] See Reimarus (1972).

scholar whose *Treatises on the Principal Truths of Natural Religion* (*Abhandlungen von den vornehmsten Wahrheiten der natürlichen Religion,* 1754) was regarded by many, including Kant, as the greatest work of its kind in German and a testimony to the author's personal piety.[3]

A native of Hamburg, Hermann Samuel Reimarus was born in 1694. He attended the universities of Jena and Wittenberg, initially as a student of theology but subsequently of philosophy and philology. From 1720 to 1721, he travelled to England and Holland, visiting the libraries of Oxford and Leiden. In 1728, he became professor of Hebrew and oriental languages at the Academic Gymnasium in Hamburg, a post which he held until his death; he also lectured on philosophy, mathematics, and science. He married the daughter of the famous philologist J. A. Fabricius, in due course inheriting Fabricius' collection of manuscripts.[4] He took an active role in Hamburg life and in some of the reform projects of that city, and published substantial works on logic and animal behaviour (the latter an offshoot of his work on natural religion).

Around the middle of the 1730s, Reimarus found that, although he continued to approve of the moral teachings of Christ, he could no longer reconcile the central dogmas of Christianity—especially the Trinity—with his own (essentially Wolffian) philosophical principles; his work as a Hebraist also convinced him that the behaviour of many revered Old Testament figures fell far short of the moral standards he himself recognized. The crisis of conscience which these discoveries precipitated is graphically described in his preface to the final version of the *Apologia*.[5] At around the same time, he planned a great work on natural and revealed religion,[6] but soon realized that the sustained critique of the Bible which this would entail could not safely be published; instead, he wrote and published the other works already mentioned, and continued in private to write and revise the *Apologia*, completing the final version shortly before his death. By this time, he had made his peace with his conscience: his deistic piety, metaphysical optimism, and strict morality remained integral parts of his own non-Christian system of belief.

He did, however, suffer acutely under the strain which his enforced duplicity imposed upon him.[7] Some of the close friends to whom he showed his clandestine work—they included the poet Brockes and the Hamburg senators J. D. Klefeker and J. P. Spreckelsen[8]—offered to publish it in whole or in part, but he steadfastly resisted their appeals. He declared in the opening paragraph of his preface that the work should remain unpublished 'until the times become more enlightened', for he feared that, if the contents became known, the common mass might be fired with 'furious religious zeal' by its spiritual mentors.[9] He also knew that, given the power of the Hamburg clergy under J. M. Goeze and the persecution of other German heretics such as Edelmann and J. L. Schmidt (translator of Spinoza, Tindal, and the so-called 'Wertheim Bible' of 1735),[10] he would inevitably be ostracized

[3] See Kant AA V, 476–7. [4] See Spalding 60–1. [5] Reimarus I, 46–8.
[6] Ibid. 11–13. [7] See ibid. I, 129–30. [8] See Kopitzsch (1998) 17–18; Boehart 109.
[9] Reimarus I, 41. [10] See Gawlick (1973) 16–17.

and removed from office, with dire consequences for his wife and family. His son and elder daughter, who shared their father's principles, became the guardians of his legacy when he died in 1768.

The manuscript of the *Apologia* which Lessing acquired towards the end of his stay in Hamburg was that of an early version, completed around 1750 and very much shorter than the final version.[11] Despite considerable differences in detail and the increased virulence of the finished work, the tendency of both versions is essentially the same. Already in 1770, Lessing was anxious that the work should be published, and he showed it to Mendelssohn towards the end of that year with this in mind.[12] He discussed it further with his Berlin friends when he visited them a year later, but both Mendelssohn and Nicolai advised him not to publish it, foreseeing nothing but trouble if he did so; Elise Reimarus also objected to this plan.[13] Three years later, however, Lessing decided unilaterally to publish the first of his *Fragments*, entitled 'On the Toleration of Deists' ('Von Duldung der Deisten'), in the third issue of his periodical *On History and Literature*, placing it immediately after his defence of the heretic Adam Neuser.[14] By falsely claiming that he had discovered the manuscript from which it came in the ducal library, he was able to publish it without consulting the censor; and to put the curious off the scent, he suggested that the author was possibly J. L. Schmidt, translator of the 'Wertheim Bible', who had died in Wolfenbüttel twenty-five years before. The fragment contained some of Reimarus' protests at the silence or hypocrisy to which he and other opponents of revealed religion were obliged to resort, but it did not attack Christianity itself. It would probably have escaped prohibition even if it had been submitted to the censor, and for good measure, Lessing added that active hostility to Christianity could not expect the same degree of toleration as deism.

Emboldened by the lack of opposition, Lessing returned to his plan to publish further material from the manuscript.[15] Voss agreed to take it on, provided that Lessing added a preface and that the Berlin censor, W. A. Teller, had no objections.[16] But although Teller declared that he would not oppose publication, he was not prepared to add his official approval.[17] Lessing accordingly decided to publish further instalments in *On History and Literature*, and devoted the entire fourth issue to five more fragments of the *Apologia*. He sent an advance copy to J. A. H. Reimarus, justifying his decision to publish with the words: 'What has to happen must happen soon or not at all; for what use is it if the arrow is released only after the target has shifted?'[18] The five fragments duly appeared in the first days of 1777.[19]

[11] See Alexander (1972) *passim*; cf. Reimarus I, 20–4 and B VIII, 887.
[12] See Mendelssohn to L., 29 November 1770.
[13] See KGL 182; B VIII, 893; D 316.
[14] LM XII, 254–71.
[15] See L. to Karl Lessing, 11 November 1774.
[16] See Karl Lessing to L., 26 November 1774.
[17] See B XI/2, 1082; KGL 182; also Stickler 105.
[18] L. to J. A. H. Reimarus, July 1776.
[19] LM XII, 301–450.

Lessing claimed, in his preface, that a number of readers had written to applaud his publication of the first fragment in 1774, and that one of them had begged him to publish the boldest material from the manuscript to dispel any suspicion that it might contain insuperable objections to the Christian faith. No such letters survive, and given the pedestrian nature and generally unexceptionable sentiments of 'On the Toleration of Deists', it is difficult to believe that any were written. Once again, Lessing was looking for any excuses he could find to publish the *Fragments*—and on this occasion, he certainly needed them.

The first fragment is harmless enough: not unlike Kant's essay 'What is Enlightenment?' of a few years later, it defends the right and duty to use one's own reason in religious as well as other matters, and condemns those who decry reason as corrupt and presume to dictate to others what they ought to believe. The second is more contentious, for it argues that it is impossible for any divine revelation to reach more than a handful of people directly, so that the vast majority of mankind has to rely on hearsay evidence of what others claim to have experienced. By the same token, the majority must decide which, if any, of such claims are sufficiently convincing to warrant the leap of faith. The third fragment is more specific in its criticism: it casts doubt on a famous Old Testament miracle, raising elaborate, but basically familiar objections to the supposed parting of the Red Sea to allow huge numbers of Israelites to cross on foot before it engulfed Pharaoh's pursuing army. The fourth enters more dangerous territory by claiming that, since the Old Testament contains no clear statement of the doctrine of immortality, it cannot embody a religion of salvation, for which the doctrine of immortality is by definition essential. (Lessing's personal response to this claim, *The Education of the Human Race*, will be discussed in the next chapter.) Finally, with a dramatist's sense for climactic effect, Lessing saves the most contentious fragment to the end. In it, Reimarus identifies ten contradictions in the evangelists' reports of the Resurrection, concluding that the disciples secretly removed Christ's body and jointly fabricated the story of his return to life.

There could no longer be any doubt that this second set of fragments would not have passed the Brunswick censorship, or that, despite Lessing's later protestations,[20] he had violated the terms of his exemption, which required him not to print 'anything which might offend religion and propriety'. It was also certain that this latest publication would elicit a storm of protest, and that Lessing must have foreseen that this would happen. But as pressure built up against him in 1778 and some of his opponents objected that the disciples had no conceivable motive for inventing the story of the Resurrection,[21] he characteristically raised the stakes even higher. He published a seventh, book-length fragment entitled *On the Aim of Jesus and his Disciples* to provide a fuller context for the fragment on the Resurrection, and commented provocatively in his preface: 'The fire must be supplied with air before it can be extinguished.'[22] In this longer fragment, Reimarus maintains that

[20] L. to Duke Karl, 11 July 1778. [21] B VIII, 1022–3.
[22] LM XIII, 215–327 (quotation in XIII, 219).

Jesus set out as a secular and political messiah whose mission was to rescue and lead the Jewish nation. But when this aim was frustrated by the crucifixion, his disciples enlarged on his claims and, with the later assistance of Paul, presented the risen Christ as a spiritual messiah sent to redeem mankind as a whole; their motive for so doing was to increase their own worldly power and influence.

Reimarus's approach to the Bible is governed by his conviction that natural religion is the sole source of religious truth, and that all other doctrines allegedly derived from revelation are necessarily false. The main aims of his Biblical criticism are accordingly to highlight contradictions, to question the accuracy of prophecies, to unmask supposed miracles as lies or illusions, and to impugn the integrity of the Biblical authors and the figures they hold up as exemplary. All of these were, of course, well-tried strategies of the radical Enlightenment, and Reimarus's references to Spinoza, Bayle, Toland, Collins and other English deists place him firmly within that tradition. But although the theory that all religion is based on priestcraft and imposture would enjoy a sporadic afterlife—as in Marx's doctrine of religion as the opium of the people and Nietzsche's *The Antichrist*—it was already obvious to most eighteenth-century thinkers that this theory is a gross simplification.[23] Mendelssohn was struck by the crude reductionism of Reimarus's psychology, commenting to Lessing: 'He derives everything from evil, cruel, and misanthropic motives, whereas even the leader of a band of robbers must at least combine good motives with bad.'[24] Lessing himself never accepted the imposture theory, and it is firmly rejected in *Nathan the Wise*, in which the precise origin of the different religions is dismissed as irrelevant: the true measure of a religion's worth is the moral conduct of its adherents.[25]

In this and other respects, Reimarus's psychology is rudimentary, as Lessing cannot have failed to recognize. His rampant anti-semitism[26] must likewise have been repellent to the author of *The Jews* and *Nathan the Wise*. And his long-winded, repetitive prose, his obsessive desire to make everything fit his conspiracy theory, his doggedly literal readings of even the most lyrical passages, and not least, the complete lack of all but involuntary humour with which he applies rationalistic models to mythical or poetic events (as in his statistical analysis of the Red Sea crossing and his morally outraged commentary on the Song of Songs)[27] must at least have tried Lessing's patience. Why, then, was he prepared to risk his reputation on publishing such imperfect material?

In the first place, he admired Reimarus as an outsider—albeit a covert one—for he had always felt drawn to those who went their own way in defiance of convention, and he relished idiosyncrasies such as misplaced pedantry and disrespect for venerated heroes. Besides, Reimarus' weaknesses are often the obverse of his strengths. For example, the counterpart of his lack of imagination is his logical acuteness. He is ever alert to circular arguments in defence of revelation, and says

[23] See Nisbet (1979b) 381–2.
[24] To L., 29 November 1770.
[25] Cf. Nisbet (1979b) 382–7.
[26] See, for example, Reimarus I, 416–24; also Strauss (1862) 76–7 and Reventlow (1965) 434.
[27] Reimarus I, 710–12.

of the Biblical writers: 'Revelation alone has the right to prove itself by begging the question: the writers are inspired by God, for they say so themselves: proof enough!'[28] Or again, he pounces on category mistakes in a manner which Lessing would emulate, declaring: 'It does not follow that, since Jesus made a blind man see and a cripple walk, God has three persons and Jesus is truly God and man.'[29] His literal-mindedness is likewise balanced by his philological rigour. He insists, for example, that such terms as 'son of God' and 'son of man' be understood in their original, colloquial senses, without dogmatic accretions,[30] and that each book of the Bible be read in the light of its contemporary context and purpose. He was, in other words, a pioneer of historical-critical exegesis,[31] and he dismisses the old *hermeneutica sacra* with its allegorical and typological readings as 'the art of making anything out of anything'.[32] It follows from this that all attempts, for example, to discover references in the Old Testament to New Testament events are necessarily mistaken. What Lessing found here was accordingly a more radical version of the new hermeneutics currently being developed by J. S. Semler, Michaelis, and other neologists who sought to apply historical methods and textual criticism to the study of the Bible. In 1774, he even considered publishing, in response to Semler's *Treatise on the Free Examination of the Canon* (1771–5), parallel extracts from Reimarus under the title *An Even Freer Examination of the Canon*.[33] In short, he saw in Reimarus' work an ideal instrument for bringing the latent tensions and unresolved questions of contemporary theology out into the open.

Inevitably, there was much speculation when the *Fragments* were published as to who their anonymous author might be. His identity was known almost at once by many, including Hamann, Herder, Gleim, and J. G. Zimmermann,[34] and Lessing's own remarks, in his polemics against Ress and Goeze, on the scholarly distinction of the author clearly imply that he knew who he was.[35] But although Elise Reimarus and her brother suspected that Lessing had divulged their secret,[36] copies of the clandestine work, perhaps made by some of those to whom Reimarus himself had shown it, were already in circulation.[37] Elise Reimarus, a passionate supporter of the progressive Enlightenment, was willing to allow extracts from the *Apologia*, though not the work in its entirety, to be published, and was at one point even in favour of revealing the fragmentist's identity.[38] But her brother, more apprehensive by nature and fearing that his mother, who seems to have known nothing of her late husband's clandestine activity, might suffer from such a disclosure, was horrified when Lessing published the seventh and most virulent of the fragments.[39] When the younger Reimarus at last revealed his father's authorship in 1814 and

[28] LM XII, 352; cf. D 441–2. [29] LM XIII, 305; cf. LM XIII, 6.
[30] See, for example, Reimarus II, 61–2; cf. Stemmer 147–8. [31] See Schultze (1978) 712.
[32] Reimarus I, 726 and 807. [33] L. to Karl Lessing, 11 November 1774.
[34] See A (2003) 268–9 and 295; D 405 and 463. [35] LM XIII, 23, 103, 194–6.
[36] A (2003) 269; also J. A. H. Reimarus to L., 19 March 1778.
[37] See Campe to Nicolai, 26 January 1778 in A (2003) 272; also L. to Duke Karl, 20 July 1778.
[38] Elise Reimarus to L., 13 March 1779; cf. Alexander (1972) 162.
[39] J. A. H. Reimarus to L., 19 March and 16 June 1778; also Spalding 48–9.

donated the manuscript of the final version to the Hamburg city library, the author's identity had long been an open secret.

To the main batch of five fragments which he published at the beginning of 1777, Lessing appended his own 'Counter-Propositions' ('Gegensätze'), in which he enunciates most of the principles which inform his subsequent polemics. Some of these propositions are designed to reassure ordinary believers, as when he declares that, while revealed religion contains all the truths of natural religion, it also contains truths which are not (or, as he argues in *The Education of the Human Race*, not yet) fully intelligible to reason.[40] But more important, his main endeavour is to separate what he calls the 'spirit' of religion from the 'letter' of Scripture. In thereby driving a wedge between religion and the Bible, he is in fact rejecting the central principle of Lutheran theology according to which the Scripture alone (*sola scriptura*) is the supreme authority in matters of faith.[41] This enables him to criticize the Bible as a fallible historical document, and to argue that the fragmentist's attacks on its text, and on any doctrines directly derived from it, do not affect the essentials of religion. It also prepares the way for his later studies of the formation of the canon in the period between Christ's death and the composition of the written gospels, during which oral tradition was the sole or main repository of Christian doctrine.

One of the effects of Lessing's distinction between spirit and letter is to make the former—that is, the essential truth of Christianity—much more fluid and intangible than before. In keeping with this fluidity, he now declares that feeling, rather than doctrinal formulas, is the surest way to religious truth for the ordinary Christian and the best defence against threats to his faith:[42]

> But what do this man's [i.e. the learned theologian's] hypotheses, explanations and proofs matter to the Christian? For him, Christianity is simply *there*, that same Christianity which he *feels* is so true and in which he *feels* himself so blessed.—When the paralysed patient *experiences* the salutary shock of the electric spark, what does he care whether Nollet, Franklin, or neither of the two is right?

This new emphasis on feeling as a source of religious and philosophical insight, already evident in *On a Timely Task* of 1776 and often reiterated in Lessing's late writings on religion,[43] has obvious advantages. It enables him to recognize in particular the simple faith of simple people, which he had always respected, as beyond the reach of the fragmentist's attacks. And more important, it enables him to avoid committing himself to any specific dogmas, or even to any particular Christian confession, thereby making his own position more difficult to identify or refute. But it also has major disadvantages. If the believer's feeling relates to more than just natural religion (which is in any case by definition accessible to reason), are we to assume that Jews, Moslems, and adherents of other revealed religions have similar feelings about their faith? And if they do, what guarantee is there that these feelings

[40] LM XII, 432–5.
[41] LM XII, 428; cf. Loewenich 25 and Werner (1984c) 46.
[42] LM XII, 428.
[43] See, for example, LM XIII, 99, 120, 123, 127–9, 134, 155 and XVI, 476.

have any definable or universally valid content?[44] And secondly, how are we to reconcile this view that feeling is the essence of religious belief with the rationalistic views on revelation which Lessing supports elsewhere (especially in *The Education of the Human Race*)? Or to put it differently, if feeling is a sufficient basis for religious belief, what need is there for any rational defence of its truth—or, indeed, for publishing the *Fragments* with their rational criticisms of Christianity? Be that as it may, Lessing's emphasis on emotional subjectivity does at least acknowledge a factor which, since the advent of Pietism, had become a prominent part of Lutheran faith for many,[45] and which, with Schleiermacher, would soon be accorded a central place in Lutheran theology.

Religious faith must, however, have an object, and Lessing has a term for it. He calls it the 'inner truth' of religion, and declares: 'the scriptural records must be explained by its [i.e. the Christian faith's] inner truth, and no scriptural records can give it any inner truth if it does not already have it'.[46] Only on one occasion does he give a more precise definition of this concept, namely in the Breslau fragment *On the Origin of Revealed Religion*, where he defines it as 'the indispensability of a positive [i.e. revealed] religion, whereby natural religion is modified in each state according to that state's natural and fortuitous condition'. In other words, the 'inner truth' of a particular religion resides in those modifications to natural religion which make it indispensable to the state or community which practises it. Such 'inner truth', he adds, is present in equal measure in all positive religions.[47]

This definition is not, however, renewed in the 'Counter-Propositions' of 1777, and it has in any case already been noted (in Chapter 17) that his views on religion had changed significantly since he wrote the above fragment. The fact remains that Lessing, normally so fond of sharp definitions, makes no attempt to define the 'inner truth' of Christianity, and even, in the subsequent treatise (the *Axiomata* of 1778) in which he further elucidates the 'Counter-Propositions', studiously refrains from doing so. As with the related concept of religious feeling, it would seem that he found the concept of 'inner truth' useful for its very vagueness, which would allow him to criticize orthodoxy, deism, or any religious tendency he chose, without committing himself to a definite theological position which might expose him to counter-attacks.[48] For this and other reasons, it is not surprising that there has never been any general agreement on his 'real' views on religion in his later writings,[49] and there is plainly little prospect of resolving this issue on the evidence just considered. Instead, it may be more helpful at this point, before examining the polemical exchanges which followed the publication of the *Fragments*, to ask what exactly Lessing hoped to achieve by publishing them.

Near the beginning of the religious controversy, Lessing points out that he is not a theologian but an 'amateur' (*Liebhaber*) of theology with no official ties to any theological system. He also rejects the role of adjudicator in any religious conflict,

[44] Cf. Guthke (2005c) 123. [45] See Sparn 152. [46] LM XII, 429.
[47] LM XIV, 312–13. [48] See Schultze (1977) 180.
[49] On this see Fick (2010) 420–5; Albrecht (1997) 82.

since he wishes neither to pass judgement on others nor to be judged himself. In short, the role he hopes to adopt is that of an impartial commentator.

He soon found it impossible, of course, to maintain this position—partly because any criticism on his part was bound to be interpreted as biased, and partly because he not only expected, but actively sought to promote, a theological conflict. Already in the 'Counter-Propositions' of 1777, he declares that religion has not hitherto been properly attacked or properly defended, and that although the fragmentist comes close to the ideal of a true attacker, what is now required is a defender of comparable stature. He goes on to describe the expected conflict with elaborate metaphors of siege warfare,[50] and concludes his commentary by challenging anyone who considers the gospels infallible to resolve all the contradictions identified by the fragmentist.[51]

There is, however, a dangerous asymmetry in Lessing's vision of the conflict he seeks to provoke. For two contestants are necessary in any battle, and in this case, one of them was already dead. There was consequently a risk that Lessing would either be seen as the fragmentist's advocate, or compelled to adopt that position (as in fact eventually happened). And as for the two main parties within Lutheran theology, namely the orthodox and the neologists, he cannot seriously have expected the neologists to take up the cudgels on behalf of the fragmentist, however close they were in some respects (such as textual criticism) to his position. To do so would have been to put their own careers at risk, and they in any case had no use for Reimarus's crude conspiracy theory.[52] Lessing also seems to have realized that he could expect little sympathy from the orthodox, for he told his brother: 'I am anxious to know whether the orthodox will be more displeased with my work than with that of the anonymous author.'[53]

But in so far as he does show his hand in the 'Counter-Propositions', it is the neologists rather than the orthodox that he criticizes. Already in Breslau, he had lost patience with Christian apologetics, especially that of the neologists, for glossing over the distinction between revelation and reason,[54] and both in his commentary to the fragment 'On the Toleration of Deists' and in the 'Counter-Propositions', he attacks this position as intellectually inadequate:[55]

> Faith has become reason reinforced by miracles and portents, and reason has become faith reinforced by rational thought. The whole of revealed religion is nothing but an additional reinforcement of the religion of reason. It either contains no mysteries at all, or if there are any, it is immaterial whether the Christian associates them with this or that concept or with no concept at all. [...] But if there can and must be a revelation, [...] reason must regard it rather as an additional proof of its truth if it finds in it things which are beyond its comprehension. [...] For what is a revelation that reveals nothing?

[50] LM XII, 430; cf. XIII, 22. [51] LM XII, 449–50.
[52] See Aner 309; on the position of the neologists see also Bianco *passim*.
[53] To Karl Lessing, 8 January 1777.
[54] See Pons (1980) 383; also Vollhardt (2002) 40–2 and *passim*.
[55] LM XII, 431–2; cf. Aner 90.

Or to borrow a phrase from a later commentator, the neologists imply that 'Christianity is true precisely to the extent that it is superfluous.'[56] In comparison with such reasoning, Lessing finds the orthodox doctrine that mysteries are mysterious and miracles miraculous more consistent, and ultimately unassailable:[57]

> if the orthodox believer answers thus, how can I refute him? We can shrug our shoulders at his answer as much as we like, but we must let him stand where he stands [...]. This consistency, which enables one to predict how a man will speak and act in a given instance, is what makes him a man and gives him character and constancy [...].

Lessing's main aim in publishing the fragments was therefore not to antagonize the orthodox, but to compel the neologists, by confronting them with a more radical rationalistic interpretation of Christianity than their own, to reveal their true position with regard to revelation.[58] But as Nicolai, who had a keener awareness of politics than Lessing, predicted, the neologists were unlikely to accept this challenge: academics like Semler and Michaelis, who lacked the legal protection which the clergy enjoyed, would remain silent and take shelter behind the orthodox—at least until they saw in what direction the wind was blowing.[59] And so it turned out, for the great majority of Lessing's adversaries were serving clergymen or non-university teachers. And despite all his efforts to remain or appear neutral, Lessing soon found himself under attack for bringing such objectionable material as the *Fragments* to light in the first place.

The conflict which followed was complex and protracted.[60] Apart from numerous reviews,[61] around fifty responses were published between 1777 and 1780;[62] all of them took issue with the fragments, and many with Lessing himself. The first came from Johann Daniel Schumann, headmaster of the Lyceum (a classical grammar school) in Hanover and a moderate neologist who had already written several works of Christian apologetics. His *On the Evidence of the Proofs of the Truth of Christianity* (*Über die Evidenz der Beweise für die Wahrheit der christlichen Religion*), a book of 167 pages, was published in September 1777.[63] Although it defends the truth of Christianity against the *Fragments*, it is not polemical. Lessing's reply, *On the Proof of the Spirit and the Power* (*Über den Beweis des Geistes und der Kraft*), followed in October or November; it is only six pages long, and is likewise free from polemics.[64]

The title of Lessing's work echoes a phrase borrowed from St Paul by the Church Father Origen, for whom it denotes two kinds of proof of the truth of Christianity, namely through its fulfilment of prophecies (the spirit) and through the miracles performed in its name (the power). These are the proofs which Schumann expounds at length in his work, and which Lessing examines in his reply. Lessing has two basic objections. He firstly declares that, whereas he would readily have accepted all of Christ's doctrines if he had personally witnessed his miracles and his fulfilment

[56] Allison (1966) 16. [57] LM XII, 442–3; cf. D 308 and L. to Karl Lessing, 20 March 1777.
[58] See Arno Schilson in B VIII, 850–1. [59] Nicolai to L., 8 March 1771.
[60] On the chronology of the conflict see B IX, 760–7.
[61] See B VIII, 894–902; IX, 976–86 and 1022–8. [62] See B VIII, 960.
[63] Text in B VIII, 355–435; commentary in B VIII, 964–93. [64] LM XIII, 3–8.

of previously known prophecies, merely historical reports of such events are not sufficient to demonstrate the truth of any doctrines, and in particular, of Christ's claim to be the son of God. And secondly, he declares that historical truths, which are not necessary but contingent, cannot demonstrate the necessary truths of reason nor compel him to believe something which his reason refuses to accept. In both cases, he detects a category mistake in Schumann's arguments. He then points out, in response to Schumann's insistence that Christ himself vouched for his divinity and that the words of Scripture are divinely inspired, that these claims are themselves only historical reports; and he continues with one of the most famous passages in all of his writings on religion:[65]

> This, this is the broad and ugly ditch which I cannot get across, no matter how often and earnestly I have tried to make the leap. If anyone can help me over it, I beg and implore him to do so. He will earn a divine reward for so doing.

These words of agonized religious doubt are without parallel in Lessing's earlier writings and private utterances (except in the largely derivative poetic fragment *Die Religion* which he wrote at the age of twenty), and they deserve to be treated with caution. It is difficult to take seriously a professed craving for certainty on the part of someone who repeatedly indicates his preference for uncertainty and endless enquiry, and the hyperbolic expression of his alleged doubts increases the impression of irony. The reasons for this irony will shortly emerge; but first of all, Lessing's arguments against Schumann call for further analysis.

Ever since Lavater, in 1769, had urged Mendelssohn either to refute Bonnet's supposed proofs of Christian doctrine, which relied chiefly on the historical reports of the Bible, or become a Christian, Lessing had regarded such proofs with suspicion.[66] Against Schumann, he therefore echoes Reimarus' declarations of principle that our knowledge of revelation is not direct, but based on the reports of others,[67] and that the miracles of Christ, as historical reports, cannot demonstrate doctrines concerning the nature of God.[68] He now gives the latter proposition philosophical underpinning by declaring that the contingent truths of history cannot demonstrate the necessary truths of reason.

Critics have often maintained that this distinction is derived from Leibniz's distinction between the contingent truths of fact and the necessary truths of reason.[69] But Lessing's specific reference to *historical* truths as an inadequate basis for rational truths concerning the divinity is more reminiscent of Spinoza, who makes precisely that point in his *Tractatus*.[70] More important, however, than the precise source of these ideas is the implication throughout Lessing's reply to Schumann that knowledge of God can only be gained by means of reason, as when he describes the doctrine of the Trinity as 'something which my reason refuses to accept'.[71]

[65] LM XIII, 7; on the history of this metaphor see Michalson *passim*.
[66] See Allison (1966) 102 and 189–90.
[67] LM XIII, 3–4; cf. XII, 319. [68] LM XIII, 6; cf. XIII, 305.
[69] See, for example, Traub 199; Ullmann 125; cf. Leibniz I, 422 (*Monadologie*) and III, 27–9.
[70] Spinoza I, 61. [71] LM XIII, 6.

There is no suggestion here, as there was in the 'Counter-Propositions', that the 'inner truth' of religion is primarily accessible to feeling. For as Goeze would shortly point out,[72] Lessing now seems to imply that religious truth lies primarily in natural, as opposed to revealed religion.

Lessing's arguments in this essay are also by no means free from inconsistency. As Kierkegaard already noticed, Lessing's assertion that, if he had personally experienced Christ's miracles and fulfilment of prophecies, he might well be convinced that his doctrines were true does not tally with his declaration soon afterwards that the contingent (i.e. empirical) truths of history cannot demonstrate necessary truths of reason.[73] For even direct personal experience is empirical and contingent. Lessing elides this distinction not, I think, because he failed to notice it, but in order not to give the lie to Origen, whose reference to personally experienced as distinct from past miracles he had just used in support of his argument against Schumann.[74]

At the end of his essay, Lessing puts aside the question of Christianity's historical truth in favour of its beneficent effects, which, he maintains, should be cherished irrespective of the truth or falsehood of the doctrines from which they flow. This pragmatic consideration supplies the transition to a second short work, the dialogue *The Testament of St John* (*Das Testament Johannis*), which he published as an immediate sequel to *On the Proof of the Spirit and the Power*.[75] He introduces it with the words:

> I shall end with this wish: may all those whom the gospel of St John divides be reunited by St John's testament! It is admittedly apocryphal, this testament – but not for that reason any the less divine.

In this brilliant little dialogue, two speakers, 'I' and 'He', defend respectively the pragmatic view of Christianity's value just outlined in Lessing's reply to Schumann, and the opposite view, approximating to that of Schumann, according to which Christian morality is of little use without the backing of Christian doctrine. The subject of the argument is the apocryphal anecdote, recorded by St Jerome and reported by 'I', according to which the aged St John's sermons became shorter and shorter until they eventually consisted of only a single sentence, the injunction 'Little children, love one another!'; and when his puzzled congregation finally asked why he spoke only these words, he replied: 'Because the Lord commanded it. Because this alone, this alone, if it is done, is sufficient.' In the half serious, half bantering dialogue, in which the speakers quarrel to the end in stark contrast to the injunction over which they argue, Lessing simultaneously sums up the concluding message of his previous essay and implies that his disagreement with Schumann is a perennial issue which will, and should, continue to be debated.

The humour and irony of this little dialogue give us a clue on how to interpret the work to which it is appended. It, too, shows unmistakable signs of irony even in its opening paragraph, in which Lessing likens the craving for truth which led him to devour Schumann's long-winded work to the hunger of the mythological

[72] B IX, 128. [73] See Traub 201–6. [74] See B VIII, 996. [75] LM XIII, 9–17.

Erisichthon, who consumed anything which even remotely resembled food. This mischievous hyperbole prepares us for the later hyperbole, at the midpoint of the essay, in which Lessing adopts a posture of agonized doubt (routinely taken seriously by the critics), and for his concluding remarks in which, again ironically, he likens the distinction between Christian doctrine and Christian practice to that between quaint superstitions and their sometimes auspicious consequences.

The question remains of why Lessing, who could so easily have subjected Schumann's shaky and laborious reasoning to ridicule, responded in so mild (albeit ironic) a tone. The answer lies partly in Schumann's earnest and manifestly well-intentioned manner and in his repeatedly stated, and no doubt genuine, desire for truth. But above all, it lies in the concluding paragraph of his book. In it, he not only refers respectfully, though not sycophantically, to Lessing, but also contrasts the fragmentist's learned and serious approach favourably with the frivolous mockery of Voltaire; he also describes the *Fragments* as the greatest assault on Christianity to date. In addition, he urges that the rest of the fragments should be published, adding that it is better for the fragmentist's objections to be submitted to public examination than allowed to sow doubt in secret among honest believers.[76] Lessing could only endorse these sentiments, which echo his own, and he for that reason confined his personal criticism of Schumann to gentle irony. When Schumann published a feeble rejoinder to his two texts, Lessing was unable to complete his reply.[77] He told Eschenburg that he could not do so without ridiculing Schumann, and this he had no wish to do.[78]

The next detailed response to the *Fragments* came from closer to home. *The Story of Christ's Resurrection [...] Defended* (*Die Auferstehungsgeschichte Jesu Christi* [...] *verteidiget*), though published anonymously, was by Johann Heinrich Ress, senior preacher at the main Church of St Mary in Wolfenbüttel. Though it dealt only with the fifth of the 1777 *Fragments* (on the discrepancies in the evangelists' reports of the Resurrection), it was even longer than Schumann's work. It was published in November or December 1777 by the Waisenhaus in Brunswick, which had also published the *Fragments* and would subsequently publish Lessing's reply to Ress; as a result, Lessing quickly discovered the author's identity. He wrote his reply, *A Rejoinder* (*Eine Duplik*), in December 1777 or early January 1778—that is, during the time of his own domestic crisis and bereavement.[79]

Ress's work consists of six dialogues between 'A', an anxious doubter whose faith has been shaken by the *Fragments*, and 'B', the mouthpiece of Ress himself, who has no difficulty in banishing his interlocutor's disquiet by explaining away the ten supposed contradictions in the gospels.[80] Lessing's *Rejoinder* examines Ress's attempted resolutions at some length and finds them contrived and implausible. He also takes issue with two general aspects of Ress's procedure, namely his use of historical evidence and his moral condemnation of the fragmentist.

The first of these objections is essentially the same as Lessing's main objection to Schumann. It concerns Ress's use—or rather misuse—of historical evidence, as in

[76] B VIII, 434–5. [77] LM XVI, 401–4. [78] To Eschenburg, 7 January 1778.
[79] LM XIII, 19–90. [80] See B VIII, 475–503 (extracts from Ress's dialogues).

his claims that the disciples' transition from despair to hope proves the facticity of the Resurrection and that the Resurrection proves that Christ died for mankind.[81] On this occasion, Lessing points out that historical proofs of this kind came into fashion only some fifty years before,[82] and it is indeed the case that they were first employed on a regular basis in the early 1730s by S. J. Baumgarten,[83] whose influence both on the neologists and on his more orthodox pupils (such as J. M. Goeze) was considerable. To the ill-founded and circular arguments generated by this kind of reasoning, Lessing prefers the plain assertions of earlier dogmatics, which he considers intellectually more honest.[84] He concludes that Ress is more intent on defending his own gospel harmony than on establishing the truth of Christianity.[85]

Lessing's second objection is more serious. Ress not only disagrees with the fragmentist, but accuses him of wilful self-deception, bad faith, and malicious intentions.[86] Just as Eberhard's accusation of hypocrisy on Leibniz's part had induced Lessing to defend Leibniz some years earlier, Ress's moral impeachment of the fragmentist now impels him to support Reimarus and decisively influences the methods and tone of *A Rejoinder*.

Unlike Ress's wooden dialogues, Lessing's work sparkles with rhetorical and stylistic virtuosity. He extracts the maximum irony from his pretended ignorance of Ress's identity, addressing him as 'Nachbar' (neighbour) throughout and concluding from the gaps in his knowledge that he cannot possibly be a theologian.[87] He satirizes him as a decrepit Nestor challenging the powerful Hector (i.e. the fragmentist) and makes him the object of a splendid dialogue in which he repeatedly has to shake him to keep him awake.[88] His register varies from learned citations of the Church Fathers to blunt coarseness, and he at one point likens Ress to a card-sharper dealing losing cards to his opponent (the fragmentist) in order to defeat him.[89] Parodying Ress's unequal dialogue between 'A' and 'B', he in turn conducts a dialogue with the reader in which he, Lessing, actually ends up defending Ress against the reader's outspoken criticisms.[90] There is high comedy here—equal, in Mendelssohn's opinion, to that in Lessing's best comedies;[91] given the dire circumstances in which it was written, it is a remarkable achievement.

But Ress's accusations of bad faith on the part of the fragmentist, and by implication of Lessing for publishing such disreputable material, finally destroyed Lessing's patience. As he admits towards the end, he has in the course of the work abandoned his intended neutrality as a commentator on the arguments and counter-arguments, and passed moral judgements on the two opposing parties. He has, in short, been forced into the posture of his earlier 'vindications', and has defended the fragmentist against the attacks of institutional Christianity. But instead of apologizing, he defiantly resolves never again to remain indifferent when faced with simultaneous abuse of reason and scholarship.[92] In other words, he has once again crossed the threshold of polemics.

[81] B VIII, 492; cf. Kröger 55–6. [82] LM XIII, 31–2.
[83] See B VIII, 969–70 and 1037–8. [84] Cf. Kröger 67. [85] LM XIII, 27–9 and 52.
[86] LM XIII, 23; cf. B VIII, 500–3. [87] LM XIII, 33, 38, etc. [88] LM XIII, 56–8.
[89] LM XIII, 34. [90] LM XIII, 46–50.
[91] See A (2003) 272–3. [92] LM XIII, 89–90.

The most celebrated passage in *A Rejoinder* is, of course, Lessing's often quoted reflection on the search for truth:[93]

> Not the truth which someone possesses or believes he possesses, but the honest effort he has made to get at the truth, constitutes a human being's worth. For it is not through the possession of truth, but through its pursuit, that his powers are enlarged, and it is in this alone that his ever-growing perfection lies. Possession makes us inactive, lazy, and proud—
>
> If God held fast in his right hand the whole of truth and in his left hand only the ever-active quest for truth, albeit with the proviso that I should constantly err, and said to me: 'Choose!', I would humbly fall upon his left hand and say: 'Father, give! For pure truth is for you alone!'

Though this is its most memorable formulation, the attitude expressed here had been part of Lessing's intellectual equipment since the early 1770s. In the present case, the close links between his belief in unceasing enquiry and the optimism of the Enlightenment are especially conspicuous: Lessing has no doubt that, in the longer term, progress and perfectibility will prevail. His statement also applies to his own strategy throughout the religious conflict, for he genuinely has no dogmatic position to offer; as the Latin epigraph on the title page of the work also emphasizes, he writes 'More in order to determine the point at issue than to put anything forward through the discourse.' But his words should also remind us not to take too literally his caveat, in his replies to both Ress and Schumann, that the practical, moral value of Christianity is what really matters and that it is unnecessary, or even foolish, to probe too closely the foundations on which Christianity is built. This advice, both here and in *Nathan the Wise*, is designed to prevent conflict between adherents of different religious persuasions. It does not, however, apply to scholarship, for Lessing himself was already engaged in close studies of canon formation—that is, of the historical foundations of Christianity. The results of these studies, embodied in the substantial fragment *New Hypothesis on the Evangelists as Merely Human Historians*, will be discussed below.

The reviews of *A Rejoinder* were mixed.[94] One critic paid tribute to Lessing's eloquence, declaring that he could, if he wished, defend even the weakest of causes convincingly. Another (Nicolai's theological adviser F. G. Lüdke) deplored the violence and mockery of some of his statements. From this point on, criticisms of his theological writings did in fact become increasingly negative, especially after he published the last and longest of the *Fragments* a few months later.

For several reasons, Lessing's conflict with Johann Melchior Goeze is the most significant of all the controversies which followed his publication of the *Fragments*. In the first place, it was personal: Goeze's assault was directed not so much at the fragmentist as at Lessing himself. Secondly, Lessing was for the first time confronted with an adversary no less determined than himself and equally experienced as a polemicist. Thirdly, although it had never been Lessing's intention to do battle with Lutheran orthodoxy, his conflict with Goeze did at least succeed in polarizing

[93] LM XIII, 23–4; cf. Nisbet (1973) *passim*.

[94] See B VIII, 1027–30.

theological opinion with particular clarity. And finally, Lessing's written output in the course of this conflict was greater than in all the other theological conflicts put together.

It is not at first sight obvious why Goeze should have aimed his attack primarily at Lessing, for as he himself acknowledged, he had been on friendly terms with him in Hamburg.[95] It will also be recalled that Lessing had sympathized with Goeze during the latter's dispute with Alberti, and had appeared to favour the orthodox cause rather than that of neology in several subsequent publications. He had, it is true, offended Goeze more recently by failing to respond to his request to check a reference to an early edition of the Bible in the ducal library.[96] But this alone is scarcely sufficient to explain the directness and ferocity of Goeze's attack on him after the publication of the *Fragments*. In order to explain it, some further reference must be made to Goeze's earlier conflicts and theological principles.

Goeze was born in 1717 and studied theology at the universities of Jena and Halle from 1734 to 1738. After serving as a clergyman at Aschersleben and Magdeburg,[97] he was appointed chief pastor at the church of St Catherine in Hamburg in 1755, succeeding to the post of president (*Senior*) of the city's pastorate in 1760. Renowned for his fiery sermons, he favoured eschatological themes, and arrived in Hamburg just in time to alert that city, after the Lisbon earthquake of November 1755, to its likely fate if it failed to abandon its ungodly ways. As Lichtenberg aptly put it, 'he dragged his people to heaven by the scruff of their necks'.[98]

Goeze's career as a controversialist did not properly begin until 1764, by which time he had reached the age of forty-seven; for this late development, the rapid advance of neology and liberalism during the 1760s was no doubt largely responsible. Thereafter, he made up for lost time, and was in regular conflict with the Hamburg Senate, his fellow clergy, and with all individuals whom he suspected of heresy: Basedow, Alberti, Lüdke, Semler, Bahrdt, and numerous others fell victim to his attacks. Through his sermons, both from the pulpit and subsequently in print, he repeatedly stirred up the populace against his enemies and against those policies of the Senate of which he disapproved, and in 1774 and 1778, he successfully challenged proposals to grant the right of public worship to Catholics and Calvinists.[99] Such tolerance, in his view, was merely a cloak for indifferentism, and was also incompatible with the 1648 settlement, which allowed for only one official confession in each state of the empire.

Like J. S. Semler, Goeze studied under S. J. Baumgarten of Halle; but thereafter, their theological development proceeded in opposite directions.[100] Like Baumgarten himself, Semler, who succeeded his teacher in office, became more liberal over the years—so much so that, as already mentioned, he came to regard the Bible as

[95] See A (2003) 267. [96] KGL 222–3; cf. B IX, 177–8.

[97] On Goeze's life and works see esp. Wieckenberg (2007); also the article 'Johann Melchior Goeze' in ADB IX, 524–6 and Boehart 145–260.

[98] Lichtenberg IV, 410. [99] See Whaley (1989) 24–5.

[100] On Goeze's theological development see Schultze (1962); Schultze (1989); Schilson (1989).

a fallible historical document. Goeze, on the other hand, grew increasingly conservative, insisting on the literal inspiration of the Bible and the immutable validity of the Lutheran Reformation: salvation is attainable only by means of Scripture, faith, and divine grace: *sola scriptura*, *sola fide*, *sola gratia*. Human reason is corrupt, except when illuminated by faith. None of the Christian mysteries, including original sin, the Trinity, the atonement, and eternal punishment, is dispensable, and there can be no truly moral conduct except on the basis of dogmatically correct religious belief. And since moral conduct is essential for the welfare of the state, the state has a duty to uphold the established religion and to protect it against harmful innovation. It was for this reason that Goeze, especially in his later years, was more concerned with politics, both secular and ecclesiastical, than with theology itself; and that is also why he attacked Lessing for publishing subversive material and called upon the secular authorities to silence him.

Goeze's attitudes were plainly incompatible with those of Lessing as stated in the 'Counter-Propositions', so that constructive dialogue was scarcely possible between them. For Goeze, religious truth is vested in authority—that of the Bible, of Luther, and of Lutheran dogmatics—and is consequently both immutable and readily accessible. Theological debate cannot be valid unless it is based on these premises, and it must adhere to the rules of formal disputation, with clear definitions of the concepts to be employed.[101] Without this basis, the only possible forms of communication are preaching and polemics. Goeze's responses to Lessing are accordingly a mixture of sermonizing and denunciation, with exhortations to repent, reminders of the Day of Judgement, and warnings that those whom the *Fragments* have corrupted will inevitably testify against him when that day comes.[102]

Lessing, on the other hand, is not concerned to defend established authority, but to subject it to rigorous criticism: the letter of the Bible is less significant than its spirit, and Luther's spirit—the spirit of reform and questioning—is a truer guide than the letter of Lutheran dogmatics.[103] Truth is elusive, provisional, and developing, and consequently incapable of definitive formulation: it is best approached and expressed through images, parables, hypotheses, and open-ended debate. The most readily accessible form of truth is that of morality, which manifests itself in practice and is fully intelligible to natural reason.

These fundamental differences between the two opponents are evident from Goeze's first response, published in a Hamburg newspaper on 17 December 1777, onwards. In reply to Lessing's 'Counter-Propositions' with their attempt to separate the essence of religion from the word of the Bible, Goeze simply reaffirms the infallibility of Scripture, and concludes by reminding Lessing (whom he refers to simply as 'the editor') of the day of reckoning to come.[104] He makes no serious effort to address Lessing's innovative pronouncements on canon formation and the role of oral tradition, dismissing them as unsubstantiated axioms. But his tone, though censorious, is still relatively restrained, as is that of Lessing in the two works he wrote in reply during the first weeks of

[101] Cf. B IX, 12–13. [102] B IX, 181–4.
[103] LM XII, 428–9 and 143; cf. Bohnen (1989). [104] B IX, 11–20.

Fig. 40. Johann Melchior Goeze, painting by Georg Ludwig Eckardt, 1786.

1778, namely *A Parable* and *Axioms* (*Axiomata*). (Lessing evidently foresaw a protracted exchange, for he numbered the title pages of these works '1' and '2' respectively.)

Like *The Testament of St John* which Lessing wrote in reply to Schumann, *A Parable* suggests that practical morality is more significant than the problems and disputes of theology.[105] When fire is reported in a labyrinthine palace from which a wise ruler's dispensations emanate, the self-styled experts who argue over its complex architecture are more inclined to consult their diagrams of its supposed structure than to tackle the blaze. Fortunately, the alarm turns out to be false. The meaning of the parable is clear enough, although Lessing later observed that it applied not just to the controversy over the *Fragments* but to the history of Christianity as a whole.[106] In the preface to the parable and in its postscript, entitled 'The Request' ('Die Bitte'), Lessing addresses Goeze politely enough. There is, however, more than a hint of irony in the somewhat inflated title 'Venerable Man' (*Ehrwürdiger Mann*) which he applies to him, and particularly in its frequent repetition. But although he expresses the hope that Goeze will reply not as a polemicist but simply as an honest man and a Christian, the nature of 'The Request' is

[105] LM XIII, 91–6. [106] LM XIII, 96 n. 1.

such that this hope is unlikely to be fulfilled; for he asks Goeze to withdraw his allegation that Lessing, in the 'Counter-Propositions', had claimed that the fragmentist's objections to the Bible are unanswerable, and to admit that this allegation was unfounded.

To supplement *A Parable*, Lessing wrote the much longer *Axioms*,[107] in which he defends in detail each of the statements in the 'Counter-Propositions' which Goeze had dismissed as 'mere axioms'. It is by far the most substantial work he published in the course of the controversy with Goeze, incorporating a lucid and closely argued defence of the statements in question. In it, he insists on the need to distinguish the vehicle of religion from religion itself, declaring, in one of his graphic metaphors, that a sick man has no need to swallow his medicine along with the box which contains it. By separating religion from the history of religion, he is also able to defend the former against the fragmentist's objections to the latter. And in emphasizing the role of oral tradition during the interval between the crucifixion and the writing of the gospels, he prepares the way for a planned treatise on canon formation, only a fragment of which he was able to complete.

Near the beginning of *Axioms*, Lessing declares that, since he is neither a professional theologian nor a minister of religion, he is free to write in whatever manner he chooses. *Axioms* accordingly employs a wide stylistic register. In addition to rigorous reasoning, it includes a fictional narrative, the story of a family, shipwrecked on a desert island, whose descendants no longer have a Bible or catechism but are nevertheless able, thanks to their oral tradition, to practise and uphold the Lutheran faith. Like *A Rejoinder*, it also contains a dialogue, described on this occasion as a 'pulpit dialogue', in which Goeze recites extracts from his response to Lessing, ignoring Lessing's critical interjections and pertinent questions. By this time, Lessing has ceased to address Goeze as 'Venerable Man', and has crossed the line between rational debate and overt satire.

Before *A Parable* and *Axioms* went to press, Lessing received a second instalment, dated 30 January 1778, of Goeze's response to the *Fragments*.[108] Again published in a Hamburg newspaper, it contains a eulogistic review of Ress's dialogues, which Lessing had meanwhile savaged in *A Rejoinder*. For the first time, Goeze now addresses Lessing by name, and likens his publication of the *Fragments* to the act of a political revolutionary. Incensed by these affronts, Lessing at once responded in kind: to *A Parable* and 'The Request', he now appended 'The Challenge' ('Das Absagungsschreiben'), which contains a furious personal attack on Goeze, accusing him of pride, inadequate learning, and (in this case unfairly) of concern for his lucrative office.[109] After describing the fragmentist as seven times more learned than Goeze, he concludes by challenging the latter to continue the conflict as long as he wishes, adding: 'If I fail to correct you on the smallest thing concerning me or my anonymous author in which you are not in the right—then I can no longer hold a pen.' *A Parable* and its appendages, together with the *Axioms*, finally appeared in March.

[107] LM XIII, 105–37. [108] B IX, 21–35. [109] LM XIII, 100–3.

Over the next few months, a war of pamphlets ensued. Goeze reprinted his newspaper articles against Lessing and reviews of works by Lessing's other opponents under the title *Something Provisional against Hofrat Lessing's Indirect and Direct Malicious Attacks on our Most Sacred Religion*,[110] and Lessing replied with the eleven instalments of his *Anti-Goeze* to these;[111] Goeze responded with three more diatribes entitled *Lessings Schwächen* (*Lessing's Failings*).[112] To follow this complex altercation in detail is impracticable as well as unnecessary: its chronology is fully documented in two editions of Lessing's works.[113] It contains no genuine dialogue, it is highly repetitive, and much of it consists of mutual recriminations. Goeze shows little interest in substantive issues, preferring to attack Lessing's figurative style, 'theatrical logic', and use of the vernacular rather than Latin to discuss such dangerous material; his attempts to involve the secular authorities with a view to silencing Lessing grow increasingly strident. Lessing is conversely obliged to devote most of his efforts to defending his manner of writing, his right to publish controversial material, and the moral integrity of the fragmentist, leaving him little opportunity to address the questions which first gave rise to the conflict. His aims, methods, and tactics throughout the controversy have still to be discussed. But first of all, the final stages of the conflict, during which substantive theological issues were once again debated, call for closer examination.

The turning point of the conflict came after Lessing published in book form the last and most inflammatory of all the fragments, *On the Aim of Jesus and his Disciples*, around the beginning of June.[114] This, more than any other publication in the course of the conflict, aroused public interest and official indignation, with the result that censorship was imposed on further publications by Lessing a few weeks later.[115] The fragment was reviewed in several journals, and it at last elicited responses from some of the professional theologians and neologists whom Lessing had hoped all along to involve. It also prompted Goeze to demand that he answer two fundamental questions. What did he understand by the Christian religion? And what were the essential articles of the religion to which he himself subscribed?[116]

Despite the imposition of censorship, Lessing continued to publish uncensored replies to Goeze outside the Brunswick territories. In his *Necessary Answer to a Very Unnecessary Question*, published in Hamburg, he replied to the first of Goeze's two questions, and defined the Christian religion as that contained in the creeds of the first four centuries, including the Apostolic Creed and the (later) Athanasian Creed.[117] The essence of these creeds, he maintains, was what the early Church Fathers described as the *regula fidei* (rule of faith), which was neither drawn from the Bible nor transmitted by it. Dating from the time of the first Christians, the *regula* was handed down through the oral tradition, and it, rather than the Bible, was the formula used to distinguish Christians from non-Christians and canonic

[110] B IX, 11–37 and 117–45. [111] LM XIII, 139–213.
[112] B IX, 163–84, 357–94, 447–69. [113] B IX, 760–7; G VIII, 587–9.
[114] LM XIII, 215–327. [115] See Kröger 20–9 and B IX, 976–86.
[116] B IX, 370–2; see also IX, 1032–3. [117] LM XIII, 331–6.

from non-canonic writings. To the second of Goeze's questions, Lessing gave no answer.

Lessing's thoughts on the *regula fidei* did not arise out of the conflict with Goeze, but originated in his studies of the patristic writers in Breslau. His main inspiration, as he himself declares, was the Church Father Tertullian (*c.* 160–230), who laid particular emphasis on tradition and the *regula* as the basis of Christian faith.[118] Around 1776, Lessing followed up his initial ideas on the *regula* in an early draft, entitled 'Theses from Church History', of his planned work on canon formation.[119] But for two reasons, these ideas acquired new relevance during the conflict with Goeze. In the first place, the *regula*, and the Church Fathers' reliance on it, reinforced Lessing's argument that the Bible was not the only, or even the main, source of Christian doctrine among the early Christians. And secondly, as he told his brother,[120] his emphasis on the oral tradition rather than the Bible would be likely to gain him the support of the Catholic majority in the governing bodies of the empire if the Lutheran representatives should ever attempt to denounce him as a heretic.

In his reply to the *Necessary Answer*, Goeze failed to refute Lessing's arguments on the central importance of the *regula*. Nor had Lessing any difficulty in showing, in a sequel to the *Necessary Answer*, that the one observation by a Church Father (Irenæus) which Goeze cited in support of his belief in the primacy of the Bible did not prove his case.[121] At this point—in the autumn of 1778—Goeze ceased to reply to Lessing, and the conflict came to an abrupt end. It may be that, having repeatedly said all that he had to say and faced with Lessing's superior knowledge of patristics and early church history, Goeze considered it pointless to continue.

Lessing's well-founded arguments on the *regula fidei* and its crucial role in the early church hastened the end of the orthodox Lutheran doctrine, already called into question by Semler and others, that the Bible is the sole foundation of Christian faith. According to the most recent editor of his theological writings, his understanding of the *regula*, though broadly correct, is too narrowly tied to the wording of the creeds as distinct from the Christian revelation as a whole, of which the creeds are only a partial and necessarily imperfect expression.[122] Be that as it may, his thoughts on the *regula* are only a small part of the material he assembled for his planned work on canon formation, the *New Hypothesis on the Evangelists as Merely Human Historians*. This work, the final draft of which he began to write between November 1777 and February 1778, was intended to reinforce the conclusions of *Axioms* by detailed historical research, and it is much to be regretted that the conflict with Goeze prevented him from completing it; for together with *Axioms*, it would have represented the crowning achievement of his theological studies. It is equally to be regretted that the surviving fragment, substantial enough in itself, is not an authentic text but a conflation by Karl Lessing of four incomplete versions, all of which are now lost.[123]

[118] LM XVI, 510; cf. B IX, 1079 and 1303.
[119] LM XVI, 304–10.
[120] To Karl Lessing, 23 July 1778.
[121] LM XIII, 369–77; B IX, 466.
[122] See Schilson (1974) 178–9; B IX, 1080–1.
[123] LM XVI, 370–91; see also B VIII, 1090–3.

Fragmentary and defective though it is, the *New Hypothesis*, published posthumously in 1784, is a pioneering work. Building on Semler's studies of the canon, Lessing develops his own hypothesis of a Hebrew proto-gospel, in use at an early date among the Nazarenes, as the source of the three synoptic gospels, the earliest of which he believes was that of Matthew. The gospel of John, he maintains, was added later to provide a fuller theological framework for the three synoptic narratives. The details of this hypothesis have, of course, long been superseded. The 'Hebrew gospel' to which Epiphanias and Jerome refer was in fact a heretical, Gnostic text in use among Jewish Christians in Egypt. Both it and all the other non-canonic gospels to which Lessing refers are of later date than Matthew. And not Matthew, but Mark, has long been considered the earliest of the evangelists (although some recent scholars claim priority for John).[124] Lessing's hypothesis of a proto-gospel was nevertheless a major contribution to scholarship, shorter in length but of comparable importance to Semler's work on the history of the canon.[125] It further strengthened his contention, and that of Semler, that the New Testament canon arose by natural processes over a long period of time.

Although numerous writers besides Schumann, Ress, and Goeze responded during Lessing's lifetime to the *Fragments* and to his subsequent polemical writings,[126] he had neither the time nor the inclination to react to most of them. He did, however, plan to reply to a significant number, but his surviving notes and drafts are by no means complete, for Karl Lessing published only a selection from them and the remainder are lost.[127] An authoritative survey of the main respondents, including F. D. Behn, Gottfried Less, J. B. Lüderwald, F. W. Mascho, and G. C. Silberschlag, can be found in Wolfgang Kröger's monograph on the subject.[128] But since Lessing's comments on most of them are extremely limited, only the two most important (apart from the three already discussed), namely those of J. S. Semler of Halle and C. W. F. Walch of Göttingen, will be examined here.

After the controversy with Goeze ended in October 1778, Lessing devoted most of his energy to *Nathan the Wise*, which occupied him throughout the winter. He turned once more to theology when Semler's *Response to the Fragments of an Anonymous Author*, prompted especially by the last and most controversial of these, appeared in April 1779. Semler's criticism was chiefly directed at Reimarus' lack of historical knowledge and his attribution to the evangelists of consistently nefarious motives; he also maintained that the essence of Christianity remained untouched by the fragmentist's aspersions.[129] These were sentiments with which Lessing could scarcely quarrel, and he decided to await the reaction of the orthodox camp, which he fully expected to be negative, before replying himself.[130] (Semler, it will be remembered, had already been attacked by Goeze for

[124] See, for example, Hofrichter *passim*. [125] See Chadwick 21; also B VIII,1093.
[126] See Seifert (L.-Bibliographie) 484–94 and Kröger 166–74; on the following decade see Albrecht (1991) in Bibliog. 'Documents on Lessing's Influence and Reception'.
[127] See G VII, 946–7. [128] Kröger *passim*; cf. G VII, 946–56.
[129] See Schultze (2001) 454–8. [130] L. to Karl Lessing, April 1779.

allegedly heretical tendencies.)[131] He did, however, take great exception to the anonymous appendix to Semler's work (written, in fact, by Semler's colleague Johann Peter Eberhard), because he was himself maligned in it.[132] In Eberhard's fictional dialogue, Lessing, who had stated in his preface to *On the Aim of Jesus and his Disciples* that 'the fire must be supplied with air before it can be extinguished', appears in the guise of a mad English arsonist who is consigned to Bedlam for implementing this instruction.[133] Lessing planned to reply in a 'Letter from Bedlam', but only a brief fragment was completed.[134]

To judge by his earlier publications—especially his magisterial *Treatise on the Free Examination of the Canon*[135]—Semler's views on Scripture were closer to Lessing's than those of any other professional theologian in Germany. Like Lessing, he was opposed to the doctrine of literal inspiration. Before Lessing, he had argued that the New Testament canon is a relatively late phenomenon, preceded by an oral phase in the transmission of Christian doctrine,[136] and in his *Response* of 1779, he explicitly associated himself with Lessing's view that Christianity existed before the gospels were written.[137] But when he finally responded to the *Fragments*, he did so not in order to support Lessing. Conscious that his own treatment of the Bible as a secular document was uncomfortably close to that of the fragmentist, he hastened to distance himself from the latter before the conservative Lutherans could claim, as Lessing seems to have expected, that the fragmentist's heresies had arisen because people like Semler were undermining the divine status of Scripture. Since he was responsible for training Lutheran pastors, Semler had to be more careful than Lessing about what he said.

The main difference between Semler's position and that of Lessing is that, whereas Lessing believes that truth—including religious truth—is for ever incomplete and continually developing, Semler believes that it constitutes an unchanging presence within the locally and historically variable manifestations of Christianity.[138] The fragmentist's attack, he maintains, affects only the outward and transient aspects. But he carefully refrains from specifying exactly which doctrines belong to the essential core, and like other neologists, he quietly drops those, like the Athanasian Trinity, which he considers irrelevant to the present age.[139] This, of course, was precisely the ground on which Lessing had wished all along to tackle the neologists' theology of compromise, and in the short surviving fragment of his planned critique of Semler's *Response*, he lists three crucial questions which he hoped would compel Semler to reveal his true position.[140] What, in his opinion, are the universal elements of Christianity? What are its purely local and dispensable elements? And what are the universal elements of Christian morality? If Semler answered these questions honestly, Lessing believed, his views would prove little different from the natural religion of the fragmentist from whom he was so anxious to distance himself.

[131] See Hornig (1989).
[132] B IX, 1343; also L. to Elise Reimarus, 14 May 1779.
[133] Text in B IX, 1346–50.
[134] LM XVI, 450.
[135] 4 vols, Halle 1771–5.
[136] See Hornig (1989) 177; also Hornig (1961) 61–5.
[137] Semler (1779) 283.
[138] See B IX, 1345–6; also Kröger 84–6 and Zscharnack 136–7.
[139] See Hornig (1989) 175–6.
[140] LM XVI, 450–1.

It is regrettable that Lessing's planned confrontation with Germany's foremost theologian did not take place, for it might well have been intellectually more productive than the acrimonious dispute with Goeze.

Illness and other distractions prevented Lessing from launching his critique of Semler. But when the ecclesiastical historian C. W. F. Walch's *Critical Examination of the Use of Scripture among the Early Christians* was published in September, he felt obliged to reply. Walch took issue with Semler, and more particularly with Lessing, over their denial that the Bible was the main source of Christian belief in the early Christian era.[141] Walch's view, which Lessing described as 'bibliolatry', was essentially the same as that of Goeze, with the important difference that Walch's knowledge of patristics was far greater than that of Goeze. Lessing decided to take issue with him and wrote three successive drafts of a reply,[142] the essence of which was that he had never claimed that the New Testament writings were irrelevant to the early Christians, but only that these writings were preceded by, and subordinate to, the *regula fidei*. He also undertook to refute Walch's contrary thesis. He speaks with respect of Walch's patristic erudition, but accuses him—probably correctly—of allowing his judgement to be unduly influenced by Goeze.

Like Goeze, Walch was fighting a rearguard action in defence of the increasingly untenable doctrine of *sola scriptura*. Lessing's decision not to publish a separate riposte to Walch, but to include it in a series of replies to various critics entitled *So-Called Letters to Various Theologians*, was probably a sign that he had little desire to renew a battle that was already essentially won. He in turn abandoned the *So-Called Letters* in the winter of 1779–1780 as his health once more deteriorated.

The rest of this chapter will consider some of the wider implications of the controversies described above and attempt to define the aims, methods, and attitudes inherent in Lessing's contributions to the conflict.

Several of Lessing's opponents express the view that criticisms of religion as radical and sensitive as those of the fragmentist should be discussed, if at all, in Latin rather than the vernacular.[143] Lessing, of course, emphatically rejects this suggestion. He also draws attention, in the *Anti-Goeze*, to the ironic discrepancy between Goeze's condemnation of C. F. Bahrdt for translating the New Testament in defiance of the religious authority of his time and his approval of Luther for doing the same.[144] This disagreement arises, of course, because Lessing's attitude towards the public is fundamentally different from that of his critics. He clearly wishes to reach as wide a public as possible, and although most of his theological polemics begin with a Greek or Latin epigraph and his subject matter obliges him to use a number of technical terms, his writing is on the whole lucid, graphic, popular, and even colloquial; it is much more approachable than, for example, his polemics against Klotz. It should also be remembered that, at the time when he was writing, theological works still formed one of the largest single categories of published material, so that most readers with even a modicum of education, accustomed to reading

[141] See B X, 913–33. [142] LM XVI, 470–81 and 488–517.
[143] See, for example, B VIII, 435 (Schumann); IX, 36 (Goeze); IX, 398 (Behn).
[144] LM XIII, 143; cf. XVI, 439.

religious tracts and other works of devotion or edification, would have little difficulty in following most of what Lessing—and Reimarus—had to say. Lessing's choice, in his polemics against Goeze, of the pamphlet medium also ensured that many ordinary readers to whom the names of Lessing and Goeze were familiar would take note of the controversy, and through it, of the *Fragments* themselves. And this, of course, was exactly what Lessing wanted. Any attempt to withhold certain ideas or topics from the wider public amounted in his eyes—as in those of Kant—to an illegitimate exclusion of that public from the ongoing process of enlightenment.[145]

Goeze, like many of his professional colleagues, was no less anxious than Lessing to reach a wide public. But his attitude towards the public differed radically from that of Lessing. The role of the public, for Goeze, was essentially passive. The public was there to have its beliefs and attitudes shaped and corrected by religious authority, and Goeze made every effort to ensure that the Hamburg press supported him in this objective: the *Freywillige Beyträge* of Christian Ziegra and the *Reichs-Postreuter* of Albrecht Wittenberg duly lauded and echoed his views throughout the conflict. Lessing, too, sought to influence the public's thinking. But his aim was not to indoctrinate the public with his own opinions, but to encourage it to form opinions of its own. The role he envisages for the public is that of a judge,[146] critically assessing the conflicting viewpoints put before it, and the attitude he demands of it is one of constant readiness to question all propositions that it is asked to accept merely because they come from established authority.

It was this threat to authority, and the demand for individual autonomy which underlay it, that Goeze most feared, and which led him at once to draw political consequences from Lessing's questioning of religious dogma. He was, of course, correct in his belief that criticism of religious authority can readily turn into criticism of political authority—especially where the state is the guarantor of an established church. For similar reasons, numerous political theorists from Kant to the Young Hegelians regarded religious dissent as a natural preliminary to political dissent, and persecution of the former has often given rise to the latter: this happened with many liberal theologians and religious dissenters, such as Andreas Riem and Carl Friedrich Bahrdt, who were adversely affected by the repressive religious policies which followed the death of Frederick the Great. Goeze had already denounced Bahrdt in 1773 for his secularizing translation of the New Testament,[147] and when the imperial authorities ordered the confiscation of that translation in February 1778, Goeze triumphantly proclaimed that Semler and Lessing might well be the next to suffer.[148] Bahrdt in due course became a political dissenter, and it is possible that Lessing, whose political disaffection in the 1770s has already been noted, might have moved further in that direction after the Brunswick authorities took measures against him in July 1778, had it not

[145] LM XIII, 143 and 163–4; cf. Kant AA VIII, 39.
[146] LM XIII, 208; also esp. Kröger 107–13; cf. Boehart 425–6 and 446.
[147] See Heymel 228 and 253. [148] B IX, 867–8.

been for special circumstances which rendered such action unnecessary. Some account of those measures and of Lessing's response to them may help to explain his position.

On 6 July 1778, Duke Karl of Brunswick passed a resolution withdrawing the exemption from censorship which Lessing had enjoyed since 1772 for publishing works from the ducal library. Julius August Remer, director of the Waisenhaus publishing house, was thereby required to confiscate all copies of the third and fourth volumes of *On History and Literature* (that is, those containing the first six *Fragments*), as well as the separately published *On the Aim of Jesus and his Disciples*. News of these measures reached Lessing one or two days later,[149] and prompted him to write one of his rare autobiographical reflections, in which, recollecting his own father's irascibility, he vainly struggles to summon up an outburst of rage to relieve his dismay at the news.[150] When he wrote to the duke on 11 July requesting permission to publish further replies to Goeze without censorship, the duke reaffirmed the ban on behalf of the privy council, and required Lessing to surrender the complete original manuscript of the *Fragments*, together with any copies, within one week. Lessing complied, but retained an incomplete copy for his own use.[151]

This was precisely the kind of interference which Lessing had always feared if he became a state employee, and he did not take it lying down. He surrendered the manuscript as required, but added that various copies of the work were already in circulation and renewed his request for exemption of the *Anti-Goeze* from censorship.[152] When this was refused, he wrote again to seek clarification, saying that he assumed he was free to publish it without censorship outside the Brunswick territories.[153] (He had by this time already published the *Necessary Answer* to Goeze in Hamburg and Berlin.) At the privy council's urging, the duke then replied that the censorship applied to all of Lessing's writings on religion, wherever they were published, and reprimanded Lessing for giving 'Wolfenbüttel' as the place of publication on the title page of the *Necessary Answer*.[154] Undeterred by this unambiguous instruction, Lessing published the sequel to the *Necessary Answer* in Hamburg two months later.[155]

He had more than once declared that he would resign from his post if the *Anti-Goeze* were confiscated along with the *Fragments*.[156] It did not come to this, and by the beginning of August, the need for drastic action had receded. He discovered—probably through Kuntzsch or Ebert—that the ban had been instigated not by the duke, who was by this time frail and inactive, but by von Praun and other members of the privy council.[157] On his visit to Hamburg in September, he was able to show Elise Reimarus Duke Karl's entry in his passport 'I give my dear Lessing a

[149] See the relevant documents in A (2005) 444–6, 448, 451 and 454.
[150] LM XVI, 422–3. [151] See LM XIX, 406–7 n. 2.
[152] To Duke Karl, 20 July 1778. [153] To Duke Karl, 8 August 1778.
[154] Duke Karl to L., 17 August 1778; see also A (2005) 451.
[155] See L. to Karl Lessing, 20 October 1778.
[156] See L. to Eschenburg, 12 July 1778 and L. to Karl Lessing, 23 July 1778.
[157] See L. to Elise Reimarus, 2 August 1778; also KGL 221.

fortnight's leave' as confirmation of the duke's undiminished benevolence.[158] He also had reason to believe that Karl Wilhelm Ferdinand, currently absent with the Prussian army in the War of the Bavarian Succession, would not have supported the ban, for he had been shown portions of the *Fragments* as early as 1771 and currently had further parts of the manuscript on loan from Lessing.[159] That Lessing was right in his assumption is confirmed by the fact that no further action was taken against him, and that the confiscated copies of *On History and Literature* were in due course released for sale.[160]

The behaviour of the ruling house was in keeping with its best traditions. In the late 1740s, Duke Karl had given refuge to J. L. Schmidt, persecuted for his translation of the 'Wertheim Bible', and had refused, in 1753, to accede to a request from Cardinal Querini to expel two apostate monks from Helmstedt university.[161] When his son succeeded him in 1780, he kept up the tradition by rejecting the request of the Corpus Evangelicorum (the supreme Protestant authority in the empire) to punish Lessing for publishing the *Fragments*.

Although Lessing's contributions to the religious controversy mark a significant stage in the history of Protestant theology, the fact that they are still read today by non-specialists has less to do with their theological content than with the way in which they are written. Many of their stylistic features have already been noted, such as the great variety of forms he employs and his graphic, often colloquial language. Another feature which ought to be mentioned—and to which Goeze took particular exception—is his frequent use of images in preference to abstract concepts.[162]

Like Luther and other controversialists of the Reformation era, both Lessing and Goeze regularly make use of images, often of the coarsest kind, to add vigour and vehemence to their polemics. A typical example is Lessing's declaration to Goeze 'I am entitled to pour the bucket of filthy water in which you wished to drown me drop by drop on your exposed head'.[163] Goeze is no less inventive in this area, declaring that he has no fear of Lessing's 'muck-spraying' (*Kotsprützen*) or of 'the art of throwing stink-pots' in which Lessing, like other heretics before him, is allegedly an expert.[164] The conceptual equivalents of these and other images used by Goeze—as when he likens Lessing and the fragmentist to arsonists, or says that Lessing's arguments have an 'equivalent value in the learned world to loaded dice in ordinary society'[165]—are clear enough, as Goeze believes they ought to be; for the model of learned disputation which he follows is that of Wolff, for whom images belong to a lower level of cognition than rational concepts, although they may prove useful in lending such concepts greater immediacy.[166]

Goeze's criticisms of Lessing's style of argument (which he describes as 'theatre logic') relate specifically to his use of images, and especially to the fact that it is often difficult, or indeed impossible, to reduce these to a precise conceptual

[158] D 461. [159] See L. to Mendelssohn, 9 January 1771; also L. to Duke Karl, 20 July 1778.
[160] KGL 225. [161] See E. Schmidt II, 275. [162] See Göbel (1971) *passim*.
[163] LM XIII, 153. [164] B IX, 170 and 360–1. [165] B IX, 382–3 and 121.
[166] See Fick (2010) 436–8; Schmiedt 100.

equivalent.[167] This very openness, this poetic allusiveness, is, of course, the main reason why Lessing resorts to metaphors in preference to rational concepts: they render the meaning they convey resistant to rational simplification or dogmatic reduction. Thus most of his favourite metaphors preserve an area of mystery: the result of the siege warfare between critics and defenders of Christianity remains uncertain, the spirit within the letter is elusive and intangible, the foundations of the Christian edifice are of unidentified composition, the way stretches ahead before us but its destination is unknown, etc. Even the parable form, used since the time of Christ as a didactic medium to convey a lesson with maximum clarity, retains an unexplained residue when used by Lessing, as in his parable of the palace on fire, in which the palace's complex architecture remains mysterious—and, more famously, in the parable of the rings in *Nathan the Wise*, which generates a whole series of unresolved mysteries. Such images also have a heuristic value, for they stimulate further enquiry and raise more questions than they answer, pointing to regions beyond the reach of existing conceptuality. For Lessing, they have a life of their own, and far from being an inferior form of knowledge, they may lead the imagination on to hitherto unsuspected insights.[168]

Like all polemics, Lessing's responses to his critics are designed to persuade, and he deploys a large and varied range of rhetorical devices,[169] tried and perfected in his earlier conflicts, to convince the reader not so much of the truth of his own opinions, but rather of the inadequacy of those of his adversaries. Irony, satire, and caricature are among his weapons, and it is evident from several of his letters to his brother that he envisaged his conflict with the theologians, even before it began, in terms of comedy.[170] From this point of view, Goeze has two inestimable advantages. Firstly, he himself has no discernible sense of humour; and secondly, he is a figure of authority, not without pomposity, and therefore admirably suited, with the help of selective quotation, to caricature and deflation. Under Lessing's onslaught, he stands vividly before us, with his ranting delivery and warnings of doom, impervious to all attempts at dialogue; and even if we know that this portrait is one-sided, we cannot but delight in Lessing's irreverent stylization.

The most perplexing question of all has yet to be answered, namely that of Lessing's personal religious beliefs. Although Goeze pressed him repeatedly on this question,[171] Lessing not only failed to reply, but was plainly determined not to do so—at least in public.[172] The question is also complicated by the fact that his attitude appears to shift from one work to another and even within the same work. Not only Goeze, but even the Berlin rationalists were unsure where Lessing stood, and Nicolai declared: 'The theologians think you are a freethinker, and the freethinkers think you have become a theologian.'[173] In more recent times, different

[167] See, for example, B IX, 119–22, 175–80, 363.
[168] Cf. LM XIII, 149–51.
[169] See Specht 195–6 *passim*; Immisch *passim*; Feinäugle 140–48.
[170] See L. to Karl Lessing, 11 November 1774 and 25 February 1778; also Timm *passim*.
[171] B IX, 128 and 370–1.
[172] Cf. L. to Elise Reimarus, 9 August 1778.
[173] To L., 24 April 1777; cf. Boehart 427.

commentators have presented him as a Christian fideist, a secularist or Spinozist bent on undermining Christianity from within, as simply inconsistent, or as caught in a cognitive crisis between rational and empirical paradigms—to name but a few of the many disparate interpretations.[174]

Further aspects of his attitude towards religion, and the strategies and stylistic refinements he develops in discussing it, will be examined later, with particular reference to *The Education of the Human Race*. But at this point, the following provisional conclusions may be drawn. Lessing accepts at least the basic articles of natural religion as valid. He leaves open the possibility that Christian revelation contains truths which are—at least for the present—incapable of rational demonstration.[175] His statements on religion are influenced more by their context within a given debate, and by the arguments of the opponent they are addressed to, than by any doctrinal assumptions of his own:[176] thus he often develops his adversary's arguments further in order to demonstrate their untenable or unwelcome consequences, such as the leap of faith which Schumann's supposedly unchallengeable certainties in fact necessitate. His basic attitude to revealed religion is one of open-ended questioning and suspense of judgement, and he refuses to foreclose this process by setting up any dogma of his own—except, perhaps, the dogma that no dogma is beyond question.[177] In particular, he believes that the leading theologians of his time, with their uneasy compromise between rationality and revelation, are in an untenable position which urgently calls for further debate.

But although Lessing did not publicly answer Goeze's question as to his personal religious beliefs, there is evidence that he did answer it in private. Editors of his works have hitherto dated the following extract from a miscellany of autobiographical notes and aphorisms to 1777[178]—that is, around the time of his reply to Schumann in *On the Proof of Spirit and of Power*. But uniquely, it does assume the form of a personal credo, and almost certainly embodies his considered response to Goeze's question of 1778. The views it expresses also coincide very well with the provisional conclusions outlined above, and with its careful sceptical reservations, it expresses Lessing's basic attitude towards Christianity more clearly than anything in his published writings:[179]

> I have nothing against the Christian religion: I am rather its friend, and I shall remain well disposed and devoted to it for the rest of my life. It fulfils the intention of a positive religion as well as any other. I believe in it and regard it as true in so far and as much as one can believe and regard anything historical as true. For I simply cannot refute it in its historical evidence. I cannot oppose any other testimonies to the testimonies adduced in its favour, either because no other testimonies existed or because all the others were destroyed or deliberately disqualified. [...]
>
> I should think that this declaration might satisfy at least those theologians who reduce all Christian faith to what human beings approve of, and who do not acknowledge any

[174] For further details see Fick (2010) 420–5; also Wessell (1977) 18–32.
[175] LM XIII, 432–5. [176] See Kröger 101–2 and B VIII, 740.
[177] Cf. J. Schneider (1953) 12 and Chadwick 44. [178] LM XVI, 536 n. 1; B X, 1007.
[179] LM XVI, 536.

> supernatural influence of the Holy Spirit. But to reassure the others who still assume such an influence, I may add that I consider this opinion of theirs to be more soundly based in Christian doctrine and handed down from the origins of Christianity, and that it can scarcely be refuted by mere philosophical reasoning. […]

The individual whose reputation suffered most from the conflict, especially in the eyes of posterity, was of course Johann Melchior Goeze. He furnished the German Enlightenment and its heirs with the antitype they required in order to define themselves as progressive, and for more than a century, he was regularly cited and satirized as the embodiment of benighted reaction.[180] This stylization, like that of Lessing from which it derived, was certainly unfair, and Goeze was less of a fanatic than was often claimed. He deplored the burning of Servetus by Calvin as well as all attempts to constrain individual conscience, as Lessing privately acknowledged.[181] He also deserves respect for his hard work, moral integrity, and scholarship. There have indeed been several attempts to vindicate him and defend him against Lessing, the fullest of which was that of G. R. Röpe in 1860. Röpe presents Goeze as a kind of theological Götz von Berlichingen (the comparison is his), defending traditional Lutheran values against the rise of cynical rationalism. Helmut Thielicke's defence of 1967, though shorter and less hostile to Lessing, likewise defends Goeze primarily on account of his Christian faith.[182]

Much of the sympathy Goeze attracts derives from a feeling that Lessing treated him unfairly, turning him into a comic figure while he strove to uphold his deeply serious Christian principles. There is no denying that Lessing played fast and loose with his theological opponents, resorting at times to evasive and even duplicitous tactics, from his false claim that the *Fragments* came from the ducal library to his manoeuvres to secure Catholic support in the event of Protestant censure. Some of his arguments are plainly sophistical, as when he declares that, even if the disciples secretly reinterred Christ's body, this does not make them deceivers, since pious fraud was perfectly acceptable by the moral standards of their age.[183] These and other related criticisms are advanced in Peter Michelsen's more recent defence of Goeze, and they are indeed a salutary corrective to the Lessing hagiography of earlier times.[184] But beneath Lessing's satire and disingenuousness lies a principle no less serious than Goeze's religious convictions, the principle that dogma, bigotry, and intolerance are destructive of humanity and must be opposed at all costs. In choosing the clandestine work of Reimarus as a means of undermining them, Lessing was, however, committed from the start to less than forthright methods.

It is clear that, during his Hamburg period, Lessing defended Goeze and held him in respect, a respect not unconnected with the affinities he detected between him and his own father (whose Wittenberg dissertation, it will be remembered, was entitled *A Defence of Luther's Reformation against Some Prejudices of the Innovators*). When the conflict with Goeze, which Lessing had neither foreseen nor

[180] See Höhne 42–7. [181] See KGL 166 n.
[182] See Röpe and Thielicke (Bibliog.); also Stolt *passim*.
[183] LM XIII, 171. [184] Michelsen (1992).

planned, broke out some eight years later, history seemed to be repeating itself. Just as the young Lessing, in his comedy *The Freethinker*, had defended the eponymous hero against Pastor Lessing's Lutheran orthodoxy as a man 'without religion, but full of virtuous sentiments',[185] so now did he find himself defending the morally righteous deist Reimarus against Goeze's fulminations. But perhaps because he had grown older and briefly been a father himself, he now identified himself, rather than Goeze, with his father as he recollected the latter's attempts to control a rage which he, the son, now sought to summon up on discovering that he was no longer exempt from censorship. When he declared soon afterwards that, in writing *Nathan the Wise*, he would return to 'my old pulpit, the theatre', an echo of that identification can still be heard.[186]

In keeping with poetic justice, Goeze himself became a victim of the imperial authorities whose intervention he had so often called down upon others. After declaring in a sermon that the Lutheran faith alone offered correct spiritual guidance, he was reported to the Hamburg Senate by the imperial legate, F. B. von Kriegelstein. When he refused to retract his statement, the matter was brought to the attention of Joseph II, upon whose intervention Goeze finally agreed to recant. The emperor also demanded that a close watch be kept on him, and that, if his offence were repeated, he should be removed from office.[187] Lessing did not rejoice at Goeze's humiliation, but expressed contempt for his failure to stand by his convictions.[188] He could not, however, resist alluding to it in the last of his pamphlets in the affair of the *Fragments*, the *Tale of 1,000 Ducats*.[189] It was now more than ever obvious that Goeze was yesterday's man and a defender of lost causes. A sad figure in his latter years (he died in 1786), he stood out as a pessimist in what was still an age of optimism.[190]

The reception of Lessing's theological writings was mixed, predictably with positive reviews in progressive journals such as Nicolai's *Allgemeine Deutsche Bibliothek* and Wieland's *Teutsche Merkur* and negative comments from conservative circles.[191] A particularly nasty allegation appeared in a Vienna periodical to the effect that he had received 1,000 ducats from the Jews of Amsterdam for publishing the anti-Christian *Fragments*. To anyone remotely familiar with these, the absurdity of this claim was obvious, for Reimarus is even more critical of the Jews than of the Christians, and his work is full of anti-semitic comments.[192] Lessing nevertheless felt obliged to respond, and in a pamphlet for distribution in Vienna entitled *Further Correction of the Tale of 1,000 Ducats, or Judas Iscariot the Second*, ostensibly by his stepson Theodor König, he briefly outlined the history of the *Fragments* and the subsequent controversy. He also explicitly indicated that his own viewpoint, with its emphasis on oral tradition, was akin to that of Catholicism.[193]

[185] LM III, 262. [186] To Elise Reimarus, 6 September 1778.
[187] See B XII, 599–60; also Whaley (1989) 24–5.
[188] L. to Elise Reimarus, 22 January 1780. [189] LM XIII, 383.
[190] See Wieckenberg (2007) 217–24. [191] See Fick (2010) 438–40; B IX, 786–8.
[192] See Spalding (2005) 260. [193] LM XIII, 379–86; cf. B IX, 1296–9 and Kröger 26–7.

There is still no authoritative study of Lessing's influence on Protestant theology.[194] It is also difficult to disentangle from that of Reimarus and is often indirect, extending to numerous individuals and circles who never mention Lessing by name and may not even have heard of him. Only a few selected aspects can be mentioned here.

The ban on the *Fragments* in various German states[195] simply increased the demand for them, and they were frequently reprinted, sometimes by those who attempted to refute their content.[196] The historical-critical methods they pioneered, augmented by the work of Lessing, were soon taken further by Michaelis, J. G. Eichhorn, and others, with far-reaching consequences for biblical hermeneutics.[197] The naive gospel harmonies of the eighteenth century and the doctrine of literal inspiration on which these depended were successively consigned to the past.[198]

The influence of Lessing's religious thought on German Idealism was considerable, and some of its aspects will be touched on later in connection with *The Education of the Human Race*. Kant's contention, in *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*, that the origin of a religion and the historical revelation on which it claims to be based have no bearing on its universal significance is plainly an echo of Lessing, as are the young Fichte's thoughts on religion as a practical response of the heart.[199] The young Hegel was greatly indebted to Lessing's theological writings, especially those published posthumously in 1784, and his fragmentary essay 'The Positivity of the Christian Religion' (1795–6) builds on Lessing's distinction between the religion of Christ and the religion which makes Christ an object of worship.[200] In the nineteenth century, David Friedrich Strauss equated Lessing's ideas, all too indiscriminately, with his own radical critique of religion and published further extracts from Reimarus' *Apologia*.[201]

Lessing's theological influence was felt in England from an early date. The young Coleridge, with his unitarian sympathies, was attracted to Lessing primarily as the editor of Reimarus, and he planned at one stage to translate the *Fragments* himself.[202] E. B. Pusey, who studied for a time in Germany, was particularly attracted by Lessing's stress on feeling rather than the understanding as the surest route to religious faith, and he translated relevant passages from Lessing in support of this belief.[203] The same aspect was, of course, examined more fully by Schleiermacher, and Kierkegaard's preoccupation with the role of individual subjectivity and the leap of faith has already been mentioned.

All these, and other currents of theological thought to which Lessing contributed soon left his direct influence behind, and by the later nineteenth century, references to him by theologians become increasingly infrequent: his personal

[194] For existing comments see Trillhaas *passim*; Hirsch IV, 120–65; Chadwick 48–9.
[195] For example, in Saxony: see Braun II, 155.
[196] See KGL 222; Kröger 18 and 22.
[197] See Kröger 28; Allison (1966) 165–6; Reventlow 448.
[198] See B VIII, 893.
[199] Kant AA VI, 115; cf. Allison (1966) 193 and Trillhaas 63.
[200] Hegel I, 104–229; cf. Nisbet (1999) 77–8 and Allison (1966) 165–6.
[201] Strauss (1862). [202] See Louth 158. [203] Kenwood 352–3.

contribution is regularly overshadowed by that of Reimarus.[204] His famous dilemma of the 'broad and ugly ditch' continues to be referred to, and has even become something of a cliché in modern theology.[205] But his wider achievement, like that of so many innovators, is obscured by the very developments he himself helped to inaugurate.

[204] Trillhaas 60.

[205] See, for example, Foreman 394–400.

19

The Education of the Human Race and *Ernst and Falk*

The works discussed in this chapter, along with the drama *Nathan the Wise*, are often grouped together as embodying the definitive wisdom of Lessing's final years. The three works do indeed have much in common. They all deal with the relationship between reason and the often less than rational doctrines of institutionalized belief. All three also reflect the older Lessing's reorientation as he turns away from current problems and specialized scholarship to consider issues of wider significance. In all of them, he directs his attention to the future—not the immediate future, but a more distant future in which the wrongs and injustices of the present may at least be greatly diminished, if not entirely removed. And most important of all, he takes elaborate measures in all three works to avoid any impression of dogmatic certainty or systematic closure.

The real affinities between the three works must not, however, be allowed to obscure their differences. Each of them has its distinct origins and identity, and although the second parts of *The Education of the Human Race* and *Ernst and Falk* were not published until 1780, both works were written before Lessing experienced the double crisis of personal bereavement and the imposition of censorship in 1778. It therefore follows that, if there is such a thing as Lessing's philosophical testament—often identified with *The Education of the Human Race*—we must not overlook the biographical hiatus which separates the two works discussed here from the later *Nathan the Wise*.

It is generally accepted that *The Education of the Human Race*, the first half of which appeared in Lessing's 'Counter-Propositions' to the *Fragments* of Reimarus in January 1777, was written in 1776, probably in the latter half of that year.[1] In introducing the first half, Lessing himself speaks of the work as already complete, and one of his friends appears to endorse this statement.[2] The first half in particular is closely related to the fourth of Reimarus's *Fragments*. In it, Lessing accepts Reimarus's contention that the Old Testament lacks the doctrine of immortality, but rejects his conclusion that the religion it contains is therefore invalid, arguing instead that it is simply more primitive than Christianity. He then omits the second half of his work not because he had not yet completed it, but because it contained nothing of relevance to the topic in hand, namely the Old Testament.

[1] B X, 796; G VIII, 707. [2] LM XII, 446; D 410–11.

As will shortly be seen, *The Education of the Human Race* has strong affinities with other works written in 1776, confirming that it was likewise written in that year. The complete work, with a new preface and epigraph, was finally published in the spring of 1780.[3]

Apart from the date of its composition, another problem concerning the work's origin calls for comment. Since Lessing published it anonymously, describing it as the work of 'a good friend',[4] the view gained currency during the nineteenth century that *The Education of the Human Race* was largely the work of Albrecht Thaer, a young friend of Leisewitz who visited Lessing in 1780. Thaer declared in 1785 that, having devised in his student years 'a new system' in defence of Christianity, his work was appropriated and published in part by 'a great man', with stylistic modifications, as the work of an unknown author;[5] the second part, with some additions, had followed at a later date. It was long assumed that this 'great man' must have been Lessing. But a letter to Thaer which came to light in 1943 seemed to suggest that the 'great man', now identified as 'M.', may in fact have been the historian Jacob Mauvillon, whose *The Only True System of the Christian Religion* (*Das einzige wahre System der christlichen Religion*) was published in 1787.[6] This revised attribution, based on circumstantial evidence and problematic dating, is by no means compelling, so that doubts concerning Lessing's authorship are still occasionally expressed. What is known as the 'Thaer legend' has never been conclusively refuted.[7]

The strongest evidence of the work's authorship is not, however, to be found in the enigmatic statements of Thaer and his correspondent, but in the text itself and its reception. Firstly, Lessing's inimitable style is evident throughout the text. Secondly, several of the work's central arguments replicate or are closely related to statements in Lessing's other writings: his comments on Warburton's *The Divine Legation of Moses* in paragraphs 22 to 25 are on a work reviewed in 1751 in the BPZ and discussed at greater length in the Breslau fragment *On the Elpistics*;[8] the rationalization of the Holy Trinity in paragraph 73 (the longest in the entire work) closely follows the early fragment *The Christianity of Reason*; and the speculations on metempsychosis in the concluding paragraphs of the work are in accord with Lessing's well documented interest in this idea towards the end of his life.[9] Thirdly and finally, some of his most discerning readers and closest friends, namely Elise Reimarus, Moses Mendelssohn, Herder, and Friedrich Jacobi, had no doubt whatsoever that the whole work was by Lessing.[10] The question of why Lessing refused to the last to acknowledge his authorship still remains to be answered.

The Education of the Human Race is short, dense, and complex. The problem already encountered in determining Lessing's own religious beliefs in his polemical

[3] LM XIII, 413–16. [4] See L. to J. A. H. Reimarus, 6 April 1778; also LM XII, 446.
[5] B X, 798–9 and 812–13; D 394–5.
[6] See Wagner *passim* and H. Schneider (1951) 220–30.
[7] See D 397; GEL: *EdM*, ed. Helbig, 55–7; Jasper 360–2.
[8] LM IV, 373–4; XIV, 298, 302, 310.
[9] Cf. D 592; LM XVI, 442–3 and 522–5.
[10] See B X, 798 and 835–6; also Elise Reimarus to L., 25 April 1780.

writings is again present, compounded in this case by an even more elaborate network of stylistic and rhetorical devices. There is consequently little agreement on the meaning of the work itself. Some have seen it as a tacit endorsement of Spinoza, some as a speculative exercise in Christian eschatology, and others as a secularist critique of religion in general;[11] for others again, it is an essentially poetic document with no definable rational significance.[12]

The structure of the work is simple enough: it follows a tripartite scheme, corresponding to successive stages in the education referred to in the title. Mankind first learns that there is a single god who rewards and punishes human beings on earth, then that human beings are immortal and are rewarded or punished only in the afterlife according to their moral deserts, and finally, that true morality is its own reward and requires no external sanctions. A concluding speculation on metempsychosis or reincarnation offers an alternative model of the afterlife. What we have here is little more than the three basic tenets of natural religion, presented in chronological sequence and associated with three progressively higher stages of moral consciousness.[13] These ideas are commonplaces of Enlightenment thought: Schiller writes a treatise *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*, Kant's *What is Enlightenment?* defines enlightenment as a process leading to moral autonomy, and Herder even speaks explicitly of 'the education of the human race' in 1775.[14]

Lessing is also far from original in his application of this model to human history, and in particular to the history of religion. The analogy between the development of mankind and the education of the individual has a long history, and Lessing must have encountered it repeatedly in his patristic studies. Clement of Alexandria, Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Tertullian, and Origen all speak of a divine pedagogue, and their view of post-lapsarian history entails a progression from paganism to Judaism and on to Christianity, each stage affording superior degrees of insight, followed by chiliastic or eschatological fulfilment.[15] The neologists, too, employed the same analogy in Lessing's time, and Johann Georg Rosenmüller published a *Treatise on the Wise Purposes of God in the Various Dispensations of His Church on Earth* (1767) in which he discusses the progressive stages of divine revelation.[16] But as so often in his later writings, Lessing's originality lies not so much in the concepts and images he uses, as in the manner in which he undermines their familiar senses and opens the way to alternative interpretations. This applies in particular to the concepts of revelation and reason and their interaction in *The Education of the Human Race*.

He first explains that he is using the term 'education' (*Erziehung*) figuratively—that is, as an image or analogy for the process of revelation in history. As for the concept of revelation itself, he seems initially to be using it in its traditional sense as denoting direct communication of religious knowledge by a transcendental, miracle-working god to the human race, and in particular to the ancient Israelites.

[11] See Fick (2010) 471–3.
[12] See, for example, Eibl (1985); Hill (1990) 241–4.
[13] Cf. Nisbet (1993a) 17–21.
[14] Herder SWS VII, 369.
[15] See Allison (1975) 183; Allison (1966) 200–1; B X, 801–2.
[16] On these and other precedents see B X, 805–7; also Kessler *passim*.

It soon emerges, however, that the knowledge in question is essentially rational in character—that is, in principle discoverable by human reason (§ 4). The reason in question, in most cases denoted by the term *Vernunft*, signifies in this context the faculty of abstract rational deduction (§§ 6, 55, 72), whereas the term *Verstand* ('understanding'), though sometimes synonymous with *Vernunft* (§§ 65, 79–80), more often denotes the relative degree of insight which rational thought affords (§§ 19, 66, 85).[17]

It is therefore clear that, almost from the beginning of the work, Lessing has relativized the concept of revelation by that of reason, thereby divesting it of much of the mystery which surrounds it. But the reverse is also true, for he again proceeds shortly afterwards to speak of a personal god as the initial source of rational insight (§§ 7, 11–12). Yet no sooner has he appeared to reinstate the traditional concept of revelation than he undermines it once more by declaring that the concept of a single god revealed to the Israelites was 'far inferior' to the kind of monotheism later deduced by reason from the concept of infinity (§ 14). And so it continues, as reason at one moment appears to overtake revelation (§ 20), and revelation overtakes it in turn (§§ 21–23).

The overall tendency of this progression is, however, for reason to become increasingly dominant as more and more truths once considered to be divine revelations are converted into rational insights, thereby rendering the original revelation superfluous. Thus the entire Old Testament is eventually superseded as its rational content is digested, and the word *Natur* begins to displace the earlier term *Gott* (§§ 84, 90) as immanence gradually replaces transcendence. But just as we begin to suspect that the concept of revelation, with its associations of mystery, has become redundant, Lessing warns us that there may still be truths of revelation which reason has not yet fully understood (§ 72). He illustrates this point by offering tentative rationalizations—tentative because they are formulated rather as rhetorical questions than as definitive statements—of three central mysteries of Christianity, namely the Trinity, original sin, and the vicarious satisfaction (§§ 73–75). This counter-movement whereby mystery is gradually reintroduced continues as Lessing evokes the third, post-Christian age not in the language of secular rationality, but through the medium of medieval prophecies concerning an 'everlasting gospel' to come (§§ 86–90). Similarly, our impression that the doctrine of the afterlife has long since been rationalized as a principle of natural religion is suddenly destabilized as the work concludes with speculations on immortality via reincarnation on earth (§§ 93–100).

The relationship between reason and revelation is accordingly one of interdependence—or 'mutual service', as Lessing calls it (§ 37). The two sources of truth are equally necessary, and each illuminates and relativizes the other in a dynamic, dialectical process.[18] Under these circumstances, Lessing's complaint over the 'broad and ugly ditch' which divides the contingent truths of history

[17] See Strohschneider-Kohrs (1991) 8.
[18] See Allison (1966) 189; Strohschneider-Kohrs (2005) 242.

from the necessary truths of reason no longer seems justified. In *The Education of the Human Race* (which, it should be noted, was written *before* Lessing's anguished complaint to Schumann in 1777), the ditch no longer needs to be bridged or jumped over, but is simply circumvented. For although the historical truths of revelation cannot prove the necessary truths of reason, they can at least foreshadow them and hasten their discovery. Revelation is the historical vehicle of reason, and reason is the necessary content of revelation.[19] Both are relative to the particular stage in human history at which they operate, and they develop together to ever higher degrees of insight.

But although their relationship is one of 'mutual service', Lessing repeatedly emphasizes that the two are distinct and opposite modes of cognition. He even presses the distinction to the point of real or apparent contradiction, as in the notorious discrepancy between § 4 and § 77. In the first of these, we are told that 'revelation gives the human race nothing which human reason, left to itself, could not also arrive at', whereas in the second, it is suggested that Christianity may supply us with 'better and more precise conceptions of the divine being, of our own nature, and of our relations with God, which human reason would never have arrived at on its own'. Numerous attempts have been made to resolve this contradiction—for example, by arguing that § 4 refers only to the basic truths of natural religion and § 77 to Christian mysteries such as the Holy Trinity, or that § 4 refers to the innate capacity of reason and § 77 to the external incentive or psychological stimulus required to activate it.[20]

To anyone familiar with Lessing's hermeneutic principles in his latter years (including his affirmation of the Talmudic axiom that mutually incompatible interpretations of the same scriptural passages may be equally true), it makes little difference whether the above contradiction is resolved or not. He chose to let it stand, and even underlined it in the epigraph from St Augustine which he prefixed to the work when he published the complete text in 1780: 'All these things are in certain respects true, for the same reason that they are in certain respects false.' In the disjunctive logic which Augustine here applies, the law of contradiction is suspended for failing to do justice to the diversity of meaning.[21] In Lessing's case, the position defined in § 4 is essentially that of the neologists, and that in § 77 essentially that of Lutheran orthodoxy, and as already noted, the two are incompatible. But as so often in his later writings, he prefers not to come down firmly on one side or the other and leaves the two conflicting positions in unresolved tension, each relativizing the other as equally one-sided: neither reason nor revelation alone is the exclusive source of religious truth, which is a product of their interaction. That the contradiction is no accident is confirmed by two no less provocative paradoxes, one in each half of the work: we are told in the first that the doctrine of a single God 'is found, and is not found, in the books of the Old Testament' (§ 22),

[19] Cf. Schilson (1989) 115.
[20] For further attempts see B X, 875–6; also Strohschneider-Kohrs (2011) *passim*.
[21] Cf. Althaus 179.

and in the second, that 'it is not true that the shortest line is always the straight one'(§ 91).[22]

The scriptural revelations to which Lessing refers were traditionally believed, as he explicitly reminds us, to come directly from God by miraculous means (§§ 11–12). Though he does not directly challenge this belief in *The Education of the Human Race*, he does declare that our perception of religious truth no longer depends on it (§ 59), and there is ample evidence in his other writings that, like most Enlightenment thinkers, he did not himself believe in miracles.[23] Where, then, does revelation in his opinion come from?

In his prefatory comments to the first part of *The Education of the Human Race* in the 'Counter-Propositions' to Reimarus, he declares:[24]

> truths which are at present so obvious and understandable to the most ordinary people must at one time have seemed quite incomprehensible and therefore directly inspired by the deity. But at all times and in all countries, there have been privileged souls whose thoughts, by their own efforts, transcended the sphere of their contemporaries, and who, hastening towards the greater light, were able, if not to communicate their feelings [*Empfindungen*], at least to tell others about them.

Such 'privileged souls', he adds, are found from time to time even today, and he no doubt includes among them those 'enthusiasts' (*Schwärmer*) whom he defended in the essay *On a Timely Task* (1776) for the new ideas they contribute to philosophy,[25] and likewise those medieval 'enthusiasts', such as Joachim of Fiore, whose prophecies of a third age and 'everlasting gospel' he cites in support of his own parallel hypothesis towards the end of *The Education of the Human Race* (§§ 86–90). (The close affinity between the latter work and the essay of 1776 is a further indication that both works date from that year.)

The above evidence suggests that Lessing saw revelation as originating, by a natural process, in the as yet obscure feelings (*Empfindungen*) of exceptional individuals whose insights are ahead of their time. This is in keeping with Leibniz's epistemology as outlined in his *Nouveaux Essais*, in which obscure perceptions (*perceptions insensibles*) and confused feelings are the precursors of rational knowledge;[26] the same epistemology underlies Lessing's theory that the 'inner truth' of religion is directly apparent to the feelings of simple believers. It follows from this that all of the central mysteries of Christianity should be capable of rationalization, and Lessing's tentative rationalization of the Trinity in particular encouraged later thinkers, including Schelling and Hegel, to rationalize it more completely.[27]

The final section of *The Education of the Human Race*, with its speculations on metempsychosis, will be discussed later. Something must first be said on the style and rhetoric of this complex work.

[22] On the latter paradox see Hill (1991) *passim*.
[23] See, for example, LM III, 10–19 (*Nathan the Wise*).
[24] LM XII, 445. [25] LM XVI, 297.
[26] Leibniz III/1, xxvi-xxxiii and 63; cf. Allison (1966) 158.
[27] Cf. Nisbet (1999) 76–84.

According to Lessing, the Old Testament has all the good qualities of an elementary textbook (§§ 49–50), including the fact that its style is

> sometimes plain and simple, sometimes poetic, full of tautologies throughout, but of the kind that exercise one's acumen by appearing at one moment to say something different while yet saying the same thing, and at another to say the same thing while basically meaning, or possibly meaning, something different.

As he was surely aware, this description applies equally well to his own text. The opening paragraphs in particular consist mainly of clear and simple statements, but as the work proceeds, straightforward assertions become less common, the sentences become longer, figurative and oblique expressions are more frequent, statements are increasingly qualified, and suggestive rephrasing of earlier points casts doubt on what had originally seemed uncontroversial certainties. Although the work is basically philosophical in character, its modes of expression are so varied that it is impossible to assign it to any recognized genre, literary or otherwise. In its self-relativizing ingenuity and ever-changing perspectives, it is more resistant to conclusive interpretation than any of the theological polemics whose 'theatrical logic' Goeze had found so impenetrable.

Like the theological polemics, *The Education of the Human Race* has pronounced poetic qualities, not least in its use of images. The preface of 1780, with its image of the wanderer on the hill who gazes into the 'immeasurable distance which a soft evening glow neither wholly conceals nor wholly reveals', foreshadows the related image of the 'inscrutable way' of providence towards the end of the work (§§ 91–93). Characteristically, these images add mystery as well as vividness to the phenomena they evoke; but as Lessing observes with reference to figurative (or potentially figurative) expressions in the Old Testament, these may also foreshadow unsuspected truths, preparing the way for rational comprehension (§§ 44–8). By the same token, revelation as a whole, in his interpretation, is but a metaphor for abstract truths which reason will eventually render fully intelligible.

But Lessing's use of figurative language does not mean that the text we are dealing with is essentially poetic in character, as has sometimes been argued.[28] Philosophers have always enriched their texts with figurative and narrative expressions, from Plato's parable of the cave to Leibniz's windows, mirrors, and synchronized clocks, Kant's Copernican revolution, and Nietzsche's reworkings of Greek myths. Lessing's philosophical and religious texts are no exception, and it is primarily his wish to reach out to a broader readership than an audience of specialists, together with his wish to avoid that dogmatic closure to which conceptual formulation can all too readily lead, that accounts for his fondness for figurative usage. As he puts it himself in one of his replies to Goeze:[29]

> I do indeed seek to influence my readers' understanding partly through their imagination. I consider it not only useful, but also necessary to clothe reasons in images, and to indicate by allusions all the subsidiary concepts which one or other of these calls to

[28] See, for example, Eibl (1985) and Hill (1990).

[29] LM XIII, 188–9.

> mind. Anyone who knows and understands nothing of this must have absolutely no ambitions as a writer, for only in this way have good writers become what they are.

Friedrich Schlegel, who repeatedly stressed the philosophical character of Lessing's work and declared that philosophy was the area 'for which the tendency of his thoughts destined him', praised him precisely for his 'closest possible combination of reason and imagination'.[30] But the decisive feature which defines most of his later writings as primarily philosophical (or theological) rather than poetic is his declared aim, as noted above, 'to influence my readers' understanding'—in short, to persuade them; and the fact that, like Socrates before him, he seeks to persuade them not so much to adopt a specific doctrine or opinion, but rather a critical attitude of mind, does nothing to diminish the philosophical character of his work.

To this end, Lessing employs an ever-changing variety of rhetorical devices. Even within the same sentence, he calls into question the proposition he has just enunciated, as when he declares of the New Testament writings (§ 65; cf. § 77):

> For seventeen hundred years, they have exercised the human understanding more than any other books and illuminated it more than any other books, if only through the light which the human understanding itself brought into them.

The work is replete with irony, as in the sentence just quoted and on numerous other occasions when the reader's expectations are frustrated. The same irony, or ambiguity, is present even in the layout of the work in one hundred numbered paragraphs. This numbering, together with the conceptual definitions with which the work begins, leads us to expect a systematic treatise (Leibniz's *Monadology*, for example, consists of ninety numbered paragraphs); but by the time we reach the end, the round figure seems more in keeping with number mysticism than with any rational system. Paradoxes, contradictions, and repeated qualifications generate perplexity and stimulate further thought, and the succession of interjections, exclamations, apostrophes (§§ 68–71, 91–2), dialogue (§§ 93–4), and inner monologue (§§ 96–100) gives the text immense liveliness and mobility. Perhaps the most striking rhetorical feature is the transition from third person speech, which predominates in the first three quarters of the text, to the first person, which increases in frequency thereafter and takes over completely towards the end;[31] this change is reinforced by a parallel transition from the indicative mood, which also predominates for the first three-quarters of the text, to exclamations and rhetorical questions, which increase in frequency thereafter. The climactic effect which this double transformation produces culminates in the last five paragraphs, which consist almost exclusively of rhetorical questions in the first person. The short preface of 1780 follows a similar pattern, with a series of rhetorical questions in the final paragraph. These changes lend great intensity to the work's conclusion, and underline the fact that we are left with more open questions than definite answers.

[30] Steinmetz (ed.) (1969) 199–200 and 216.

[31] Cf. Göbel (1998) 94.

The effect of all this, philosophically speaking, is to emphasize the provisionality of all human insights. Lessing makes this point himself in a letter to the younger Reimarus:[32]

> *The Education of the Human Race* is by a good friend who likes to set up all kinds of hypotheses and systems in order to have the pleasure of pulling them down again. [...] But what does it matter? Let each man say what he *thinks* is truth, and may *truth itself* be entrusted to God!

In the last sentence of this quotation, Lessing plainly alludes to his own memorable statement, in *A Rejoinder*, on the search for truth and the error which necessarily accompanies it. This allusion throws light on a puzzling remark at the end of his preface of 1780 to *The Education of the Human Race*. After declaring that it makes better sense to see all positive (i.e. revealed) religions as stages in the development of human reason than to respond to them with derision or anger (as, for example, the elder Reimarus had done), he continues:[33]

> If nothing in the best of worlds deserves this scorn, this indignation on our part, why should the religions alone deserve it? Can God's hand be involved [*im Spiele*] in everything except in our *errors*?

Apart from the provocative gambling metaphor (*im Spiele* means literally 'in play'), Lessing also seems at first sight to dismiss the revealed religions as 'errors'. But since all the main revealed religions include some or all of the truths of natural religion, which Lessing never calls into question, and since he repeatedly suggests that the doctrine of the Trinity and other Christian mysteries may embody further rational truths, it is more likely that the 'errors' he has in mind are simply the necessary limitations of all human knowledge which, as he puts it in *A Rejoinder*, ensure that we must 'constantly and eternally err'.[34]

Lessing's insistence, in his later years, on the limitations of human knowledge is symptomatic of a momentous development in European thought, especially that of Germany, during the final years of the Enlightenment. Frederick C. Beiser describes it as follows:[35]

> If the Enlightenment was 'the age of criticism', then the last decades of the eighteenth century marked the beginning of a new age, the age of meta-criticism. Intellectuals began to suffer a crisis of conscience and question their own faith in the powers of criticism.

Although this development is primarily associated with Kant, it should by now be apparent that Lessing's constant questioning, qualifying, and rephrasing of his own assertions stems from a similar meta-critical awareness.[36] This awareness is in no way diminished by the fact that he does not turn it into a system: on the contrary, he is no less distrustful of intellectual systems than of the

[32] To J. A. H. Reimarus, 6 April 1778. [33] LM XIII, 415.
[34] See Strohschneider-Kohrs (2005) *passim*; cf. also Strohschneider-Kohrs (1991) 225–6.
[35] Beiser 1. [36] Cf. Strohschneider-Kohrs (1991) 161–9; also Lüpke 20–1.

propositions of which they consist. And unlike that of Kant, his critical view of truth-claims in general is not based on the antinomies of reason itself, but rather on the limitations of language and the dogmatic fixity which its concepts so readily assume. There is a hint of this attitude in *The Education of the Human Race* when he struggles to make rational sense of the Trinity and adds 'I am perhaps not so much in error as that language is inadequate for my concepts' (§ 73); but much clearer examples can be found, as will shortly emerge, in the dialogues *Ernst and Falk*.

These factors must be borne in mind in any attempt to define the relationship of *The Education of the Human Race* to earlier thinkers. It is clearly indebted to numerous influences, ancient and modern, but its closest affinities are once again to Leibniz, and to a lesser extent to Spinoza. Its serene optimism, its faith in a benevolent providence, its vision of ever higher levels of rational awareness, and its perspectival relativism—all central features of the work—are certainly reminiscent of Leibniz. It is probably influenced, too, by Spinoza's view that the early Hebrews lived 'in the condition of children' and by his doctrine of 'accommodation', whereby successive revelations are adapted (or accommodated) to the level of understanding of those who interpret them.[37] Lessing's reference to 'the true transcendental concept of the One which reason learned [...] to deduce with certainty from the concept of the infinite' (§ 14) echoes a passage in Spinoza's *Ethics*,[38] and Friedrich Jacobi and others have argued that Lessing's deduction of the Trinity (§ 73) is likewise based on Spinoza.[39] These and other influences do not, however, appreciably diminish the originality of this extraordinary work. Its main philosophical significance lies not so much in any doctrines it contains or appears to contain, as in its self-relativizing manner of philosophizing and in the stimulus which this affords to critical—and self-critical—thinking.

One further aspect of this work remains to be considered, namely the concluding speculations on metempsychosis, in which Lessing suggests that human beings may be reincarnated on earth as often as is necessary to realize their full potential (§§ 94–100). This suggestion is not as eccentric as it may appear today, for the last decades of the eighteenth century witnessed a ferment of speculation on alternative modes of future existence. The decline of Christianity, with its doctrines of heaven and hell as absolute and final states, the preoccupation with ancient Greece, in which Pythagoras, Plato, and others taught various versions of metempsychosis and transmigration, and the growing knowledge of similar beliefs in Hindu culture all helped to stimulate this interest. Nor were such ideas wholly unacceptable in a Christian context, for they could also be found in the works of the Church Fathers and of Origen in particular.[40] And although Leibniz did not himself believe in metempsychosis, he was prepared to give the idea serious consideration,[41] and his

[37] See Spinoza I, 165; cf. I, 38–9 and 41.
[38] Spinoza II, 54–5 (*Ethics*, Part I, Prop. XIV).
[39] See Scholz (ed.) 99–100; cf. Spinoza, *Ethics*, Part I, Prop. XXIX.
[40] See Kurth-Voigt 30–1.
[41] Leibniz III/1, 415–19 (*Nouveaux Essais*, II, Ch. 2).

metaphysics of imperishable, continuously developing monads could readily be adapted to provide it with a philosophical foundation.

We know from Karl Lessing that Lessing was fond of speculating on various forms of reincarnation in his later years, whether as repeated human existence on earth, or more comprehensively on a scale extending from terrestrial animals to higher beings in other worlds.[42] He also liked to indulge, half seriously, in reflections with friends on what their identity might have been in previous incarnations. These speculations probably go back to his first year in Wolfenbüttel and his conversations with the younger Jerusalem, who was currently studying the works of Moses Mendelssohn. The dialogues *Phädon, or on the Immortality of the Soul* (1767), in which Mendelssohn postulates continued development of the soul in the afterlife, were of particular interest to Jerusalem, and they must certainly have featured in his discussions with Lessing.[43] We also know that, in 1770, Lessing purchased for the library the *Essais sur les dogmes de la métempsychose et du purgatoire* by the Swiss scholar Jean Rodolphe Sinner (dated 1771 but published in 1770),[44] a work which has been described as 'perhaps the most informative contribution to the literature of reincarnationism in the eighteenth century'.[45] Sinner reviews a wide range of reincarnationist beliefs in ancient and modern cultures, and lists relevant studies of the topic in several languages.

The essay 'Leibniz on Eternal Punishment' (1773) contains Lessing's first extended consideration of the afterlife in the 1770s; in it, he writes in the manner of Leibniz and Mendelssohn of the soul's continued development after death, but with no mention of metempsychosis. His first allusion to that idea probably occurs, as earlier mentioned, in his postscript to Jerusalem's essays.[46] But since it is merely an allusion, it is difficult to tell what kind of metempsychosis Lessing had in mind. He was, almost certainly, thinking of human reincarnation on earth, as in *The Education of the Human Race*, which he wrote very soon afterwards. The same idea appears in a brief note of 1778 on J. H. Campe's philosophical dialogues, in which he points out, in response to Campe's concern at the apparent injustice of unequal human fulfilment on earth, that such injustices may eventually be redressed through successive reincarnations.[47]

The longest and most interesting of Lessing's meditations on metempsychosis is the fragment *That More than Five Senses are Possible for Human Beings*.[48] Since it is plainly influenced by Charles Bonnet's *Palingénésie*, which Lessing is known to have studied in 1780, it was almost certainly written during that year.[49] In this curious fragment, he speculates that human beings may have acquired their present senses successively, in an evolutionary process, and that they may in future acquire further senses capable of directly detecting electrical, magnetic, and other invisible phenomena. Given that our present combination of senses has been gradually acquired, and that nature makes no leaps, beings with all possible permutations of

[42] D 592. [43] See Altmann (1973) 140–58; also Altmann (1976) 15.
[44] R/S (2004) 64. [45] Kurth-Voigt 56. [46] LM XII, 298–9.
[47] LM XVI, 443. [48] LM XVI, 522–5. [49] See LM XVI, 522 n. 1; also B X, 990.

senses, from one to five, must at one time have existed. (There are echoes here of the numerical permutations in the lotteries to which Lessing regularly subscribed.) And since material particles of every kind are inherently animate (as so often, Lessing follows Leibniz here), all may eventually serve to constitute new senses, thereby unlocking entire new dimensions of perception. The connection with metempsychosis, already implicit in his comment that 'the soul' (that is, one and the same soul) progressively acquires additional senses, is made explicit in a further fragment, on the same sheet as that just mentioned, which notes the great antiquity of the belief in the transmigration of souls.[50]

Although these fragments have some original features, all of the ideas in them can be found in earlier writers. For example, as Lessing had noted in 1751,[51] Diderot reflects in his *Lettre sur les sourds et les muets* on what the capabilities of people with only one of the five senses might be, and Leibniz observes in his *Nouveaux Essais* 'we do not know how far our knowledge and our organs can be developed in the course of the course of eternity which lies before us'.[52] But Lessing's chief inspiration is undoubtedly Charles Bonnet's *Palingénésie philosophique* (1769), which Jacobi found him studying in the summer of 1780.[53] Bonnet's vision of the afterlife, which he presents as a fulfilment of Christian eschatology, includes a cosmic hierarchy of beings migrating from planet to planet and progressively acquiring new and higher senses;[54] but unlike Lessing, he speaks not simply of the immortal soul, but, in quasi-scientific terminology, of the 'germ of the spiritual body' which contains the preformed elements of higher faculties to be acquired in future incarnations. Lessing, on the other hand, makes no mention of interplanetary migration. But since he nowhere questions traditional estimates of the earth's age and history, he can hardly have imagined that the earlier stages of human evolution, with beings endowed with fewer than five senses, took place on this planet. He was also familiar with theories of interplanetary migration as a commonplace of the age, and they already feature in his early poetry.[55] We must therefore conclude that, in the fragment of 1780, he assumes that successive incarnations take place on different celestial bodies, and not exclusively on earth, as in *The Education of the Human Race*.

The degree of Lessing's commitment to these distinct versions of metempsychosis, neither of which is wholly original, should not be exaggerated. The version in *The Education of the Human Race*, expressed in the form of rhetorical questions rather than statements, is self-evidently speculative, and the other versions are either brief and unspecific or fragments of a provisional and experimental nature. He has, in short, no single, unified theory of metempsychosis.[56] But inconsistent and derivative as they are, these scattered observations are not without interest. The fragment of 1780 indicates that, just as he had argued in *The Education of the Human Race* that human reason and moral consciousness develop to ever higher

[50] LM XVI, 525. [51] LM IV, 416. [52] Leibniz III/1, 305.
[53] D 509. [54] Bonnet II, 428–46.
[55] See, for example, LM I, 125; also Guthke (1983c) 237–41 and 279–80.
[56] See on this Cyranka 457–8.

levels over the course of time, Lessing also considered a parallel development—or evolution—of the human senses. That this was more than a casual borrowing from Bonnet is confirmed by a series of related entries in his *Collectanea*, all devoted to sensory and extra-sensory perception. There are separate entries on the four senses of 'Sehen', 'Hören', 'Fühlen', and 'Rüchen' (i.e. 'Riechen'), some with cross-references, and in the entry 'Wunderbare Menschen' (human prodigies), he comments:

> We are doubtless far from understanding the range of the human faculties, and far from knowing how far a human being can progress by application and practice, or what kind of anomalies can manifest themselves in his organism [...].

In the same entry, he states his intention to include such matters in a projected work or periodical entitled *Der Litterator* (*The Man of Letters*), and in other articles in this group, he notes examples of individuals who could distinguish colours by touch or other people by their smell.[57] It would therefore seem that a study of the senses and their range and development must be added to the long list of projects which Lessing never completed.

Finally, there is evidence that he had a personal interest in metempsychosis and other forms of continued development after death. He was to an unusual degree subject to fits of ennui and inertia, often accompanied by deep depression. The ultimate he could conceive of in boredom was the idea of a transcendental God existing in eternal and immutable perfection, and that of the afterlife as portrayed in orthodox Christian theology. As Jacobi reports,[58]

> Lessing could not come to terms with the idea of a personal and absolutely infinite being in the unchanging enjoyment of its supreme perfection. He associated it with such an impression of *infinite boredom* that it caused him pain and anxiety.

And on his visit to Hamburg in 1778, he told his friends that, rather than sing eternal hallelujahs, he would sooner be one of the stone lions supporting a coat of arms above the town hall—presumably because he could then observe the bustle below.[59] Such feelings may help to explain why, in his later years, his vision of the afterlife became increasingly dynamic and diversified.

The early reception of the complete version of *The Education of the Human Race* was predictably mixed.[60] Jacobi and Elise Reimarus warmly applauded it, but Moses Mendelssohn was less impressed (not surprisingly, given the work's portrayal of Judaism as an obsolete religion), and he rejected Lessing's central hypothesis that humanity as a whole is constantly progressing.[61] The theologians were generally critical, and other reviewers were at a loss how to interpret it. Lessing's vision of a third age and of infinite development in the hereafter appealed to the Romantic generation,[62] and it may have influenced Kant's concept of 'philosophical chiliasm',

[57] LM XV, 229, 272–3, 362, 370–1, 391, 404–5. [58] D 509.
[59] E. Schmidt II, 556. [60] See B X, 816–40; Fick (2010) 484–6.
[61] Mendelssohn JA VIII, 162–3 (*Jerusalem*). [62] See Koepke 213 and 219.

according to which the prospect of future fulfilment may serve as a regulative idea to guide our moral efforts in the present.[63] Lessing's view of the history of religion as a rational process foreshadows the basic premise of Hegel's philosophy of history (although Lessing would have found Hegel's approach too doctrinaire and systematic). On a more unusual note, recent research has revealed that the last seven paragraphs of Lessing's work, with their brief and tentative speculations on metempsychosis, are cited with approval in innumerable tracts by spiritualists, theosophists, anthroposophists, and occultists over the last two centuries, from Annie Besant and Helena Blavatsky to Rudolf Steiner.[64] Since Lessing's speculations are neither original nor fully developed, it seems likely that their appeal to this particular readership was due mainly to their rhetorical eloquence and the authority of Lessing's name.

There remains the puzzling question of why Lessing refused to the end to acknowledge his authorship of this particular work.[65] Despite its historical breadth and reference to humanity as a whole, *The Education of the Human Race* was conceived in a highly specific context, namely the publication of Reimarus's *Fragments*. In it, Lessing sought in particular to rescue the Old Testament—that is, Judaism—from Reimarus's claim that it had no religious worth because it lacked the doctrine of immortality; but he was able to do so only at the price of conceding that Judaism was a more primitive religion than Christianity. He was also anxious at this time to maintain an impartial attitude in the conflict he knew would follow the publication of the *Fragments*, and consequently had no wish to associate himself directly with the unorthodox view, expressed in *The Education of the Human Race*, that the Old Testament is superseded by the New. He therefore presented the work as written by someone else, and assured his readers that the anonymous author 'is not nearly as heterodox as he appears at first glance'.[66]

By the time he published the complete work in 1780, however, the original context no longer existed, and there was no longer any need to present Judaism as superseded by Christianity. Significantly, in his new preface of that year, the context to which Lessing refers is not just that of Judaism and Christianity, but that of 'all the positive religions'. Not for the first time, he pays the price of inconsistency for his usual habit of writing in response to the exigencies of the moment rather than in the light of a coherent set of beliefs. For he had meanwhile written *Nathan the Wise*, in which Judaism is presented as no less valid than Christianity, and Islam is included as equal in status to both. Given this fact, he now had every reason to continue denying his authorship of a work which had taken a narrower and much less equitable view of the world religions; and since no action had been taken against him for publishing *Nathan the Wise*, in which Christianity comes off distinctly worse than in *The Education of the Human Race*, his continued denial that he had written the latter work cannot be attributed to fear of the Brunswick censorship.

[63] Kant AA VI, 34 and VIII, 27; cf. Kuzniar *passim*.
[64] See Cyranka 21–146.
[65] See L. to Karl Lessing, 25 February 1780.
[66] LM XII, 446.

But another, more personal factor was also at work. Lessing's view of the future, after the calamities of 1778 and his declining health thereafter, was less sanguine than it had been in 1776. Elise Reimarus, who discussed the newly published text of *The Education of the Human Race* with him on his final visit to Hamburg in 1780, later said of the work that Lessing, by that time, 'no longer believed in this earlier dream'.[67] It is also safe to assume that he now found it less easy than before to associate himself with the ecstatic, visionary tone of the final paragraphs of the work, in which the authorial voice becomes that of an 'enthusiast' of the kind he had defended in 1776. He had not, of course, lost his lifelong faith in a benevolent providence. But his vision of the future, like that of the judge in the parable of the three rings, was no longer quite so assured as it had been four years earlier.

The eighteenth century was the century of the Enlightenment. But it was also the golden age of secret societies, whose preoccupation with mystery seems at variance with everything the Enlightenment stood for. Admittedly, most of these societies—the Freemasons, Illuminati, and Rosicrucians are among the most familiar—professed their commitment to philanthropic aims and the pursuit of higher insight; but their cultivation of mystery and mystification could, and often did, become an end in itself. One of the aims of Lessing's *Ernst and Falk. Dialogues for Freemasons* was to counteract this tendency—not by condemning the current fascination with mystery, but by showing how, far from conflicting with the aims of the Enlightenment, it might actually be made to serve them.

As Lessing's preface to the work implies, the Masonic dialogues have strong affinities with *The Education of the Human Race*. In this preface (which he characteristically attributes to a third party), he draws a parallel between the development of Christianity on the one hand and that of Freemasonry on the other: in both cases, practice precedes theory. Both varieties of belief develop in the course of history, both become progressively more intelligible, and both contribute significantly to the moral progress of humanity. But the two works are also complementary, for the progress of rational insight described in *The Education of the Human Race* is reinforced by the progress towards human brotherhood outlined in *Ernst and Falk*.

The genesis, content, and reception of *Ernst and Falk* are closely related to the history of German Freemasonry. The work was written at a time of uncertainty and internal conflict within the Masonic movement, and although Lessing's main concern was to look beyond the factionalism and petty disputes of the present to the essential character and ultimate value of Freemasonry, he could not avoid taking issue with the current crisis and with the political principles which underlay it. The following account will look initially at the work's origin, composition, and publication, and then at its formal and rhetorical features. The relation of the work to the wider context of eighteenth-century Freemasonry, and its political implications, will be examined in more detail towards the end of this chapter.

[67] D 465.

Lessing's plan for a work on Freemasonry is of much earlier origin than that of *The Education of the Human Race*. He had known many Freemasons since his early years, including J. G. Brückner and other actors in Caroline Neuber's troupe, Nicolai and C. F. Voss in Berlin, and Ekhof, Bode, Knorre and others in Hamburg. Before his Hamburg years, he showed no interest in joining the Order himself, and one of his early poems ridicules its obsession with its (no doubt trivial) secrets.[68] But at some time before he visited Bad Pyrmont in the summer of 1766, he began to research the origins of Freemasonry, for we know that he expounded his own hypothesis on that question to Justus Möser when he met him at the spa. According to Lessing, the term 'Freemasonry' arose out of a confusion in Britain between the Old English 'masony' (German *Masoney*), denoting a company at table (such as the Round Table of Arthurian legend), and the term 'masonry', denoting the stonemasons' craft. He developed this hypothesis further in his first surviving notes for *Ernst and Falk*, written at some time between 1769 and 1771,[69] and subsequently included it in the fifth and last of the dialogues.

Soon after he moved to Hamburg in 1767, he applied to his friend and partner Bode for admission to the Freemasons, since Bode was Master of Lodge Absalom, the oldest of the German lodges, at that time affiliated to the Strict Observance system of Freemasonry.[70] Lessing claimed to have discovered 'the secret' of the Order (presumably the hypothesis outlined above) through his own researches, and he no doubt wished to discover whether or not his supposition was accurate. Bode refused to admit him, ostensibly because advancement within the Order would be too slow for someone of Lessing's age and temperament, but in reality because internal friction had led to a suspension of the Strict Observance's activities between 1767 and 1773.[71]

Undeterred by this rebuff, Lessing applied once more for admission on his visit to Hamburg in 1771, and although Bode was still in no position to admit him, Lessing's wish became known to members of the rival lodge 'Zu den drei goldenen Rosen', who included Claudius, Ekhof, Knorre, and Bubbers.[72] This lodge, affiliated to the Swedish system of Freemasonry, was part of a breakaway movement from the Strict Observance, but it continued to accept the latter's introduction of 'higher grades' beyond the three basic grades (apprentice, fellow craft, and master) of the original British system, as well as its belief that modern Freemasonry was founded by the medieval Knights Templar.[73] When the Master of this lodge, Georg Johann von Rosenberg, heard that the celebrated Lessing planned to publish a work on the origins of Freemasonry, he wrote to the head of the breakaway movement, Johann Wilhelm Ellenberger (commonly known as von Zinnendorf), declaring his intention of admitting Lessing to the Hamburg lodge as a matter of urgency. (Rosenberg was clearly anxious to prevent Lessing's discoveries from reaching the public in general and rival Masonic movements in particular.)[74] With

[68] LM I, 181–2 ('Das Geheimnis'). [69] LM XV, 484–90.
[70] See Dziergwa 101–2. [71] D 218–19.
[72] Danzel/Guhrauer II, 489; D 314; Dziergwa 105.
[73] B X, 709; H. Schneider (1951) 175 [74] B X, 709–11.

Zinnendorf's agreement, Lessing was duly admitted at a private ceremony in Rosenberg's house on 14 October 1771, with Bubbers and Knorre in attendance. The usual entry fee was waived, and Lessing was admitted to all three basic grades at once; the ceremony was conducted in private to avoid embarrassment to Lessing in Brunswick, where the Strict Observance system was dominant.[75] But although Rosenberg hoped that Lessing would eventually found a lodge in Brunswick within Zinnendorf's system, Lessing was thoroughly disillusioned by his own inauguration and seems to have taken no further part in that system's affairs.[76] He also seems to have ignored the strange letter he subsequently received from Zinnendorf, warning him not to publish his planned work on the origins of Freemasonry and hinting that he might share the fate of Socrates if he proceeded to do so. (This letter was eventually used by Mathilde Ludendorff as evidence that Lessing, along with Luther, Mozart, and Schiller, was poisoned by a conspiracy of Jews and Freemasons.) The Hamburg experience did, however, leave its mark on *Ernst and Falk*, in which the disillusioned Ernst, in the fourth dialogue, describes the empty rituals and absurd beliefs he encountered on his admission to the Order.

In the final draft of *Ernst and Falk*, Lessing radically altered his earlier plan and confined his original hypothesis on the origin of Freemasonry to the final dialogue; the rest of the work is chiefly concerned to define the true nature of Freemasonry and its world-historical mission. The approximate date of this final version can be inferred from references in it to the American War of Independence,[77] which had begun by the time Lessing returned from his travels in 1776, and from its stylistic and thematic affinity to *The Testament of St John*, which also employs the dialogue form and was written in the latter part of 1777. The work was certainly complete by early November of that year, for Moses Mendelssohn acknowledges receipt of a manuscript copy on 11 November, and it is clear from his comments that it already contained all five dialogues.[78]

In keeping with the work's subject matter, the history of its publication is devious and convoluted. After completing the work in the autumn of 1777, Lessing took no steps to publish it until the following summer, when a national convention of the Strict Observance was held in Wolfenbüttel from 15 July to 27 August. He had already circulated the manuscript among local members, and he showed it to others attending the convention, including Duke Ferdinand of Brunswick, Grand Master of the Strict Observance, who praised the work and expressed a wish to receive a personal copy.[79] Lessing duly sent him one, and simultaneously arranged for the first three dialogues to be published, with Lichtenberg's help, by J. C. Dieterich of Göttingen. These dialogues appeared in September 1778, without the author's name; but since the place of publication was given as Wolfenbüttel, there could be little doubt as to the author's identity.[80]

[75] D 314–15; Dziergwa 106–8. [76] D 313; Dziergwa 110.
[77] LM XIII, 400. [78] Mendelssohn to L., 11 November 1777.
[79] See L. to Claudius, 19 April 1778; L. to Duke Ferdinand, 28 July 1778.
[80] LM XIII, 339–68.

The most remarkable feature of this publication was its printed dedication to Duke Ferdinand. For two reasons, this dedication was highly unusual. Firstly, it was out of character on Lessing's part to dedicate a work to anyone, and especially to someone in a position of authority; this is indeed the only published dedication in all of his works.[81] And secondly, he omitted to seek advance permission from the recipient, as was invariably expected on such occasions. Two factors seem to have prompted this strange behaviour. On the one hand, it enabled Lessing to circumvent the censorship which had been imposed on him only a few weeks before, since Duke Ferdinand was unlikely to disown a work he had recently praised,[82] and a dedication to this leading Freemason and member of the ruling family of Brunswick gave the work a quasi-official status. And on the other hand, the Duke would almost certainly have refused any request to accept the dedication, for although Lessing knew that he was anxious to reform the Strict Observance and welcomed the work's criticisms of its Templar legend, he also knew that the Duke would not wish to lend open support to that system's critics at a time when a major debate on its future was in progress. To spare him such embarrassment, Lessing published only the first three dialogues, which deal with the basic concept of Freemasonry, and omitted the last two, which contain the criticisms in question. The Duke, nonplussed by this fait accompli, consulted his advisers,[83] and his reply to Lessing was characteristically benevolent but at the same time reproachful, for he felt that even the first three dialogues contained material unsuitable for release to the general public. He also extracted a promise from Lessing not to publish the remaining dialogues without his permission, and Lessing duly advised those to whom he showed the manuscript not to let it be copied or published.[84]

The manuscript was widely circulated, and it cannot have greatly surprised Lessing when it appeared in print in the autumn of 1780, with no indication of authorship, publisher, or place of publication.[85] Like the first three dialogues, it began with a 'preface by a third party'—in this case, an accurate attribution. The publisher was Johann Carl Brönner of the firm H. L. Brönner of Frankfurt am Main, Master of the Frankfurt lodge 'Zur Einigkeit', which adhered to the older, British model of Freemasonry and was consequently opposed to the Strict Observance. Only in recent times was the identity of the editor and author of the preface discovered:[86] he was Adolf von Knigge, the well known novelist and writer on etiquette, who had visited Lessing during the Masonic convention of 1778 and read—and possibly copied—the complete manuscript of *Ernst and Falk*.[87] (Knigge's claim, in his preface, that he was not himself a Freemason was no doubt intended to conceal his identity.) Although Lessing made no public protest, it is unlikely that he had any hand in this publication. He confined

[81] See Birus *passim*. [82] Duke Ferdinand to L., 29 July 1778.
[83] A (2003) 286–7 and 290–1.
[84] Duke Ferdinand to L., 21 October 1778; cf. L. to Campe, 6 November 1779.
[85] LM XIII, 387–411. [86] See Fenner *passim*.
[87] A (2005) 447; also A (2003) 471 (No. 962a).

himself to correcting some of its many inaccuracies in his personal copy. A further, posthumous edition of the fourth and fifth dialogues, published by Hamann in 1781, supplied some references—mainly to the controversial Templar legend—which Knigge's edition had omitted.

The dialogues consist for the most part of questions and answers, exchanged by the curious and uninitiated Ernst and the wiser and more experienced Falk, on the nature and purpose of Freemasonry. Though superficially similar to the catechetical dialogues of which Masonic ritual so largely consists, these conversations are in fact much closer to the Socratic dialogue,[88] since Falk rarely supplies definitive answers to Ernst's questions and more often encourages him, by hints, riddles, paradoxes, and other rhetorical devices, to work out the answers for himself.

Much of the perplexity which Ernst—and the reader—experiences is due to the fact that the main concepts discussed have not one but two senses. Thus in the first dialogue, in which Ernst asks his partner whether he is a Freemason and what he understands by Freemasonry, Ernst is thinking primarily of institutional Freemasonry, whereas Falk has in mind an essential and ideal Freemasonry in which any individual can in principle participate without being a member of a Masonic lodge. And when Falk explains that Freemasons are known by their deeds rather than by words, Ernst takes this as referring to the well known philanthropic projects of institutional Freemasonry, whereas Falk again has in mind the less tangible (or 'true') deeds of essential Freemasonry in neutralizing the divisive factors in human relations and promoting long-term solidarity. Similarly, when means of mitigating the divisive effects of class, religion, and nationality are discussed in the second and third dialogues, Falk has in mind not direct political intervention but a gradual change of attitude in the spirit of the original constitution (1723) of modern Freemasonry.

Encouraged by these reflections, the impulsive Ernst leaves at once to join the Freemasons; but when he returns at the beginning of the fourth dialogue, he delivers a bitter account of his disillusioning experience: far from the enlightened humanity he expected, he encountered class divisions and religious prejudices no less pronounced than in civil society, as well as practices such as alchemy and spiritualism which were scarcely indicative of enlightenment. In the final dialogue, Falk counsels patience and tolerance, and expounds his own vision of true Freemasonry as a comradeship of equals, descended from the fraternal equality of the Round Table and early Germanic society.

It matters little that Lessing's hypothesis on the etymology of 'masonry' is without foundation: like much else in the dialogues, its function is essentially symbolic. Just as original Freemasonry, as instituted in 1717, adopted the tools and practices of 'operative' masonry as symbols of its belief in social justice and natural religion, so does Lessing adopt the terminology and imagery of institutional Freemasonry—smoke and fire, sunrise and sunset, etc.—to symbolize his faith in gradual human progress in which all can participate, without any need of secret societies. The

[88] See Strohscheider-Kohrs (1991) 216.

dialogues themselves—five in number, hence reminiscent of a drama—fall into groups of three and two, each of which begins and ends with a sunrise and sunset. Ernst explicitly brings out the symbolic significance of the second sunset, which also marks the climax of the dialogues, by declaring that another sun—the sun of enlightenment—has risen for him instead.

The most distinctive feature of the dialogues, their thematic focus and at the same time the key to many of their formal features, is their preoccupation with secrets and mystery. But like so many other concepts in the work, those of secrecy and mystery have a double significance. Falk himself distinguishes between *Heimlichkeiten* (or secrets which can in principle be revealed) and *das Geheimnis* (or that which is inherently mysterious or incapable of rational explanation).[89]

One of the main functions of secrecy and mystification in the secret societies of Lessing's time was to exploit that thirst for increased knowledge which the Enlightenment did so much to encourage, and thereby to attract and retain their members by promises of ever higher degrees of insight. In some branches of European Freemasonry, this led to a proliferation of 'higher grades' beyond the original three. But since the promised insights consisted merely of new symbols and ceremonies and ever more grandiose titles, the risk of frustration and disillusionment of the kind which Ernst experiences in Lessing's dialogues was high.[90] One possible reaction was to demand an end to all such mystification, as Herder did in his own Masonic dialogue of 1793.[91] This work begins as an extract from Lessing's dialogues, but continues it in a new direction, reinstating the Enlightenment principle of publicity as a necessary precondition of all human progress.[92] Lessing's reaction was subtler and more original. He uses mystification both to encourage independent enquiry and to delimit those areas of experience which cannot be rendered more transparent without distortion or over-simplification. The oblique modes of discourse he employs to this end are akin to those in *The Education of the Human Race*: paradoxes, ambiguity, aposiopesis, continual qualifications and other such devices deny Ernst, and the reader, the definitive statement to which the discussions appear to be leading.[93] But above all, it is repeatedly suggested that each apparently unambiguous concept conceals a vitally important deeper meaning. The link with Lessing's theological writings is brought out when Falk says of institutional Freemasonry that 'a lodge is to Freemasonry what the church is to religious faith. No conclusions whatsoever can be drawn from the external prosperity of the church as to the faith of its members.'[94]

We have here essentially the same antithesis as that between the letter and spirit of Christianity. And just as Lessing uses the latter, in his *Axioms* of 1778, to undermine religious dogma in favour of that 'inner truth' which the ordinary Christian can discern without being able to define it, so in the dialogues does he subvert institutional Freemasonry in favour of the spirit which prompted its foundation. The 'inner truth' of Christianity, it will be recalled, was felt rather than rationally comprehended. So likewise, according to Falk, does true (i.e. non-institutional)

[89] LM XIII, 394. [90] Cf. Agethen 134 and 137.
[91] Herder SWS XVII, 123–32. [92] Cf. Kant AA VII, 89–90.
[93] See, for example, LM XIII, 362. [94] LM XIII, 398.

Freemasonry rest 'not on *external associations*, which can so readily degenerate into *civil regulations*, but on the shared sentiment [*Gefühl*] of sympathetic spirits'.[95] There is already a hint of this attitude in James Anderson's original constitution of Freemasonry, with which Lessing was familiar, when Anderson says of his attempts to define the Freemason's duties: 'It is impossible to describe these Things in Writing; and every Brother must attend in his Place, and learn them in a Way peculiar to this *Fraternity*.'[96] Clearly, the sentiment of friendship is involved here, and it may not be possible to express that sentiment adequately in words.[97] But friendship is not itself 'the secret' referred to by Ernst or Falk, who are already close friends before the dialogues begin (they address one another by the familiar 'Du'). As Falk himself says, the 'true deeds' of the (non-institutional) Freemasons, whose effects may not become apparent for centuries, are their secret;[98] and these deeds are their active contributions, made possible by their fraternal sentiments, towards implementing the eighteenth-century ideal of the brotherhood of man.

But since such contributions, as Falk makes clear, never seek to undermine the legitimate authority of the state, what need is there to describe them as 'the secret', and those who make them as (non-institutional) Freemasons? The reason for such secrecy is essentially the same as that which led Lessing to oppose the 'letter' of religion—that is, its dogmatic formulation—in favour of its spirit. Institutional Freemasonry, with its hierarchical organization and all too familiar prejudices, has betrayed the spirit of its founders. But instead of redefining its aims with the help of a new set of abstractions—which might themselves harden into new forms of prejudice and intolerance—Lessing seeks to reanimate the spirit which gave Freemasonry its original impulse, and which, like the 'inner truth' of religion, can never be adequately expressed in words. Thus the ultimate reason for the secrecy and mystification in which Falk indulges is the inadequacy of conceptual language,[99] as the following exchange between the two friends illustrates:[100]

ERNST: If I have a conception of something, I can express it in words.
FALK: Not always; and at least often not in such a way that others derive exactly the same conception from the words as what I have in mind.
ERNST: If not exactly the same, then at least an approximation!
FALK: An approximate conception would in this case be useless or dangerous. Useless if it didn't contain enough, and dangerous if it contained the slightest amount too much.

The emancipatory effect of this insight is exemplified in the person of Ernst, who, by personal experience and reflection, discovers both the limitations of institutional Freemasonry and the deeper sense which originally inspired it. That some-

[95] LM XIII, 402. [96] Anderson 313.
[97] Cf. Michelsen (1990f) 158–9. [98] LM XIII, 349.
[99] See esp. Hoensbroech 25 and 36–48; also Nisbet (1986) 301–7.
[100] LM XIII, 345.

thing of this effect can be transmitted to the reader is confirmed by the positive reception of the dialogues and the canonic status they eventually attained within German Freemasonry.

It now remains to discuss the political content of *Ernst and Falk* and its role in the development of Freemasonry in Germany; for the second and third dialogues contain Lessing's most extensive reflections on political theory, and these are largely responsible for the increased interest in this work during the last half century. This process began with Reinhart Koselleck's influential study *Kritik und Krise. Ein Beitrag zur Pathogenese der bürgerlichen Welt* (Freiburg, 1959), according to which the secret societies of the Enlightenment functioned as proto-democratic institutions which, under the cloak of secrecy, rehearsed the new and potentially revolutionary principles of individual freedom and social equality, thereby preparing the way for bourgeois emancipation and the downfall of absolutism. Applied in detail to Lessing's dialogues, as happened in the 1960s and 1970s, this theory implied that Lessing's mystifications were due primarily to political caution or even served as a mask for revolutionary intentions.

Conspiracy theories of the secret societies were, of course, in circulation long before the twentieth century. They were already widespread in the eighteenth century, especially after the French Revolution, but also in Lessing's time. Such a theory is mentioned in *Ernst and Falk* itself, when the two friends discuss and reject the claim, at the start of the fifth dialogue, that the American war was the product of a Masonic conspiracy. Since the 1970s, Koselleck's theory of the secret societies has also encountered growing criticism.[101] It is difficult to reconcile with the fact that, in such organizations, the leaders and office-bearers were frequently members of the high nobility and even of ruling families. It has also been shown that, even among the Illuminati, a few of whose leading figures developed utopian political principles in the early 1780s, the vast majority of members had no inkling of any revolutionary objectives.[102] It is now generally recognized that Lessing's dialogues do not lend themselves to revolutionary interpretation,[103] for the two partners agree that, despite their evils and inequalities, the state and civil society are much to be preferred to the state of nature, and that no attempt should be made to remove such evils completely, 'for this would destroy the state itself along with them'.[104] It should also be remembered that, from the earliest times, the Freemasons themselves explicitly forbade political interference, as in Anderson's *Constitutions*, which state: 'A Mason is a peaceable Subject to the Civil Powers, wherever he resides or works, and is never to be concerned in Plots and Conspiracies against the Peace and Welfare of the Nation.'[105] Besides, it has already been seen that the primary function of Lessing's mystifications is pedagogical rather than political,

[101] See, for example, Roberts 54–5 amd 117; Michelsen (1990f) 150–1 n. 13; Agethen 11–12 and 59.

[102] Agethen 12 and 330.

[103] See, for example, Michelsen (1990f) 150–1; Eibl (1985) 234; Fink (1980) 61; Willems 541–2.

[104] LM XIII, 359 and 364.

[105] Anderson 312; cf. Dülmen (1977) 259.

serving to undermine rather than encourage simplistic political initiatives.[106] And in the words of that memorable axiom (perhaps ultimately derived from Benjamin Franklin) which the two friends warmly endorse: 'Whatever costs blood is certainly not worth shedding it.'[107]

The most radical political statement in the dialogues is the following comment by Falk:[108]

> States unite human beings so that each individual may enjoy his share of happiness better and more securely through and within this union.—The sum of the individual happiness of all its members is the happiness of the state. There is none at all apart from this. Every other happiness of the state whereby even the smallest number of individual members suffers, and *must* suffer, is a cloak for tyranny.

This criticism certainly applies to absolutism, as Lessing no doubt intended. But it is not solely applicable to absolutism, for it applies to any form of government which puts the interests of the state before those of the individual, as might happen under a system of majority rule (such as Rousseau's government by the 'general will') which disregarded the interests of minorities. In so far as it does have specific reference, it would seem to be aimed at the political theory, based on natural law, of such thinkers as Wolff and Gottsched, who taught that the aim of the state is to promote human happiness—but happiness as defined by the state, and with reference to the welfare of the state rather than that of individuals.[109] This theory is compatible either with enlightened absolutism or with the utilitarian principle of the greatest happiness of the greatest number.[110] And although Lessing shares Rousseau's belief that the state is an artificial construction, he views it more positively than Rousseau does, declaring that civil society develops human capacities which are necessarily absent in the state of nature.[111] But like other early exponents of German liberalism such as Herder, the young Fichte, and Wilhelm von Humboldt, he seems to favour a minimal state whose chief function is to provide security for its members. Individualism is accordingly the fundamental principle of Lessing's political thought. The state is not a leviathan or a macroanthropos, but an additive construction equivalent to the sum total of its citizens, each of whom—as in Leibniz's monadology—has a unique and inviolable perspective on the whole. Just as in Kant's moral philosophy, the two friends in the dialogues therefore agree that human beings should be treated as ends in themselves, and never as means to the ends of the state.[112]

It follows from this that all individuals have equal rights, and Ernst's disillusion with institutional Freemasonry is due largely to his discovery that certain classes of people, such as Jews, tradesmen, and servants, are routinely excluded from membership.[113] This does not, of course, mean that social distinctions

[106] See Nisbet (1986) 297–8.
[107] LM XIII, 401; see also H. Schneider (1951) 189–90 and Werner (1987) 587–92.
[108] LM XIII, 352. [109] Cf. Willems 547. [110] See Fink (1980) 43.
[111] LM XIII, 359. [112] LM XIII, 352. [113] LM XIII, 397.

should or can be abolished. What is needed, as Falk declares, is a more open and tolerant attitude:[114]

> It is most desirable that there should be men in every state who are not overawed by exalted rank or repelled by social inferiority; men in whose company the exalted willingly cease to stand on their dignity and those of inferior rank boldly assert themselves.

He also points out that different climates and customs generate further differences between people beyond those of social class, namely differences of religion, nationality, and political constitution. Like those of social class, such differences cannot be legislated against or eliminated by forcible means; but their potentially harmful effects can and must be neutralized by the efforts of individuals who are able to rise above religious, national, and political prejudice. Falk describes the work of such individuals—that is, of the Freemasons in his own, non-institutional sense—as a work of supererogation (*opus supererogatum*), a voluntary, cosmopolitan service which they perform in the interest of humanity as a whole, over and above their normal duties as citizens. In so doing, they respect the differences in question in a spirit of tolerance and pluralism—in the spirit, that is, which Lessing would shortly celebrate in *Nathan the Wise*.

Like *The Education of the Human Race*, the Masonic dialogues contain utopian elements, raising the prospect of an ideal political constitution and universal brotherhood. But the two friends are less sanguine about such prospects than the authorial voice in *The Education of the Human Race*, for they conclude that no human society will ever be able to match the harmonious anarchy of the anthill, and that there can be no unity among people at any level without concomitant divisions.[115] Like Kant's perpetual peace, complete human brotherhood remains a regulative idea to which we can never do more than approximate,[116] and Lessing's two speakers console themselves with the thought that the present decadence of institutional Freemasonry may be merely the means chosen by providence to make way for better things.

Friedrich Jacobi, who discussed such matters with Lessing, later said of him 'he had no more idea of political constitutions than the apostles had of aesthetics'.[117] Lessing does indeed have little to say on constitutional arrangements, for what mattered to him most, in his personal life as well as in political theory, was the principle of individual autonomy. It is this principle, liberal and implicitly democratic, which gives *Ernst and Falk* its progressive edge, and which helps to explain its appeal to the young Karl Marx, who talked of the withering away of the state and who still, in his early years, attached a positive value to free individual development.[118] For in 1844, the journal *Vorwärts* published extracts from Lessing's dialogues, at Marx's instigation and from his personal copy, under the title 'Lessing as a Socialist'.[119]

[114] LM XIII, 360. [115] LM XIII, 351 and 358–61.
[116] Cf. Henn 141–4. [117] D 519.
[118] See, for example, Marx/Engels III, 33 (*Die deutsche Ideologie* I: *Feuerbach*).
[119] Dziergwa 161.

The main political significance of *Ernst and Falk* lay not so much in political theory in general as in its relation to institutional Freemasonry and the crisis which overtook it in Germany in the 1770s and early 1780s. By that time, most German lodges had lost contact with the original, simpler system which spread from Britain to the continent in the first half of the century.[120] The 'higher grades' system which replaced it, especially in the dominant Strict Observance movement, originated in France, where it was first developed in the 1720s and 1730s by Jacobite aristocrats from Scotland such as the Chevalier Andrew Michael Ramsay and Charles Radcliffe, Earl of Derwentwater, both of whom became followers of the Young Pretender Charles Edward Stuart.[121] The system of 'higher grades', which in some branches numbered as many as thirty-three,[122] appealed to the French aristocracy because it enabled them to replicate their social superiority within Freemasonry itself,[123] thereby introducing a hierarchical and elitist principle alien to the original Masonic constitution. Two other elements were equally hard to reconcile with the original Masonic values. Firstly, it was claimed that ultimate control of the Order was in the hands of 'Unknown Superiors' (widely assumed to include Charles Edward Stuart); and secondly, a new, aristocratic genealogy linking the Order to the Knights Templar replaced its traditional descent from the plebeian stonemasons' guild. Both of these myths were promulgated in Germany by the dubious figure of Karl Gotthelf von Hund, who founded the Strict Observance in 1755. Under Hund's aegis, all manner of hermetic practices and charlatanry invaded the movement, even after Duke Ferdinand of Brunswick became Grand Master in 1772.[124]

This was a time of schisms and factional disagreements in the Masonic movement, and the basic conflict between rational and mystical tendencies remained unresolved. Zinnendorf's split from the Strict Observance has already been mentioned, and Adam Weishaupt, founder of the Illuminati in 1776, sought to take over the Freemasons by a process of infiltration; another group under J. A. Starck broke away in 1778. In an attempt to resolve the crisis, a number of conventions of the Strict Observance were held. One took place in Brunswick, under Hund's chairmanship, in the summer of 1775 (during Lessing's absence in Italy), another in Wolfenbüttel from 15 July to 27 August 1778, and a third in Wilhelmsbad in 1782. Hund's death in 1776 cleared the way for reform, and Duke Ferdinand looked around for a new spiritual basis for the Order, seeking, among other things, to abandon the myth of the Knights Templar as founders of Freemasonry and terminate recent attempts to restore the Templar Order within the Strict Observance system.[125]

It is against this background that Lessing's relationship with institutional Freemasonry must be viewed. The traditional assumption that he broke off all contacts with Masonic lodges after his disillusioning experience in Hamburg certainly needs

[120] See Roberts 98. [121] Jacob 128; Roberts 32 and 38.
[122] Ridley 72. [123] Agethen 65.
[124] See Roberts 106–9; Hammermayer 9. [125] Roberts 113; Hammermayer 11.

to be qualified. As long ago as 1951, Heinrich Schneider discovered that he made a special visit to Prague on his way to Vienna in 1775, and again on his return trip in 1776, to meet Ignaz von Born;[126] Born, who subsequently became Master of the Lodge 'Zur wahren Eintracht' in Vienna, was at that time resident in Prague. That the visit concerned Masonic matters is confirmed by the fact that Lessing seems to have given or sent Born the original of the threatening letter which he had received from Zinnendorf in 1771, and that he also sent him a manuscript copy of the fourth and fifth dialogues of *Ernst and Falk* in 1779.[127] All this indicates that Lessing remained in active contact with Freemasonry after the Hamburg experience. But whether he attended meetings of the Brunswick lodge is uncertain, and indeed unlikely: Duke Ferdinand, at least, on receiving the published dialogues with their dedication, was unsure whether Lessing was a Freemason at all, and if so, what kind of Freemason he was.[128] It is, however, certain that many of Lessing's associates in Brunswick attended the local lodge, that Lessing circulated the manuscript of the dialogues among them before the 1778 convention,[129] and that he met Bode, Knigge, and other delegates while the convention was in progress.[130] Knigge shared Lessing's misgivings about the Templar legend, as did Duke Ferdinand, who circulated the unpublished fourth and fifth dialogues among the office bearers of the Order.[131] It is also clear that, by publishing the first three dialogues when he did, Lessing wished to support the reformers of the Strict Observance, as the following words in his dedication confirm: 'The people have long craved refreshment and are dying of thirst.' The dialogues as a whole are indeed an attempt to rescue the positive element in Freemasonry from the discredit into which the movement was rapidly falling, and a central part of this effort is the alternative genealogy of Freemasonry which Lessing supplies: he presents the Knights of the Round Table, with their egalitarian organization and the ancient Germanic freedoms they had inherited, as an earlier and more authentic alternative to the Knights Templar and the hierarchical associations the latter had by this time acquired in German Freemasonry.

Lessing did not live to see the dénouement of the crisis at the Wilhelmsbad convention of 1782. The Templar legend and its associated rituals were abolished, along with the 'higher grades' and 'Unknown Superiors', and an attempt was made to devote more energy to practical, caritative initiatives.[132] But although the rift between rationalistic and mystical tendencies was papered over, it reopened in the mid-1780s, and new disputes and spurious genealogies brought the movement into further disrepute.

As is only appropriate for a subject of this kind, mystery still surrounds some aspects of Lessing's Masonic activities. His cryptic reference, in the

[126] See H. Schneider (1951) 184; Reinalter *passim*.
[127] H. Schneider (1951) 190–1.
[128] See Duke Ferdinand to L., 21 October 1778; also A (2003) 178 (No. 943).
[129] See L. to Claudius, 19 April 1778.
[130] See Gleim to L., 18 August 1778; also A (2005) 447.
[131] Hammermayer 27.
[132] Agethen 135; Roberts 115–16; Vierhaus (1973) 24.

postscript to the dialogues, to a 'sixth dialogue' in the form of 'critical notes' provides a suitably open ending, which prompted Duke Ferdinand to ask for these items as soon as they became available. Karl Guthke has convincingly argued that no such dialogue—as distinct from bibliographical notes to the fifth dialogue, which can be reconstructed—was ever written.[133] But mystery plainly has its attractions, for some scholars continue to claim that Lessing's postscript refers to material which he planned to write or which no longer survives.[134]

A genuine mystery surrounds Lessing's choice of names for the two collocutors in his dialogues. The usual explanation is that he chose the names 'Ernst' and 'Falk' ('falcon') to characterize the earnest pupil and the sharp-eyed, far-seeing teacher.[135] This may in part be true, but the name 'Falk' in particular also has real associations which have been noted in work on the secret societies, but appear not to have come to the notice of Lessing scholars.[136] In the early 1730s, the Jewish cabbalist Samuel Jacob Falk came to Germany from eastern Europe and led an itinerant existence, drawing attention to himself by magical feats, alchemical experiments, the discovery of hidden treasures, and conjuration of spirits. Suspected of Sabbatean tendencies (i.e. belief in the false messiah Sabbatai Zevi), he was regarded as a heretic by Jewish orthodoxy, but he soon gained access to the Masonic network, where his arcane knowledge assured him of instant celebrity. But his activities also aroused the suspicion of the authorities, and he was arrested in Westphalia and accused of sorcery, which was at that time a capital offence.[137] He managed to escape to Holland and thence to London at some time around 1740, where he again gained celebrity in Masonic and Jacobite circles and became known as 'the Baal Shem [i.e. "Master of the Name"] of London'.[138] He died there in 1782. During his London period, he formed associations with Swedenborg and Cagliostro, both of whom drew on his knowledge of cabbalistic mysteries. In his later years, he was revered in Masonic circles in Germany as one of the 'Unknown Superiors', or possibly the only one.[139]

It is inconceivable that Lessing was unaware of Falk's existence and reputation. In one of his last exploits before he left Germany, Falk had been a guest of Count J. L. A. von Rantzau at his estate in Brunswick territory, where he summoned up spirits, discovered buried treasures, conducted alchemical experiments, and caused explosions. When this came to the attention of the Brunswick authorities, Rantzau was ordered to expel him, whereupon he moved to Westphalia.[140] Duke Ferdinand, who met Cagliostro in 1777 and was always on the lookout for new arcane knowledge—he became joint Grand Master of a new, mystically inclined order after the collapse of the Strict Observance in 1782[141]—must have

[133] Guthke (1975d); Guthke (1981c) *passim*.
[134] See Voges *passim*; B X, 716; Dziergwa 277–8.
[135] See, for example, Michelsen (1990f) 139; B X, 792.
[136] See Schuchard (2001) 218.
[137] See Oron 246.
[138] See Adler *passim*.
[139] Schuchard (1995) 140 and 142.
[140] Schuchard (2001) 206; also Adler 162.
[141] Schuchard (1995) 145 and 149.

encountered Falk's name on numerous occasions. Why, then, did Lessing choose this name for the dominant and eminently rational partner in the dialogues which he dedicated to the duke? He did so, presumably, to create a counter-image to the Baal Shem of London, for Lessing's Falk believes that the only mysteries worth exploring lie not in alchemy or spiritualism, but in the original ideals of Freemasonry and its world-historical task. As he put it in his reply to Duke Ferdinand's reproaches for his alleged indiscretion, 'I did not profane any secret knowledge: I merely sought to convince the world that really great secret knowledge lies hidden where it finally grew tired of looking for it.'[142] Whether the name 'Ernst' also alludes to a real person remains to be seen. On this and the whole question of Lessing's links with Freemasonry, there is certainly scope for further research. For the moment, it is clear at least that, in addition to *The Jews* and *Nathan the Wise*, a third important work by Lessing alludes to a Jew or Jews in its title.

Ernst and Falk was warmly welcomed by Lessing's contemporaries, more often in discussion and letters than in print, for the topic of Masonic secrecy was a delicate one.[143] Lichtenberg described it as 'one of the best things I have read for a long time',[144] and Herder, Friedrich Schlegel, Fichte, and Knigge all tried their hand at related works in dialogue or letter form, none of them of comparable merit to Lessing's original.[145] French translations of the dialogues appeared in 1778 and 1784,[146] and Adam Weishaupt, founder of the Illuminati, declared that Lessing's work first awakened 'the cosmopolitan idea' in him.[147] The dialogues attained their greatest influence, however, in the second half of the nineteenth century and the first decades of the twentieth. During that period, *Ernst and Falk* became a canonic work in German Freemasonry, and numerous lodges were named after Lessing—not just in Germany but as far afield as Chile and the United States.[148] In some cases, a veritable Lessing cult developed, with elaborate rituals focused, in one instance, on an illuminated bust of the hero, who was serenaded in another lodge with a song to the tune of 'Deutschland über alles', ending with the words: 'Long live Lessing! Now and always/Long live Lessing evermore!'[149]

It may safely be said that such behaviour would not have met with Lessing's approval. That his dialogues were—and still are—appreciated in Masonic circles can only be applauded. But it should not be overlooked that his primary object was neither to reform existing Masonry nor to replace it with another institution. For him, the independent individual is primary, and he himself always prefers to comment on society and its institutions from their outer edges, mediating between them and whatever lies outside them. Thus, whereas Freemasonry first began by withdrawing from the constraints of society to cultivate its ideal of

[142] To Duke Ferdinand, 26 October 1778. [143] See Fick (2010) 464; B X, 724.
[144] A (2003) 280, No. 922. [145] See B X, 727–8
[146] Seifert (Lessing-Bibliog.) 282, No. 2075–6.
[147] B X, 737–8. [148] Dziergwa 111–20. [149] Ibid. 120.

human brotherhood within its own institutional framework, Lessing's ideal Freemasons withdraw in turn from the constraints of institutional Freemasonry. They constitute an 'invisible church' of autonomous individuals, linked not by any formal organization, but by their shared commitment to human solidarity across institutional frontiers.

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Nathan the Wise

Nathan the Wise is a classic of German literature and of the German stage. Like Goethe's *Iphigenie* and Schiller's *Don Carlos*, with both of which it is often associated, it celebrates the humanitarian and cosmopolitan values of the Enlightenment. Its hero is a Jew, and his success in establishing amicable relations with adherents of the Muslim and Christian faiths serves as a model of human brotherhood and interconfessional harmony. Its scope is accordingly wider than that of Lessing's earlier play *The Jews*, which dealt with the more limited question of Jewish civil rights: *Nathan the Wise* addresses the wider issue of the three monotheistic religions and their rival claims to exclusive truth. For obvious reasons, it has often been the subject of controversy, and it remains the best-known and most influential of Lessing's dramas. With some notable exceptions—above all between 1933 and 1945—it has regularly been performed in Germany, and increasingly often abroad, over the last two centuries. The aim of such performances has usually been to endorse the values the play embodies, and since 1945, it has frequently been taught in German schools in order to reaffirm that principle of tolerance which was so catastrophically violated under Nazism. More recently, and especially since 2001, it has gained renewed topicality with the resurgence of Islamic fundamentalism.

The origins of the play go back to early in Lessing's career, for as he told his brother in 1778, his original plan was formulated 'many years ago'.[1] This almost certainly refers to the early 1750s, and particularly to the time when he wrote his *Vindication of Hieronymus Cardanus*. For the dialogue in that work between representatives of four rival religions (including paganism) belongs to the same literary tradition, which Lessing studied in depth in those years,[2] as Boccaccio's parable of the three rings, the chief inspiration of *Nathan the Wise*. He also told his brother that he had taken the project up again on his return from Italy (in February 1776) with the intention of completing it.[3] But the real incentive to do so came only when he lost his exemption from censorship in July 1778 and suddenly realized that he could use the play, if it were published by subscription, to circumvent the censor and continue his religious conflict by other means. He duly drafted a circular, to be distributed by his brother and friends throughout Germany, announcing the project and inviting subscriptions payable to the distributors.[4]

The surviving notes and drafts for the play probably date from the summer and autumn of 1778, although they may well be based on earlier equivalents.[5] They

[1] To Karl Lessing, 11 August 1778.
[2] See Nisbet (1979b) 377–81.
[3] To Karl Lessing, 7 November 1778.
[4] LM XIII, 337–8.
[5] See B IX, 1283.

consist of a fairly detailed scenario with passages of prose dialogue, historical notes, a partially versified draft of the opening scene, and other shorter fragments.[6] Apart from changes to some of the characters' names and the complete versification of the text, the main differences between the scenario and the finished work occur in the final act. The scenario lacks the symbolically important revelation that Saladin, the Templar, and Recha are all blood relations, and ends instead with a double betrothal of the Templar and Sittah, and Saladin and Recha (or Rahel, as she was originally called).[7] The prose version was substantially complete by November 1778, whereupon Lessing versified it act by act between mid-November 1778 and March of the following year.[8] A loan of 300 talers from Moses Wessely helped to cover the printing costs,[9] and he sent the work in instalments to Berlin, where his brother supervised the printing by C. F. Voss while Ramler checked and polished the versification.[10] The finished work was distributed to subscribers in May 1779.

Unlike Lessing's abortive publishing venture in Hamburg, the sale of *Nathan* by subscription was an unqualified success. Voss printed around 3,000 copies for subscribers, followed later in the year by two reprints and two pirated editions, amounting in all to around 4,500 copies[11]—a total comparable to that achieved by Goethe's best-selling *Werther* in its first two years.[12] The only casualty of the subscription were three additional items which Lessing had planned to include in the volume, namely a preface (a draft of which survives),[13] guidance for actors on how to interpret the punctuation as an aid to delivery, and an afterpiece entitled *The Dervish*, tracing the fortunes of Al-Hafi, who leaves for India at the end of the second act. The play turned out much longer than Lessing expected, and he feared that the cost of printing additional items might leave him unable to repay his loan. As a result, the guidance for actors and *The Dervish* were never written.

Some account must be given of the play's origin and the literary and other influences which helped to shape it. Lessing declared, in his draft preface, that the 'germ' (*Keim*) from which the play developed was the third novella of the first book of Boccaccio's *Decamerone*—that is, the parable of the three rings. Until the middle of the twentieth century, much scholarly effort was devoted to this parable and its history, tracing its evolution from Hebrew, Latin, and Old French versions from the twelfth century to the time of Boccaccio (1313–75) and on to the eighteenth century with new versions such as Swift's *Tale of a Tub* and Lessing's parable.[14] Although further variants of the tale from as far back as the eighth century have since been brought to light,[15] the overall tendency in criticism since the 1950s has rightly been to emphasize the distinctiveness of Lessing's version and its function within his play.[16] All that need be mentioned here is that Lessing's parable remains relatively close to its main inspiration, the novella of Boccaccio,[17] at least up to the point at which the quarrelling sons refer their dispute to a judge; but the story's

[6] LM XXII, 89–119. [7] B IX, 1287. [8] B IX, 1134–35.
[9] See L. to Karl Lessing, 16 March 1779. [10] See Schmitz *passim*. [11] Wessels 28–9.
[12] See Alt (2000) I, 192. [13] LM XVI, 444–5.
[14] See, for example, Wünsche *passim*; E. Schmidt II, 300–22; Oehlke II, 370–82.
[15] See, for example, Niewöhner *passim*; Kuschel (1998) 273–99; Mulsow *passim*.
[16] See esp. Atkins (1951). [17] For a German translation of the novella, see B IX, 1153–6.

complexity is greatly increased by several crucial additions. Boccaccio's tale also suggested to Lessing the time and place in which he sets his play, namely twelfth-century Jerusalem. For in various versions of the tale, including that of Boccaccio, the ruler to whom the wise Jew recounts his parable of the rings is the Sultan Saladin, a figure idealized in his own time and again in the eighteenth century as a model of Islamic chivalry and enlightenment in the face of Christian fanaticism.

As for dramatic influences on the play, that of Voltaire (in whom Lessing, despite his earlier criticisms, took a new and more positive interest after his death in 1778) is considerable. Like the eponymous heroine of *Zaïre*, Lessing's Recha, though a Christian by birth, has been taught only the basic truths of natural religion. The Templar's passion for her also takes up the motif of sibling love which occurs in *Mahomet* and others of Voltaire's oriental dramas. The didactic drama *Les Guèbres, ou la tolérance* (1769), like Lessing's *Nathan*, is a story of intolerance defeated, and Voltaire's glorification of the Parsees (*Guèbres*) foreshadows Al-Hafi's emigration to join the Parsee community.

Other dramatic influences include Diderot's two contributions to the new *genre sérieux*, namely *Le Fils naturel* and *Le Père de famille*, both of which Lessing had translated. The first of these, like some of Voltaire's plays, contains the motif of sibling love and the discovery of a blood relationship. The hero of the second is a benevolent father-figure who restores concord in his family, and both plays end with affecting tableaux of family unity. But unlike the closing scenes of Diderot's plays, the concluding tableau in Lessing's *Nathan* not only celebrates family solidarity in the present, but symbolizes an ideal future state in which the human family as a whole will be united in peace and concord.

Lessing's positive image of Islam, and of Saladin in particular, goes back to his translation, in 1751, of Voltaire's historical essays, including 'On the Koran and Mohammed' and the 'History of the Crusades'. This interest was further developed through his translation of Marigny's *Histoire des Arabes* in 1753 and subsequently consolidated by his study of other works on Saladin and the Third Crusade, notably François Louis Claude Marin's *Histoire de Saladin* (1758), from which much of the historical detail in *Nathan* is derived.[18] Although nearly all of Lessing's characters are invented, the historical references in the play are broadly accurate—so much so that it is possible to date the action to the interval between the truce which ended the Third Crusade in September 1192 and the death of Saladin in March 1193,[19] during which time peaceful encounters between adherents of the three religions depicted could plausibly be assumed.

As Lessing himself acknowledged, his immediate incentive for writing the play was the religious conflict which preceded it.[20] The play is full of allusions to it, and Lessing was prepared to alter the historical record in order to accommodate them. In particular, the Christian Patriarch Heraclius, who murdered a rival candidate for his office and lived in open adultery with his mistresses,[21] cannot have remained

[18] See LM XXII, 113–14 and B IX, 1157–76. [19] B IX, 1241.
[20] To Elise Reimarus, 6 September 1778; to Karl Lessing, 11 August 1778.
[21] See B IX, 1163–4.

in Jerusalem after Saladin occupied the city. But he was too good an example of Christian fanaticism and hypocrisy to be omitted,[22] and Lessing duly includes him and puts several of Goeze's polemical utterances into his mouth.[23] In his interview with Saladin, Nathan also echoes Lessing's belief that faith in the revealed religions depends entirely on historical evidence and cannot be demonstrated by rational means.[24] And Saladin's demand that Nathan tell him which of the three religions is the true one recalls both Lavater's challenge to Moses Mendelssohn to refute Bonnet's 'proofs' of Christian doctrine or become a Christian, and Goeze's demand that Lessing state the articles of his personal religious creed.

Finally, there is evidence that the play held deep personal significance for Lessing, for a few months after his fiftieth birthday, he described it to Jacobi as 'the son of [my] incipient old age, which polemics helped to deliver'.[25] The obstetric metaphor suggests that he saw it in some sense as a replacement for his lost son, and Nathan's moving account in Act IV, Scene 7 of how he lost his entire family and adopted Recha instead inevitably recalls Lessing's own recent bereavement and strong attachment to his stepdaughter Malchen König.[26] The reconstituted family at the end of the play, unlike the authoritarian patriarchal family against which Lessing had rebelled in his youth, is also of a kind of which he could unconditionally approve; for it is not primarily defined by parental authority, nor even by blood relationships (since Nathan is part of it), but rather by mutual respect and understanding. It has also been suggested that two of the characters in the play were modelled on real individuals of Lessing's acquaintance. Al-Hafi does indeed resemble the Jewish mathematician and eccentric Abraham Wulff (or Wolf), a keen chess player and member of Mendelssohn's circle whom Lessing had known in Berlin and admired 'on account of his piety and innate cynicism'.[27] Nathan himself has also been likened to Moses Mendelssohn, a comparison regularly cited in the struggle for Jewish emancipation in the nineteenth century. Flattering to Mendelssohn though it may be, this comparison is of too general a nature to provide new insights into either figure, and it rarely features in more recent studies of Lessing's play.[28]

As for its formal features, *Nathan the Wise* is unique among Lessing's dramas in that it does not conform to any dramatic type recognized at the time of its composition or discussed by Lessing in his dramatic theory. It is certainly not a tragedy, although events in Nathan's past and the evil machinations of the Patriarch remind us that, so long as intolerance continues to exist, tragedy remains a lasting possibility. As Schiller and others have noticed,[29] the play has closer affinities with comedy: the love intrigue suggests a comic plot, and the discovery that the young couple are siblings, together with the happy family reunion which follows this discovery, is likewise typical of comedy. But the central didactic purpose and the ever-present threat of renewed hostilities undercut the play's comic potential. For these reasons,

[22] Cf. LM XXII, 114–15. [23] B IX, 1272–3; LM III, 113–19.
[24] Cf. B IX, 1150. [25] To Jacobi, 18 May 1779. [26] Cf. Koebner 173.
[27] See D 195–6. [28] See Goetschel *passim*.
[29] See Schiller V, 725 n. 1 (*Über naïve und sentimentalische Dichtung*).

Lessing gave it the neutral subtitle 'a dramatic poem', a term he had already used in the *Hamburg Dramaturgy* to describe Weisse's (and implicitly Shakespeare's) *Richard III*.[30] Voltaire had also described his own didactic play *Les Guèbres* as a 'poème dramatique', and Lessing's friend Eschenburg had applied the same term to his *Die Grossmut des Scipio* (1767), another play with a clear didactic purpose.[31] In short, this term could usefully be applied to a variety of different plays at a time when traditional genre distinctions were breaking down and newer, mixed forms were emerging. But the closest relatives of *Nathan the Wise* are to be found not in the eighteenth century but in the twentieth, and more specifically in the didactic dramas (*Lehrstücke*) of the later Brecht, particularly *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*[32] (although the relative dimensions of play and parable are reversed in the latter work). With its pronounced narrative elements, its didactic purpose, internal parable, exotic setting, and colloquial, informal verse, Lessing's *Nathan* is a direct ancestor of Brecht's epic theatre.

Nathan is also an exception among Lessing's major plays in its length, which is approximately twice that of the others. This factor, together with its controversial treatment of religion, delayed its inclusion in the theatre repertoire for over twenty years, until Schiller produced a successful abridgement. It also marks the end of that constant progression towards ever greater realism which characterizes Lessing's previous dramas: for the first time, he takes steps to reduce—though by no means to eliminate—the degree of illusion and emotional involvement on the part of the reader or spectator, in order to promote rational comprehension of the play's didactic content and symbolic significance. And although he retains, as before, the unity of time, that of place is abandoned as the action shifts between localities associated with the three distinct religions, namely Nathan's house, Saladin's palace, and the Patriarch's monastery; a neutral outdoor space is associated with the homeless Templar. Affecting scenes of sensibility are again included, as when Nathan sheds a tear over the Templar's burnt cloak and describes the loss of his original family, but they are less frequent and less emotionally indulgent than in *Miss Sara Sampson* or even *Minna von Barnhelm*.

The structure of the play is analytical inasmuch as the action is largely determined by three prior events of which we are informed, as part of the exposition, in the course of the first three acts. These events, all of them morally admirable deeds, are Nathan's adoption of the infant Recha, Saladin's sparing of the Templar's life, and the Templar's rescue of Recha from a burning house. They in turn make possible a series of further, synthetic developments whereby the main characters overcome their prejudices in favour of mutual understanding, mainly thanks to Nathan's constructive initiatives. He first overcomes the Templar's religious prejudices by his forthright humanity, then wins over Saladin by relating his famous parable, whereupon Saladin, influenced by this experience, takes a sympathetic interest in the Templar and his courtship of Recha. Though tension is sustained almost to the end when the Patriarch's evil designs are finally thwarted, the stage is

[30] LM X, 121. [31] Cf. Schilson (1997) 12–14. [32] Cf. Eckardt 80–2.

now set for the concluding family reunion. This is again made possible by Nathan, with his revelation that Recha and the Templar are the children of Saladin's late brother Assad, who (as his surviving breviary confirms) had become a Christian on his marriage to a European lady. As usual in Lessing's plays, the events follow a rigorous causal sequence. And just as in *Minna von Barnhelm* and *Emilia Galotti*, a vital element of the exposition—in this case, Nathan's account of how he lost his entire family in a Christian pogrom and nevertheless adopted a Christian infant in place of his own children—is not supplied until the fourth act.

The structure of the parable and its relation to the play as a whole must now be considered. The play as a whole is itself a kind of parable, inasmuch as it imparts a moral lesson—on religious tolerance—by means of a concrete example. Thus Nathan's parable is, so to speak, a parable within a parable, and the two complement and illuminate one another. Their relation is that of general and particular, or theory and practice, for Nathan's parable is a distillate of Lessing's late thinking on the elusive nature of religious truth and the primacy of moral practice (as in his earlier *Testament of St John*), whereas the main action represents a particular instance of constructive moral behaviour; or to put it the other way round, the main action provides a specific example of inter-confessional harmony, which Nathan's parable invests with a wider significance. Both the main action and the parable present us with concrete images, the one in dramatic and the other in narrative form; but Nathan's parable also employs abstract concepts, for the parable enumerates the moral and religious virtues essential to religious harmony, thereby endowing them with universal significance. Nathan's parable performs a further, practical function within the main action, for it transforms Saladin's attitude towards Jews and Christians from passive tolerance to active friendship and understanding. Placed as it is in the middle of the third act, the parable scene is in a sense the peripeteia of the play,[33] for it marks a decisive turning point in the action by uniting Nathan's wisdom with Saladin's power, thereby ensuring a positive dénouement.

In this profoundly didactic play, the chief modes of communication are argument and persuasion, reflection and elucidation. Nathan's rhetorical strategy is not confrontational but collaborative, for he repeatedly subsumes his collocutor's point of view under a wider, more inclusive perspective,[34] thereby engineering that series of rapprochements which moves the drama on to its conciliatory conclusion. Such dialogue has nothing in common with the formal disputation. It is lively, colloquial, full of graphic images and down-to-earth expressions, as in the spirited exchanges between Saladin and his sister and in Nathan's hurried deliberations as he prepares to meet the Sultan.[35]

In passages such as these, the fast-moving pronouncements overflow the blank-verse metre in which they are set, with constant enjambements, interruptions, hiatuses, and sudden changes of tack. The verse rhythm and sentence rhythm often fight one another, lending the dialogue a dynamism and intensity hitherto unprecedented in German verse drama, which until recently had consisted of wooden

[33] See H. Fuhrmann 65. [34] See Simon 622. [35] See, for example, LM III, 39 and 89.

alexandrine couplets. At the same time, Lessing's rough-and-ready blank verse affords a degree of distance, as appropriate to the play's symbolic significance. He was well aware that more polished verse would sound artificial and sententious, or as he put it in a characteristic paradox, 'I think the verse would be much worse if it were much better.'[36] Blank verse had, it is true, been used in German drama before this time—for example, by Lessing himself in various dramatic fragments,[37] in Wieland's *Lady Johanna Gray*, in J. E. Schlegel's translations of Thomson's tragedies, in Gleim's revision of Lessing's *Philotas*, and more recently in some of Eschenburg's dramatic experiments.[38] But it was *Nathan the Wise* which firmly established this metre in Germany, preparing the way for the verse dramas of Weimar classicism.

The play's exotic setting fulfils a related function to the use of verse, providing a stylized atmosphere which invites us to interpret the action symbolically rather than literally. Like Voltaire's oriental dramas, Mozart's *Magic Flute*, and Montesquieu's *Lettres persanes*, it invokes an imaginary world of orientalism, of *turquerie*, in which profoundly serious issues can be viewed in a more relaxed and dispassionate manner than in the medium of contemporary realism. Many of the play's images, names, and allusions provide local colour of this kind, without any deeper significance. Others—especially those in Nathan's parable and related discussions—have more in common with those to which Goeze had taken exception because they preserved ambiguity instead of resolving it and could not readily be reduced to a precise conceptual equivalent. The image of the opal in the original ring, scintillating in ever-changing colours as it is viewed from different perspectives, is a typical example. Another is Nathan's image of religious truth as coinage, whose meaning has been much debated by critics:[39] the 'ancient coinage which was weighed' probably represents the 'inner truth' of religion, whose value is intrinsic and not expressible by any conceptual formulas, and the 'new coinage, created by the stamp alone' denotes the letter of religious dogma, which bears little relation to the spirit it purports to express. (Not for the first time, the debasement of the Prussian coinage during Lessing's Breslau years provided him with a metaphor for true and false values.)[40]

Ever since the play first appeared, a central issue for critics has been that of religion, or more precisely, of whether the play is implicitly hostile to revealed religion and supportive of natural religion, or whether it accepts that one or more of the three monotheistic religions has a legitimate claim to truth.[41] Those who argue that the play is hostile to revealed religion, and especially to Judaism and Christianity, can cite a considerable body of evidence in their favour. To take Nathan's parable first, when Saladin protests that the three religions, unlike the three rings in the story, can easily be distinguished, Nathan replies that they are nevertheless identical in one important respect: all of them claim exclusive truth for themselves, but

[36] To Karl Lessing, 7 December 1778. [37] See Seelgen *passim*.
[38] On Eschenburg see Paulin (1990) 30–8.
[39] See for example, GEL: *NdW*, ed. Demetz 146; Göbel (1971) 187–9.
[40] Cf. LM XI, 4. [41] See Fick (2010) 490–2.

the evidence on which they base this claim is invariably historical (as in reports of revelations, miracles, fulfilled prophecies and the like). Such hearsay evidence, handed down from a distant past, is inherently unreliable and lacks the conclusiveness of rational demonstration. Accordingly—in Lessing's extension to Boccaccio's story—when the three sons appeal to a judge to adjudicate between their rival claims, the judge rapidly loses patience, since none of them can offer any solid evidence in support of his claim that his ring is the true one. He therefore advises them to stop wasting their time on sterile disputes; instead, since the true ring is supposed to make its wearer 'agreeable to God and man', they should vie with each other in good actions in order to demonstrate, in practice if not in theory, whose ring is the true one. Translated into religious terms, the parable thus appears to suggest that religious disputes are pointless and harmful, and that people should be judged rather by their good deeds (or lack of them) than by the supposed truth or falsehood of the religion to which they subscribe. Secular morality, it would seem, is the most valuable thing—or even the only valuable thing—about religion; for of the virtues which the judge in the parable finally recommends to the quarrelling sons—namely 'unprejudiced love', 'gentleness', 'sincere good nature', 'beneficence', and 'deepest devotion to God'—four out of five refer to morality rather than religious belief. Each of the sons should therefore act not in the certain knowledge that his ring (that is, his religious belief) is the true one, but only *as if* it were true.

This critique of revealed religion in the parable is reinforced and amplified throughout the rest of the play. To set the tone, a substantial part of the first act consists of a dialogue in which Nathan successfully persuades his adopted daughter Recha to abandon her pious delusion that, when the house caught fire, she was rescued not by a man (the Templar) but by an angel; he tells her instead always to seek natural rather than supernatural explanations for unusual events. We further learn that Nathan, though himself a Jew, has brought up Recha (who is of Christian parentage) neither as a Jew nor as a Christian, but has taught her only the basic doctrines of natural religion, such as the existence of God and of a universal providence. And as for the source of moral goodness, it would appear to lie rather in natural human benevolence than in religious doctrine: we are human beings, as Nathan points out, before we are Christians or Jews. Similarly, in one of those equivocal dichotomies which Lessing is fond of using in polemical contexts, he has one of the characters in the play (the lay brother) declare with reference to the needs of young children: 'Children need love […] in those years more than Christianity'[42]—thereby excluding the middle term by implying that love and Christianity have no necessary connection.

Similar pronouncements on revealed religion and morality can, of course, be found elsewhere in Lessing's later works. In *The Education of the Human Race*, for example, he had depicted human history as a process in which the human race has already outgrown Judaism, which represents a more primitive religious phase, and

[42] LM III, 137–8.

may in due course outgrow Christianity too, until the third age dawns in which people will do good for its own sake, with no need for religious sanctions to ensure moral conduct. And on *Nathan the Wise* itself, his remarks in his unpublished writings and correspondence reinforce the evidence just cited. He says, for example, in his draft preface to the play:[43]

> Nathan's attitude towards *all* positive religion has all along been *my own*. [...] If it is said that there have been people, not just in recent times, in all manner of nations who have moved beyond all revealed religion and were nevertheless good people [...] I shall find in this little to object to.

Or as he puts it more bluntly to his brother: 'It is enough if it [the play] can even be read with interest, and if out of a thousand readers just one learns from it to doubt the evident truth and universality of his religion.'[44]

As for the representatives of the three religions who appear in the play, neither the Muslims Saladin and Sittah nor the Jew Nathan make more than passing references to their own faiths, and they at no time defend any doctrines of Islam or Judaism other than those, such as monotheism and belief in a benevolent providence, which they share with natural religion. And in the hierarchy of insight which the characters represent, the four least enlightened figures are all Christians, namely (in ascending order) the evil Patriarch, the bigoted Daja, the well-intentioned but naive lay brother, and the Templar, still immature and undergoing an identity crisis as he abandons his Christian prejudices and adjusts to the discovery of his parentage and relationship to Recha. Sittah and Saladin are already ahead of him on the scale of enlightenment, and it is to them that some of the most trenchant criticisms of Christianity and its obsession with the letter of religion rather than its spirit are allotted.[45] Nathan, of course, known as 'the Wise', is the most enlightened of all, and the only truly ideal character in all of Lessing's dramas.[46] There are, nevertheless, a number of derogatory remarks about Jews in the play, particularly on their claim to be the chosen people;[47] but in most cases, the function of such remarks is to show up the anti-semitic prejudices of those who make them.

As several recent studies have confirmed,[48] Lessing's attitude towards Islam was positive throughout his career. But European views on Islam, especially in the earlier years of the Enlightenment, were divided. The older view of Islam as a pernicious heresy coexisted with more positive attitudes, sometimes even in the same individual. Voltaire, for example, speaks of Mohammed as an audacious impostor, 'a sabre-wielding Tartuffe',[49] but he also takes a positive view of Saladin and of Muslim tolerance towards other faiths. But already in his *Vindication of Cardanus* of 1754, Lessing defends Islam for its inherent rationality and denies that Mohammed was an impostor,[50] and twenty years later, he defends Adam Neuser, who fled to Turkey and abandoned Christianity for Islam. In a less serious vein, it will be

[43] LM XVI, 444–5. [44] To Karl Lessing, 18 April 1779. [45] LM III, 43.
[46] Cf. Albrecht (1997) 88. [47] LM III, 62.
[48] Kuschel (1998); Kuschel (2004); Horsch *passim*.
[49] Cited in Kuschel (1998) 80. [50] LM V, 325–6.

recalled how Lessing, on hearing of Carlo Denina's plan for a novel on a Christian invasion of Turkish-occupied Greece, declared 'Au nom de Dieu, ne touchez pas à mes Turcs!'[51] But more significantly, in the curious fragment of the later 1770s entitled *My Arabian's Proof that Not the Jews, but the Arabs are the True Descendants of Abraham*, he argues that the Islamic Arabs have as much reason as the Jews—or even more—to claim that their religion is sanctioned by the Old Testament, which makes it clear that they are descended from Abraham via his undoubted son Ishmael, whereas Isaac, father of the Jews, may well have been the offspring not of Abraham, but of his wife Sarah's adulterous liaison with Abimelech.[52]

What Lessing values most about Islam, however, is its tolerance of other religions and its closeness to natural religion, especially in its unitarian view of God.[53] In his defence of Adam Neuser, he cites with approval Reimarus' praise of these features, and has little to say on Islam as a revealed religion and its transcendental theology, except to note that Neuser doubtless found such elements no more credible than their Christian counterparts.[54] But as his preliminary notes for *Nathan the Wise* confirm, he was also aware that the word 'Islam' denotes 'submission to the will of God'[55]—that is, that same 'Ergebenheit in Gott' which is commended on three separate occasions in the play. It is commended, however, not because of its Islamic associations, but because it can and should be cultivated by all three religions, for those who commend it are not the Muslim characters, but Recha, the judge in the parable, and Nathan himself.[56] In short, natural religion seems to be treated more favourably in the play than any of the three revealed religions.

On the strength of such evidence, a case can be made, as it has been by several critics, that the play is hostile to revealed religion in general and to the Christian and possibly Jewish faiths in particular,[57] and that natural religion is implicitly rated more highly than any of them. But if the evidence is examined more closely, it becomes clear that such a conclusion is less than compelling. This is a play about tolerance, and natural religion, as the lowest common denominator of the three revealed religions, is the obvious basis on which all three can agree as a first step towards mutual understanding. And if Nathan, as the man of wisdom, has brought up Recha on natural religion alone, this does not mean that he is indifferent to his own or to any other revealed religion. He cannot bring her up as a Jew, for he knows that she was born a Christian, and he cannot bring her up as a Christian either, for he is self-evidently unqualified to do so. But in any case, even the truths of natural religion are not, for the later Lessing, a clear-cut alternative to the revealed religions, for their precise significance is likewise open to fundamental disagreements. God exists, but is he trinitarian in nature, as Lessing suggests in *The Education of the Human Race*, is he the supreme monad and transcendental arbiter, as in Leibniz's metaphysics, or is he an immanent, pantheistic deity as in Spinoza's

[51] D 368; cf. Ch. 14 pp. 450–1 above.
[52] LM XVI, 302–3; cf. Smend 96–8 and Kuschel (1998) 186–7.
[53] Cf. Niewöhner 219–20 and Horsch 33.
[54] LM XII, 267–9.
[55] See LM III, 491.
[56] LM III, 76, 95, 138.
[57] See, for example, Mayer 364–5; R. Robertson (1998) 111.

philosophy? The human soul is immortal, but does its immortality take the form of reincarnation, or of transition to another, purely spiritual state, and if so, does this change take place in this world, another world, or on one or more heavenly bodies? Good will be rewarded and evil punished, but are our actions truly free or in some sense predetermined, and do they carry their own rewards and punishments with them, or are they rewarded and punished in a later existence?

There is, of course, another more important reason why it is difficult, if not impossible, to extract an unambiguous religious doctrine—Christian, deistic, agnostic, or any other—from this play. For although it is, among other things, a drama of ideas with an obviously didactic purpose, it is also a poetic document. More than Lessing's religious polemics and more than *The Education of the Human Race*, it deals with the problem of religious truth by indirect, figurative, and poetic as well as rational means.[58] We have here another example of the kind of hybrid discourse which had fascinated Lessing in *Pope a Metaphysician!* and in his lifelong interest in the fable. Following the preoccupation of earlier commentators with the play's ideological aspects, it is therefore understandable that criticism over the last half-century has focused largely on its poetic qualities. It must therefore now be asked whether or not the results of such analysis strengthen or weaken the case for regarding the play as a critique of revealed religion or an invitation to abandon it in favour of secularity.

To begin once more with the parable, as the most concentrated example of poetic discourse in the drama: unlike the parables of Christ—or, for that matter, of Brecht or Boccaccio—Lessing's parable is famously enigmatic, ambiguous, and paradox-ridden. Like the iridescent colours in the legendary ring, its meaning, on closer scrutiny, becomes ever more elusive.[59] Unlike the father in Boccaccio's parable, the father in Lessing's version cannot himself tell which of the three rings is the true one. Did the craftsman steal the original? Has the true religion been irretrievably lost? And did the original ring really possess a special power to render its wearer agreeable, or was the wearer rendered agreeable only by his special status as head of the house? Is the evidence for the ring's power not in any case circular?—for the son who inherited it inherited it because he was the most beloved, yet he is supposedly the most beloved because he inherited it. Does the fact that none of the three quarrelling sons exerts the expected charisma merely imply that all of them lack that trust in the ring's power which is also required of the wearer in Lessing's version—in other words, the necessary faith on which all religion depends? All the tests which the judge can apply depend, furthermore, on hearsay, on historical evidence—as does our faith in the divine origin of our own particular religion. But this again seems to lead us into a vicious circle: the truth of our religious faith depends on historical evidence, but the truth of the historical evidence itself depends on our faith, our faith in the truthfulness of our ancestors. It is, then, no wonder that the judge is unable to deliver a verdict. And although he does suggest at one point that all the rings may be false, this is not his last word: he does not

[58] Cf. Strohschneider-Kohrs (1991) 26–9; Schilson (1995) 10; Fischer 54.
[59] Cf. Politzer (1958) 162–3 and 174.

then advise the sons to abandon their claims, but encourages them to uphold them—that is, to retain their particular faith—and to demonstrate the truth of their faith through the worth of their actions. There are, indeed, good precedents for this advice in the Christian tradition, as in the advice in the sermon on the mount on how to distinguish between true and false prophets: 'by their fruits ye shall know them' (Matthew 7.20). There is nothing here to suggest that anyone should abandon their inherited religion; and what began in the legal fiction of the parable as a dismissal of hearsay evidence finally looks more like an endorsement, in religious terms, of the doctrine of justification by faith.

And as for the main action of the drama, it consists, as already noted, of a series of rapprochements between the three main characters, and these were made possible by the progressive removal, through persuasive dialogue, of prejudices which had previously ruled out amicable relations between the parties concerned. It is true that the prejudices in question—above all, antisemitism on the part of Christians (and to a lesser degree of Muslims)—are of predominantly religious origin, and of Christian origin in particular. But apart from Nathan's criticism of Recha's assumption that an angel rather than a man rescued her from the fire—a criticism which could equally well be made by a believing Christian or Muslim—the common factor in all of the prejudices criticized is their exclusive character, their underlying assumption that virtue and rectitude are a Christian monopoly, even if those who make this assumption are themselves uncharitable, corrupt, or malevolent.

There is also evidence, on closer scrutiny of the religious attitudes expressed in the play, that they are not confined to secular humanism. Moses Mendelssohn described the play as 'this splendid encomium to providence' and as 'a kind of *Anti-Candide*'.[60] He clearly had in mind that faith in providence which Nathan in particular expresses, and which Lessing himself often invoked in times of uncertainty. It is evident in the repeated references in the play to 'devotion to God' (*Gottergebenheit*), and especially in Act IV Scene 7, when Nathan tells the lay brother how he lost his entire family as a result of Christian persecution, and nevertheless overcame despair through his faith in God. As Ingrid Strohschneider-Kohrs has shown, Nathan's words and behaviour in that scene are also full of allusions to the Book of Job[61]—even in such minor details as the fact that Nathan, like Job, had seven sons. These allusions to the Old Testament are, of course, entirely appropriate to Nathan's Jewish faith. Similarly, there are signs of religious humility in Saladin's response 'I who am nothing? Who am but dust?'[62] when, after relating the parable, Nathan invites him to supply the verdict which the judge was unable to deliver. It is true that Lessing leaves it unclear to what extent reason is involved in the faith which Nathan expresses: in describing his recovery from despair, he does say 'And yet my reason gradually returned./It spoke with gentle voice "Yet God exists."' Nathan's narrative also leaves it unclear to what extent, in his opinion, human actions are freely chosen or determined by a higher necessity such as that of providence—as in his address to God 'I will!/If only you will that I

[60] D 581. [61] Strohschneider-Kohrs (1991) 68–79. [62] LM III, 95.

will!', or when he expresses his wonder at 'what deeds can be achieved/By human beings who submit to God'.[63] And there can be no doubt that providence, for Lessing, does not entail miraculous intervention by a higher power in the normal chain of events, but rather the operation of a beneficent design inherent in nature. He nevertheless believes that the operation of that design is beyond rational comprehension—at least until after the event. In short, we do encounter what can only be described as religious experience in the play, especially on the part of its exemplary central figure.

None of this implies, of course, that Lessing himself subscribed to any of the three revealed religions, or indeed to any of the Christian confessions in their orthodox form. For the kind of religious experience encountered in the play is no less compatible with deism than it is with any of the revealed religions: for example, Voltaire and Rousseau, as deists, were capable of religious transports in writing of God the creator or of God's presence in nature, and the kind of piety recommended by the judge in Nathan's parable recalls that of Reimarus, whose preface to the *Apologia* describes it in words close to those which Nathan uses.[64] Nor is there anything in the play to suggest that Lessing's criticisms of revealed religion and its doctrines were not genuine criticisms. What the play, no less than his theological writings of the same period, does indicate is that his religious consciousness left room for faith as well as for reason, and that he respected the religious faith of others—as is confirmed by his defence of simple faith, as against theological formulas, on more than one occasion in his later years.[65]

Lessing's attitude towards religion and religious faith is not, then, one of hostility. His reply to the question of what is the true religion is the same as that of the judge in the parable: he does not presume to supply a definitive answer, but prefers to leave the question open. This openness, this avoidance of foreclosure, is evident not only in the ending of the parable, but also in the final scene of the play. Lessing's earlier draft of the work had concluded with a double betrothal, of Saladin and Recha on the one hand and the Templar and Saladin's sister on the other—that is, it had a closed ending like that of a classical comedy or the more recent family tableau in the manner of Diderot. But in the final version, this is eliminated in favour of an open ending: the Templar's plan to marry Recha is frustrated when he discovers that she is his sister, and the last lines of the play, in which Saladin recalls how he nearly murdered his nephew, remind us that what we have seen is only a precarious lull in a military and religious conflict which will shortly be resumed. Any sense of possession or attainment is undermined, and the condition of human brotherhood and perpetual peace which the scene evokes still lies, as a regulative idea, in the indefinite future. As such, the final scene of this symbolic drama cannot be judged by criteria of verisimilitude and realism.

All this is in keeping with Lessing's philosophical attitude in his later years, as outlined in the preceding chapters of this work. His aim is not to deliver fixed concepts and definitions, but rather to question and destabilize existing concepts

[63] LM III, 138–9. [64] Reimarus I, 59; see also Guthke (2005c) 118.
[65] See, for example, LM XII, 428 and XV, 358.

and definitions in order to prevent them hardening into unchallengeable dogmas. Like the judge in the parable, he suspends judgement on the nature of ultimate truth. In these respects, he is indeed a sceptic, especially in relation to language in so far as it fixes and thereby simplifies and impoverishes meaning.[66] The parable accordingly ends with a practical recommendation: like the 'true' Freemasons in *Ernst and Falk*, the three sons must show by their deeds rather than by their words whether or not their faith is of benefit to humanity. But Lessing is not a dogmatic sceptic, for he does believe in certain metaphysical and religious truths, such as those of natural religion (even if their precise formulation remains open to question), and he also believes that, while no philosophical or religious proposition embodies absolute truth, some propositions embody higher degrees of truth than others. He is, then, a methodological sceptic, who applies systematic doubt, as a heuristic device, to all supposedly unchallengeable doctrines in order to stimulate further enquiry and, if possible, to attain ever more adequate formulations.

It follows from this that Lessing is not a religious indifferentist. Every religion embodies an element of truth, but it is impossible to say that any of them is exclusively and definitively true, so that—in the words of the parable—'the tyranny of the one ring' must give way to the competition of a plurality.[67] There are many ways to God, as Recha indicates when she says of Daja's Christian dogmatism 'She is one of those fanatics who/Imagine that they know the only true/And universal way to God!'[68] Or in Nathan's words, 'I know […] that/Every country contains good people.'[69] And as Saladin in turn emphasizes, 'I've never wished/The same bark to grow on every tree.'[70] In the religious and cultural relativism implicit in these remarks, Lessing may well be influenced, as has recently been demonstrated, by the second of the *Fragments* of Reimarus he had published in 1777, in which, given the enormous variety of historical and geographical circumstances, Reimarus denies that any single revelation can be valid for all people at all times and all places.[71]

The reception of *Nathan the Wise* is more varied and complex than that of any other play by Lessing.[72] It has aroused strong feelings not only among academics and literary critics, but also among a wider public, including adherents of the three religions represented in the play. It has at times been revered as a classic and treated accordingly—praised by many, read by few, and exciting nobody. But it has also shown a remarkable ability to acquire sudden relevance as historical developments throw new aspects of the text into relief. Some of these shifts of opinion will now be considered in the light of the conclusions so far reached in this chapter.

When the play first appeared in 1779, it was warmly welcomed—mainly in letters and conversations—by many of Lessing's friends and admirers, including Mendelssohn, Herder, Hamann, Gleim, Jacobi, and the Hamburg circle. Men-

[66] Cf. Gustafson *passim*.
[67] Cf. Kuschel (1998) 314 and 316; on L's religious pluralism see also Nisbet (2010) *passim*.
[68] LM III, 164. [69] LM III, 61. [70] LM III, 123.
[71] See Guthke (2005c) 119–28.
[72] On this, see B IX, 1177–1240; Wessels *passim*; Gansel/Siwczyk (eds) (2009) and Hanke/Siwczyk *passim*.

delssohn pronounced it the best of all Lessing's plays and named the last of his sons, born in 1782, after its hero; on another occasion, he described it as more than a generation ahead of its time.[73] Public responses were more guarded and frequently hostile, and Lessing's choice of a Jew (for the second time) as hero, together with his less than favourable portrayal of Christians and Christianity, was widely perceived as scandalous. One anonymous reviewer commented 'Why not say so explicitly: *Nathan the Wise* is the most bitter satire on the Christian religion.'[74] Baltasar Ludewig Tralles, a Breslau physician, published a two-volume denunciation, listing all the critical remarks on religion by various characters as representing Lessing's personal opinions.[75] From the start, the play was associated with the controversy over the *Fragments*, and it was banned in Austria, Augsburg, Würzburg, and Frankfurt am Main.[76] It fared little better abroad, and two English translations (1781 and 1791) were criticized as tedious, irreligious, or both.[77] The following verdict of the *Edinburgh Review* in 1806 foreshadows a criticism renewed in recent times:[78]

> The author's whole secret, for reconciling Jews, Mahometans, and Christians to each other, is, to persuade them to renounce their peculiar tenets, and to rest satisfied with a kind of philosophical deism, in which they may all agree.

Christian misgivings also helped to delay the play's acceptance on the stage. On this score, Lessing was under no illusions, declaring on one occasion that it might not be performed for a century, and on another that it might never be performed at all.[79] The vogue for dramatic realism, which Lessing himself had done so much to inaugurate, together with the declamatory style of acting cultivated during the Storm and Stress years, may also have diminished the play's attractiveness to theatre companies.[80] There can, however, be no doubt that Lessing intended it for performance, as his draft preface and unrealized plan to provide guidance for actors confirm. But until the nineteenth century, the play was known primarily through the printed word.

The play was performed in 1779 by an amateur group in Mannheim,[81] but the first production in Germany by a professional company was that of Döbbelin in Berlin, with performances on 14, 15, and 16 April 1783. Special costumes were designed and a lavish decor constructed, and Döbbelin and his daughter appeared as Nathan and Recha. They played to a full house on the first night, to a smaller audience on the second, and to an almost empty house on the third. Few reports of these performances survive, but it is likely that the play's considerable length and unfamiliar idiom put many people off.[82]

[73] See Karl Lessing to L., 1 May 1779; KGL 249. [74] B IX, 1207.
[75] B IX, 1181–2. [76] Wessels 30–1.
[77] See Seifert (L.-Bibliog.) 274 Nos 2004 and 2005.
[78] Cited in Zelle 211–12; cf. R. Robertson (1998) 109.
[79] To Karl Lessing, 7 November 1778 and 18 April 1779.
[80] See Albrecht (1983) 88–9 and 91.
[81] See U. Schulz 108. [82] Albrecht (1983) 92; B XII, 1225–7.

A few further performances are recorded in the 1780s in outlying parts of the empire—for example in Pressburg (Bratislava), with its large Jewish population[83]—but the first really successful productions were those of F. L. Schmidt in Magdeburg and Schiller's abridged version in Weimar, both in 1801. Schiller reduced the text by almost a quarter, eliminated irregular lines and many enjambements, and generally raised the tone of the work in keeping with the idealizing tendency of Weimar classicism, whose influence already extended to other theatres.[84] His version was widely adopted, and successful productions appeared in quick succession in Berlin, Hamburg, Brunswick, Mannheim, and Breslau between 1802 and 1805. By this time, the play was firmly established in the German repertoire and performed even in Catholic territories (usually without the role of the Patriarch).[85]

From the start, *Nathan the Wise* was acclaimed by the German Jewish community not because of its treatment of the Jewish religion, which is hardly mentioned, but because its main figure and incarnation of human wisdom is himself a Jew.[86] Such was the admiration for Lessing that, when all Jews were required to adopt surnames in the following century, many chose that of Lessing; this had the bizarre consequence that, as anti-semitism became rampant towards the end of the century, Lessing himself was accused of being a Jew. But the play's appeal to the German and East European Jews was above all to the assimilationists—to men like Abraham Gottlober and Ruben Ascher Brodes, who believed that their future lay in adopting European ways and abandoning their Jewish traditions in favour of Enlightenment values.[87] For such people, *Nathan the Wise* became almost a sacred book. Conversely, the Zionist movement which arose in response to renewed persecution disowned Lessing and his hero Nathan as false prophets who had aroused unwarranted hopes and persuaded all too many Jews to abandon their collective heritage to no useful purpose.[88] Thus, both admirers and detractors of the play among the Jewish community had in mind the same qualities which had offended the first Christian critics, namely Lessing's supposed indifference or hostility towards revealed religion. It seemed to all of them that his aim was to replace the established religions with a kind of secular humanism in which religious differences disappear altogether.

Negative criticism of the play for its treatment of religion—especially, but not exclusively, of Judaism—has continued sporadically down to the present. The hero Nathan has been reviled as a Jewish Uncle Tom, selling his birthright to gain admission to Gentile society.[89] For example, Hans Mayer, in 1973, alleged that Lessing's tolerance is simply a front to conceal a basic intolerance, for his real aim was to persuade the Jews to abandon their inherited traditions and existential distinctness as the price of assimilation.[90] Another more recent critic makes similar claims, and argues that Lessing's professed tolerance is merely a mask for intolerance of all religious and cultural differences, so that *Nathan the Wise* embodies the very exclusivism which Lessing professes to deplore.[91] Thus, a play which was once described

[83] Albrecht (1983) 94. [84] See Albrecht (1979). [85] Albrecht (1983) 95.
[86] See Fischer 87. [87] See Schoham 8–21 *passim*. [88] Ibid. 25.
[89] Rafael Seligmann in R. Robertson (1998) 106.
[90] Mayer 367. [91] R. Robertson 115.

as 'the Song of Songs of toleration'[92] has since been condemned as the work of a false prophet, a vehicle for utopian illusions, and a trap set to rob people of their inherited religion and identity and to propel them into a soulless secular world in which everyone is equal—but only in the sense that, when darkness falls, all cows are grey.

It should by now be obvious that such allegations are unjustified, for the kind of tolerance to which Lessing subscribes is not based on a dogmatic conviction that his own views, as distinct from the views of those he criticizes, are infallibly correct—or, indeed, that the latter are demonstrably false.[93] The same allegations are also refuted by his behaviour in real life, as in his irate reaction when Lavater challenged Moses Mendelssohn either to refute Bonnet's 'proofs' of Christianity or to abandon his Jewish faith and become a Christian. Similarly, in his Masonic dialogues, Lessing declares that, while the task of the true Freemason is to combat the harmful effects of social and political divisions, these divisions cannot and should not be removed completely, for as he puts it, 'Human beings can only be united through division.'[94] A plurality of nations, beliefs, and lifestyles is inevitable and indeed desirable. It is, admittedly, true that Lessing is less interested than, for example, Herder in cultural variety and difference for their own sake. But Herder's interest in cultural variety is primarily an interest in the distinctive cultures of different nations rather than in inter-cultural relations, whereas Lessing is primarily concerned, in *Nathan the Wise*, with the coexistence of people of different faiths within the same community. It may even be the case that, as one critic argues, he is not so much interested in Jews as Jews either in this drama or in its predecessor *The Jews*.[95] But for him to have emphasized and celebrated their otherness and difference rather than their common humanity would only have served to reinforce the prejudices of those who oppressed them. In the conditions of his time, his priority, quite rightly, was not to celebrate diversity, but to attack discrimination and intolerance; and to blame him for this is to imply anachronistically that he ought to have leapfrogged over a necessary stage of history, namely the removal of those obstacles which prevented the extension of equal rights to all citizens, including the Jews.

The first stage in this process of emancipation, which was not completed in Germany until 1871, was to find common ground with the disadvantaged minority, for without it, there could be no mutual respect and no meaningful dialogue between the two communities. One of the main criticisms of the play by Hans Mayer and his followers is, however, that its hero Nathan is an educated and affluent individual, and therefore untypical of the Jewish community as a whole.[96] But both Nathan and his real-life counterparts, such as Lessing's Jewish friends A. S. Gumpertz, Moses Mendelssohn, and Moses Wessely, needed to be educated in order to understand and communicate with the culture they found themselves in, just as Lessing had to be educated to understand theirs; and they could not

[92] By Theodor Lessing (1935), cited Mayer 355.
[93] See Guthke (2003) 12–14; Horsch 55 and 97–8.
[94] LM XIII, 358–9. [95] See Fischer 26. [96] Mayer 366.

become educated without at least a modicum of financial security. Then as now, it was nearly always the best-informed and most articulate members of different communities who took the initiative.

Nathan stands out not only because of his education and wealth, however. Much has been made of the fact that he is the only character in the family tableau at the end who is not related by blood to the others; and although the final stage direction reads 'the curtain falls amid silent embraces on all sides',[97] it became common in stage productions from 1933 onwards (when the Kulturbund Deutscher Juden performed the play in Berlin as a final tribute to humane values)[98] either to exclude Nathan from these embraces or to leave him alone on the stage at the end.[99] Hans Mayer actually likens Nathan to Shakespeare's Shylock, who remains an outsider to the last.[100] But this goes directly against the evidence of the play, and of Lessing's known attitudes. For when Recha, fearful lest she may lose her adoptive father Nathan, asks Saladin 'Does blood alone create/A father? Blood alone?' Saladin replies emphatically in the negative (rather like Azdak in Brecht's *Caucasian Chalk Circle*), adding that the blood relationship merely gives the genetic parent an initial right to earn the title of father.[101] Besides, when he wrote the play, Lessing had very recently become an adoptive father himself, and he looked on his adopted daughter Malchen, who stayed with him until he died, with particular fondness.[102] The reunited family at the end of the play is based primarily on mutual recognition and love, and Nathan, more than anyone else, has earned his place in it.

Why, then, does Lessing not make him a blood relation of the others? He does not do so because, unlike Christianity and Islam, Judaism has an ethnic as well as a confessional basis, and Nathan could not fully represent the Jewish faith if he were the product of, or himself a party to, a mixed marriage. But one may well ask why Lessing made his main figure and exemplary man of wisdom a Jew rather than a Muslim—for Muslim figures, unlike the Jews, were often contrasted favourably with Christians by such leaders of the Enlightenment as Montesquieu and Voltaire. His main reason was presumably that the Jews, rather than the Muslims, would carry more conviction as a disadvantaged group familiar to his audience, added to which Judaism is the only non-proselytizing religion of the three religions in the play: that is, it is inherently less dogmatic than the others. In short, there is no evidence whatsoever in the play to suggest that Nathan, in the symbolic family at the end, is in any sense an outsider. If he stands out as different from the others, it is only because of his superior wisdom.

Tolerance comes, of course, in many different forms, according to the different motives which may underlie it. There is tolerance based on indifference, on weakness or resignation, or on practical utility.[103] None of these entails approval or understanding of the group, individual, or behaviour which is tolerated, so that

[97] LM III, 177. [98] See Fischer 128.

[99] Ibid. 128–9; Stammen 285; on the nature of Nathan's isolation, and on family relationships in general in the play, see Klüger 201–16 and 225.

[100] Mayer 364; cf. R. Robertson (1999) 45.

[101] LM III, 167. [102] See Koebner 169. [103] See Desch *passim*.

such tolerance, as Goethe once put it, should be only a prelude to genuine understanding or recognition: 'Tolerance ought actually to be only a transitory attitude: it must lead to recognition. To tolerate is to give offence.'[104] It was for this reason that the word 'tolerance', in its then current sense of 'sufferance' or 'putting up with', went out of fashion in the later eighteenth century, and Lessing was among the first to avoid it. The word in fact occurs only twice in his surviving writings, in both cases with reference to earlier periods, namely the Middle Ages and Reformation, in which he notes that tolerance was absent even as a minimal concession to freedom of thought.[105] The judge in Nathan's parable accordingly speaks not of 'tolerance' but of 'unprejudiced love', 'gentleness', 'sincere good nature', and 'beneficence' as the moral qualities conducive to harmonious human relations—in short, of respectful recognition of beliefs or opinions in others which we do not personally share.[106] In more recent times, the terminology of 'toleration' (in the sense of passive sufferance) has been largely displaced, in legal contexts, by that of 'rights' or 'human rights'; and at least in Germany, the word 'Toleranz' has acquired the more positive meaning of pluralistic understanding and respect for the divergent opinions of others—that is, the kind of pluralistic understanding which the main characters of *Nathan the Wise* have attained by the end of the play.

Underlying the distrust with which some of its critics view the play is a deeper and more far-reaching distrust of the Enlightenment itself, a distrust influentially propagated by members of the first Frankfurt School, including Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, and Herbert Marcuse. Those of us old enough to have experienced it will recall how the student revolutionaries of the late 1960s and early 1970s used to appeal to Marcuse's theory of 'repressive tolerance', according to which that liberal tolerance with which the long-suffering universities responded to their protests and sit-ins was—to use the jargon of the time—only a facade for the oppressive policies of late-capitalist society and the military-industrial complex which controlled it.[107] This was only one of a number of theories according to which virtually every evil in modern society was the result, by a remorseless teleological process, of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment. By this reasoning, the failure of Jewish assimilation in Germany was a necessary consequence of the (fundamentally oppressive) tolerance advocated by Lessing and a few like-minded contemporaries. History—so the reasoning runs—has now revealed its hollowness, or in the words of Hans Mayer (who quotes Marcuse with approval): 'Developments have refuted Lessing.'[108]

On the contrary: those who ascribe an original sin to the Enlightenment in the matter of toleration, and postulate a remorseless inevitability in the process which led from tolerance to Jewish assimilation and thence to the Holocaust, overlook the fact that such tolerance did not lead to a Holocaust in countries outside Hitler's empire. As with many of the theories of Marcuse, Horkheimer, and Adorno, there is too much of the *post hoc ergo propter hoc* about this one. There are in fact few historical figures to whom such accusations are less applicable than they are to

[104] Goethe HA XII, 385. [105] LM V, 45 and IX, 210; cf. Nisbet (2011) 21–2.
[106] LM III, 95. [107] See Marcuse *passim*. [108] Mayer 367.

Lessing. As Ernst Gombrich once said of him, 'if there is a key to his rich and complex mind, it is his persistent non-conformism'.[109] From his earliest years, he was his own man, allergic to orthodoxies and conformisms (especially dogmatic ones), and one of his most characteristic behaviour patterns is to jump to the defence of outsiders and underdogs: actors, Jews, and soldiers excluded from marriage, all of whom lived on the edge of polite society, were among his closest friends, and both in his life and in his writings, he regularly took the part of society's rejects. He took the itinerant anarchist Könemann, with his large and unruly dog, into his house for several months in Wolfenbüttel,[110] and he gave shelter to the Jew Alexander Daveson on his release from prison in Brunswick;[111] he had a good word for prostitutes[112] and for obstreperous individuals,[113] and characters in his dramas regularly find positive things to say even about malefactors: as Minna says of people like the cardsharper Riccaut, 'One must simply look for the good side in them';[114] or as Sir William Sampson says of the man who seduced his daughter, 'Ah, he was more unfortunate than wicked.'[115]

Like most major works of literature, *Nathan the Wise* was imitated and parodied from an early date.[116] But what is one to make of the much more recent travesty, *Nathans Tod* (*Nathans Death*, 1991), by the Hungarian Jewish dramatist George Tabori, an example of what he calls his 'theatre of embarrassment' ('Theater der Peinlichkeit')?[117] The text of his work consists largely of a collage of extracts from Lessing's play, but its action differs radically from Lessing's original: Recha becomes a handicapped girl assaulted by marauding Templars, Saladin a brutal tyrant involved in an incestuous relationship with his sister and flatly refusing to listen to Nathan's parable, the Templar denounces Nathan to the Christian Patriarch, and Nathan finally retrieves the charred bodies of his children from his torched house, before reciting his parable with no one to hear it, and dying alone as a demented, Lear-like figure. It would seem, from the comments of those who have worked with him,[118] that Tabori's demolition of Lessing's play is directed not so much at its author as at those directors and actors who have either treated it as a cultural icon to be approached with uncritical reverence, or who—like the Jewish actor Ernst Deutsch, who often appeared as Nathan in the post-war decades—have interpreted the work as a plea for reconciliation and forgiveness.[119] To Tabori's understandable sense of outrage and disillusionment at the Holocaust, such responses are inappropriate and inadequate. But this places Tabori at several removes from Lessing and his drama: Tabori's play is a piece of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* (overcoming of the past)—or better, overcoming of earlier forms of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*. It does, it has to be said, do great violence, both literally and metaphorically, to Lessing's play; but that, too, is familiar enough in an age in which straight performances of the German classics have long been almost unheard of. It is in this respect rather like Marcel Duchamp'd depiction of the Mona Lisa with a moustache: such

[109] Gombrich 134. [110] D 480–5. [111] A (2008) 148. [112] D 439–40.
[113] LM IX, 140–1; cf. Fischer 71–2. [114] LM II, 233. [115] LM II, 352.
[116] See B IX, 1184. [117] See Brandstetter 320. [118] See Stammen 317; Fischer 15.
[119] See Hanke/Siwczyk 17.

works can take it, for parody is, after all, a form of homage, which relies for its effect on the iconic status of the parodied work. Tabori's iconoclasm is much cruder than anything Lessing produced, but it has at least something in common with Lessing's work, for Lessing had as little time for uncritical reverence of anything or anybody as Tabori has. And as an artist, Tabori is entitled to a degree of creative licence which cannot be accorded to scholars and critics who present their conclusions as soundly based on history.

It is, of course, impossible to look at Lessing's play—or indeed at any work of German literature in which Jews play a part—in the same way since Auschwitz as before it. Since that event, the Patriarch's repeated 'The Jew must be burned' has acquired new and horrendous associations which cannot be suppressed or ignored. Similarly, those who attended the reopening of the Deutsches Theater in Berlin with a performance of *Nathan the Wise* on 7 September 1945 could never forget how numbers of people broke down and had to leave the auditorium on hearing Nathan's narrative of how his entire family was massacred.[120] This is another example of how Lessing's play—in this case banned in German schools and theatres since 1933 and suddenly performed once more—has taken on new and unforeseen significance in new circumstances. Theatre directors therefore have every right to reinterpret the ending of the play to reflect such inescapable changes of perception—for example, by leaving Nathan alone on the stage at the end.

As the controversy over Tabori's satire died down, it seemed for a time that *Nathan the Wise* would shortly return to its former status as an admired, if somewhat dated classic. All this changed towards the end of the twentieth century, and particularly after 11 September 2001, when Islamic fundamentalism emerged as a formidable challenge to the values of western society. Lessing's play, originally perceived as a threat to Christianity and subsequently as a focus of Jewish hope, a target of Zionist hostility, a plea for reconciliation after the Holocaust and then as an inadequate response to it, suddenly gained new relevance as a sympathetic portrayal of Islam in contrast to Christian fanaticism. In the aftermath of 11 September, twenty-four productions of the play were performed in Germany, some already scheduled and others staged in response to the catastrophe;[121] in a European country with a Muslim population of over three million, the play could hardly fail to be taken seriously.[122] Memorable performances in English were given in Washington D.C. in October 2001 and shortly afterwards on television;[123] another production a year later at the Pearl Theatre in New York, still recovering from the catastrophe, had a powerful impact. The latter production, adapted by Richard Sewell, reverted to Lessing's original ending by concluding the play with the betrothal of Recha and the Templar, which Sewell considered a more potent symbol of inter-racial unity than the discovery of their blood relationship.[124] With the same three cultures locked in conflict in the same region as before, the play had once again become as topical as at any time in the past.

[120] Ibid. 49–50. [121] See Kuschel (2004) 9. [122] Ibid. 31.
[123] Hanke/Siwczyk 66–7. [124] See Schade (2005) 227–32.

But in keeping with the pendular swings of approval and disapproval which the play has regularly encountered, there are renewed signs today of more negative reactions. Public opinion has hardened in various western countries on their relations with Muslim minorities, in response both to continued attacks by Islamic terrorists and to the failure of multiculturalism to overcome distrust and intolerance between native majorities and minorities from different religious and cultural backgrounds. As a result, several European heads of state have declared that multiculturalism cannot justify forced marriages, honour killings, discrimination against women, and other violations of individual rights. Needless to say, attacks on *Nathan the Wise* have again been heard in Germany, for example, by the German-Israeli writer Henryk M. Broder, who condemns Lessing's play in his *Critique of Pure Tolerance* (*Kritik der reinen Toleranz*), a polemic against tolerance in general and Islam in particular.[125]

It is, of course, difficult to pass objective judgements in such emotionally fraught situations. But in the case of Lessing's drama, it should at least to be possible to look beyond the frustrated hopes of those whose attempts to practise tolerance have not been reciprocated, and to ask to what extent the plea for tolerance within the drama is inherently unrealistic.

It cannot be denied that the drama's effect may well be diminished by two factors. In Germany itself, where it is often prescribed as a set book in schools, it can all too easily become trivialized through familiarity, as with numerous great works of literature in a classroom context; even close study in later years may fail to efface such early impressions. Secondly and more seriously, the optimism of Lessing and the Enlightenment may well disqualify itself, in the light of the catastrophes of the last hundred years, as implausible and utopian. There can indeed be no doubt that Lessing would have placed a different emphasis on the events in his play if he had written it in recent times. He would not, however, have abandoned his central thesis on tolerance, which was an integral part of his personality. Besides, it is often overlooked that the play's optimism with regard to the future is qualified by important reservations. The action takes place during a brief cessation of hostilities between Christian and Muslim armed forces, soon to be replaced by unremitting strife. The religious fanatics are still at large, and the nefarious schemes of the Patriarch have been only temporarily thwarted. In the parable of the rings, the judge declares that a final verdict on the truth and value of the competing religions may not be reached for a million years. And his suggestion that, in the meantime, the rival claims of the three quarrelling sons can only be assessed in the light of their moral conduct is fully in accord with Kant's moral philosophy—and, for that matter, with the conclusions of the most comprehensive study of toleration and its history in recent years, Rainer Forst's *Toleranz im Konflikt: Geschichte, Gehalt und Gegenwart eines umstrittenen Begriffs*.[126]

That *Nathan the Wise* can still elicit such powerful emotions is nevertheless a sign that, after more than two centuries, its power to challenge existing preconcep-

[125] Broder 7–8 and 210. [126] See Forst esp. 596–7, 604 and 642.

tions is undiminished. In this respect, its influence far exceeds that of the two most celebrated works on toleration in France and Britain, namely Locke's *Letter concerning Toleration* of 1689 and Voltaire's *Traité sur la tolérance* of 1763: though highly influential in their time, these works are rarely read outside academic contexts today.[127] Lessing's play lives on partly because it is eminently stageworthy: along with Goethe's *Faust*, it remains the best known drama in the German language. But it is also because, in its appeal for toleration, it demands more than passive sufferance on the part of its audiences and readers. In accordance with the changing level of tensions within and between societies and cultures, it therefore continues to inspire and provoke alternately positive and negative reactions in those who are exposed to its influence.

[127] For further details see Nisbet (2010) xxvii–xxx.

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The Final Years 1778–1781: Declining Health; Conversations on Spinoza; Last Illness and Death; Memorials and Monuments; Lessing's Estate

One of the temptations to which biographers often succumb is to present the final years of their subject's life as the culmination and fulfilment of that life as a whole. Lessing's life can be, and often has been, presented in this way, no doubt because his three major works on ultimate issues—on religion, metaphysics, and human history—were published towards the end of his life. But although the second instalments of two of these works (*The Education of the Human Race* and *Ernst and Falk*) did not appear until his final year, they had been completed several years before; and after he finished *Nathan the Wise* in April 1779, he wrote nothing more of comparable importance. He lived on, however, for nearly two further years, and far from being years of fulfilment, they were a time of failing health and growing isolation. On external events during those years—the journeys he made and the people he met—we are relatively well informed: he was still regarded as Germany's most eminent writer, so that many of those who met him left a record of their impressions. And thanks to his correspondence (particularly with Elise Reimarus) and conversations (particularly with Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi), we are better informed on his inner life during that period than we are in most other phases of his career.

After Eva's death, Lessing devoted much of his time to his stepchildren, whose affairs, along with other domestic matters, feature prominently in his correspondence. (On one occasion, for example, he orders a badminton set for them, and on another, he sends for tea from Brunswick to tide him over until he can obtain better from Hamburg.)[1] His domestic responsibilities were greatly eased by his stepdaughter Malchen, who, aged sixteen when her mother died, took over many of her mother's household duties. Further help was provided by Justinus Magnus Stegmann, choirmaster at St Mary's church and teacher at the local grammar school, to whose care the young Engelbert (born in 1765) was entrusted.[2] Theodor, the eldest of the children, left for Vienna in 1779 to begin a career in Austria with

[1] See L. Eschenburg, 17 and 20 February 1778.

[2] See Raabe (1997) 105; Oehlke II, 514.

the help of his late mother's contacts,[3] leaving only Malchen and her youngest brother Fritz (born in 1768) in Lessing's care.

It is to Malchen in particular that we owe, indirectly, most of what is known about Lessing's working habits and frugal but hospitable lifestyle in his latter years. She is no doubt also the source of numerous anecdotes, such as that of the kitten which Lessing allowed to sit on his desk as he worked and which obliged him, on one occasion, to recopy part of *Nathan the Wise* after it soiled the manuscript. She married the Brunswick postmaster Georg Konrad Henneberg in the year after Lessing died, and enjoyed a long and happy life until her own death in 1848; the two most detailed reports on Lessing's domestic life, by Franz Horn (1827) and C. W. G. Schiller (1847), are largely based on her recollections.[4] Her brothers were less fortunate, and at least two of them seem to have inherited a depressive tendency from their mother's family: Theodor is said to have died by his own hand, Engelbert fell victim to insanity, and Fritz, after a promising start, injured his head and ended his life as a feeble-minded curate in 1855.[5]

Lessing received many visitors in his final years. He met and played chess with Georg Forster, whose account of his circumnavigation on James Cook's second South Sea voyage was currently appearing in German translation.[6] Other visitors from abroad included the Dutch anatomist Petrus Camper[7] and the traveller and diplomat Girolamo Lucchesini, who discussed philosophy with Lessing and impressed him by his sharp intellect;[8] Lucchesini soon afterwards became a chamberlain to Frederick the Great and a member of the king's inner circle. Such visitors sometimes stayed with Lessing as house guests, as did the young poet and journalist Heinrich Christian Boie, a great admirer of Lessing's work, and his collaborator Helfrich Peter Sturz, whom Lessing had known in Hamburg.[9] So likewise did Friedrich Jacobi and his half-sister Helene, who visited Lessing on two occasions in the summer of 1780 during which the famous conversations on Spinoza took place.[10]

Lessing's work as librarian continued throughout his last years, although he found it increasingly onerous as his health deteriorated. He remained in regular contact with K. A. Schmid on learned and library matters, and corresponded at length with the Leipzig publisher J. G. I. Breitkopf on early printed books and the origins of printed music: Breitkopf's plan—unfortunately never completed—to write a history of printed books greatly interested Lessing, whose replies to Breitkopf raise almost as many questions as they answer.[11] A cordial correspondence with Herder, devoted in part to Herder's work on folksongs and on medieval and baroque literature, was cut short by Lessing's death in February 1781. Their letters are characterized

[3] See L. to Gebler, 13 August 1779; G. Schulz (1975) 227; A (2005) 750. Theodor became a soldier in Austria.

[4] D 598–607 and 608–17.

[5] Oehlke II, 513–15 and 570–2; E. Schmidt II, 542–3.

[6] D 472; also L. to Eschenburg, 17 January 1779.

[7] D 495.

[8] See Scholz (ed.; Bibliog. Primary Lit.) 102 note a.

[9] D 446.

[10] On L's visitors see also E. Schmidt II, 545–9.

[11] L. to Breitkopf, 30 August, 3 November and 12 December 1779 and 28 January 1781; Breitkopf to L., 13 September 1779 and 29 September 1780.

Fig. 41. Painting, supposedly of Lessing, by an unknown hand, c. 1780.

by great mutual respect[12]—Lessing at one point declares that, on many occasions, his first thought is 'what will Herder say to this?'[13] He had good reason to feel warmly towards him, for although Herder was head of the Lutheran church in the duchy of Weimar, he welcomed Lessing's publication of Reimarus's *Fragments* and urged him to publish the entire work from which they were taken.

As Lessing's health deteriorated, he and his employers turned their thoughts to who might succeed him as librarian. Among those who, before or after Lessing's death, expressed an interest in this post were his young friend J. A. Leisewitz, the freethinker C. F. Bahrdt, the Old Testament scholar P. J. Bruns, the librarian J. A. L. Wetzel of Ansbach, and the Swiss historian Johannes Müller.[14] But both Lessing and the duke already had in mind Ernst Theodor Langer (one of the young Goethe's associates in Leipzig),[15] who assisted Lessing with library matters throughout the summer of 1780. Helpful and agreeable though Langer was on this occasion, he in due course proved an undistinguished choice.[16] In the light of his subsequent performance, the greatly reduced salary of 470 talers which he received during his first six years in office was perhaps no more than appropriate.[17]

[12] See Kohlschmidt *passim*. [13] L. to Herder, 10 January 1779.
[14] See Danzel/Guhrauer II, 606; also A (2003) 483, No. 1116. [15] Cf. Goethe HA IX, 333.
[16] See Raabe (1997) 60. [17] For further details see A (2005) 519–21.

In the summer of 1778, as the conflict with Goeze drew to a close and Duke Karl confirmed that Lessing's writings would henceforth be subject to censorship, the loneliness and depression he had experienced in the first half of the 1770s once again overwhelmed him. He now expressed his feelings to Elise Reimarus no less forthrightly—or perhaps even more so—than he had done to Eva, whose own depression he had tried not to aggravate. One such letter begins as follows:[18]

> I am left entirely to my own devices here. I have not a single friend in whom I might fully confide. I am assailed each day by a hundred irritations. I must pay dearly for the one year during which I lived with a sensible woman. [...] How often do I feel like cursing the fact that I once wished to be as happy as other people! How often I wish I could return to my old isolated state: to be nothing, to want nothing, to do nothing but what the present moment brings! [...] But I'm too proud to consider myself unfortunate, – I simply gnash my teeth, – and let the boat go wherever the wind and waves will take it. It is enough if I don't try to capsize it myself!

He hankers once more for the independent existence he had once enjoyed, living from day to day and reacting only to what caught his immediate attention. Sensitive as he always was to significant anniversaries, he told his brother soon after his fiftieth birthday: 'You must know that I am now approaching the fretful, distrustful phase of life with great and rapid strides.'[19] Such sentiments occur frequently in his letters throughout his final years.[20]

Financial worries also returned to haunt him. To allay the intolerable suspicion that he was appropriating his stepchildren's patrimony, he twice signed affidavits on what he owed to Eva's estate, and borrowed from others to avoid increasing this debt.[21] The loan from Moses Wessely to finance the printing of *Nathan the Wise* has already been mentioned, but he also borrowed 200 talers from his old friend O. H. Knorre to pay for his visit to Hamburg in 1780.[22] His sister continued to badger him for money every few months, and he drew an advance of 600 talers on his salary only a few weeks before his death—presumably to pay off his creditors, since less than half of that sum was recovered from his estate.[23]

All these difficulties were compounded by his failing health. His friends noticed a change in his constitution after Eva's death, for his reactions became slower and he tended to fall asleep even in animated company.[24] Mental stimulus kept him going, as in the theological conflict in the first half of 1778 and while he was writing *Nathan the Wise* during the following winter; but he was confined to bed during the early summer of 1779 and repeatedly ill in the winter of 1779–80.[25] Friends who had not seen him for some time, such as F. L. Schröder in Hamburg[26] and Gleim in Halberstadt,[27] were struck by his drowsiness and lapses of attention. He joked with his friends that he thought his head had been replaced that winter,[28]

[18] To Elise Reimarus, 9 August 1778; cf. L. to Karl Lessing, 20 October 1778.
[19] To Karl L., April 1779. [20] See esp. L. to Mendelssohn, 19 December 1780.
[21] See L. to Elise Reimarus, 9 August 1780; A (2005) 465 and 467. [22] See B XII, 603.
[23] A (2005) 536; Danzel/Guhrauer II, 598. [24] D 467–8; B XII, 516.
[25] See L. to Karl Lessing, 25 February 1780; also B X, 668. [26] D 544; Lüdtke 32.
[27] D 528 and 530. [28] D 539.

and he may indeed have suffered one or more minor strokes around this time; some brain damage is certainly indicated by his tendency to paraphasia (substitution, in speech or writing, of the wrong word or letter for the one intended) towards the end of his life.[29] As early as 1770 or 1771, he had complained of failing eyesight, and he declared shortly before his death that he was now practically blind, though helped by a new pair of glasses.[30]

Perhaps the happiest occasions in Lessing's final years were his visits to Hamburg in 1778 and 1780. On the first of these, he was accompanied by Malchen, and his main purpose was probably to deal with his stepchildren's affairs, for their inheritance was held in trust by Eva's former adviser Johannes Schuback, and their father's brother F. W. König also lived in Hamburg. The visit was planned to last for no more than a fortnight, but Malchen fell quite seriously ill and the two were unable to return for well over a month. Lessing was warmly received in Hamburg, even by people who had been shocked by his publication of the *Fragments*,[31] and he met many old friends, including Claudius, J. H. Voss, and Klopstock. He struck up a new and cordial friendship with the young Joachim Heinrich Campe, a gifted writer, lexicographer, and educationalist who in later years returned to his native Brunswick as an educational reformer;[32] Campe was one of those to whom Lessing showed the as yet unpublished fourth and fifth dialogues of *Ernst and Falk*. He also met Campe's wife, a lady of devout pietistic beliefs, at a gathering where she regaled the company (not for the first time) with her account of a ceremony at which, on Easter Sunday, the names of the deceased brethren were solemnly read out at the graveyard—whereupon Lessing's interjection 'And one after the other they answered "Here!" ' gave rise to general hilarity.[33] Shortly before his last visit to Hamburg in October 1780 (or possibly earlier, since the relevant correspondence is lost), he seems to have agreed to supply F. L. Schröder with two new plays per year for first performance in Hamburg.[34] But it was obvious to Schröder, and to all who saw Lessing that autumn, that he was no longer in a fit state to fulfil this commitment.

By this time, Lessing's closest friend in Hamburg was Margarete Elisabeth Reimarus, commonly known as Elise, the last in that series of remarkable women who intervened at decisive moments in his life. He had met her briefly towards the end of his own years in Hamburg, again in 1771 just after his secret engagement to Eva, and in August 1776, when he called on her and her brother as he prepared to publish the most controversial sections of their father's clandestine work.[35] Six years younger than Lessing, whose birthday she shared, Elise was strongly attracted to him; she was much put out by his marriage to Eva, and complained to her brother-in-law that Lessing would now be unable to keep the authorship of the *Fragments* secret, adding 'Now his wife and every member of his household can betray him. They say his house and children are a brood of young devils who

[29] D561–2. [30] To Elise Reimarus, 21 January 1781.
[31] D 462. [32] See Kopitzsch (1985) *passim*.
[33] D 470. [34] D 538 and 545; also B XII, 607.
[35] See Spalding (2005) 20–1 and Sieveking 103.

believe in neither God nor the devil.'[36] On hearing of Eva's death, she commented 'He should have made do with a mistress such as truth, for truth retains its charm even in the afterlife, if there is one.'[37] And when the rumour reached her six months later that Lessing intended to resign his office if he were prevented from replying to Goeze,[38] she took the opportunity to write to him, imploring him not to do so but to visit his friends in Hamburg instead.[39] This letter marks the beginning of their regular correspondence and closer friendship, which was consolidated during Lessing's visit to Hamburg that autumn.

In attitudes and temperament, Elise strongly resembled her father. She had little time for revealed religion and, convinced that all essential truths must be capable of rational demonstration, she subscribed to the deistic principles which inform her father's work.[40] At the same time, she shunned publicity and conflict, sharing her more controversial opinions only with close friends and relatives. Among the latter were her brother-in-law August Hennings, a diplomat in Danish service who shared her allegiance to the radical Enlightenment. She greatly admired Voltaire, and on hearing of Voltaire's death, she confided to Hennings her hope that his campaign against religious intolerance would not be allowed to lapse.[41] Her letters to Hennings over more than two decades are the fullest record of her private thoughts.[42]

Elise had strong literary interests, and most of her poems, reflections, and translations from French and English writers remained unpublished until recently.[43] Her blank-verse translation of Voltaire's *Zaïre* was successfully performed by Schröder's company,[44] and she sought Lessing's help in translating Addison's *Cato* in the same metre.[45] She taught for a time at a girls' school, and many of her writings have a pedagogical purpose; they include twenty-eight short dramas for children, some of which appeared in a series of educational texts edited by J. H. Campe. At her own request, most of her contributions were published anonymously.[46] In the course of the 1770s, the literary salon (or *Gemeinde*, as it was known) whose meetings she and her sister-in-law organized became a Hamburg institution which lasted, with changing membership, for around forty years.[47] Klopstock was a regular participant, and Lessing, for whose *Nathan the Wise* Elise collected more than seventy subscriptions, was welcomed to its meetings on his visits to Hamburg.

Elise never married, and the two loves of her life never became more than close friendships. Her first love was for August Gottfried Schwalb, a successful merchant and art collector who, though several years her junior, died in 1777.[48] The second

[36] D 443. [37] D 445; also Vierhaus (1998) 162–3.
[38] Cf. L. to Eschenburg. 12 July 1778. [39] To L., 29 July 1778.
[40] See Spalding (2005) 167; Sieveking 86. [41] D 464.
[42] Wattenbach (see 'Reimarus, Elise' in Bibliog. 'Primary Literature') *passim*; Spalding (2005) 20–1.
[43] See Spalding (2005) 313–513. [44] Ibid. 440–98.
[45] Ibid. 205–8. [46] Ibid. 218–58.
[47] Ibid. 184–92; also Spalding (1997) 312–13.
[48] See Spalding (2005) 151–5 and 165–8; also D 276.

Fig. 42. Elise Reimarus, silhouette, c. 1784.

was for Lessing. Her feelings for him again became evident in her letter of May 1780, which does not survive but in which she apparently asked him whether there was any truth in the rumour that he intended to marry his stepdaughter.[49] Lessing did not, as he might well have done, take offence. Instead, he wrote a firm but tactful reply, refuting the rumour and describing in detail the nature of his relationship to Malchen.[50] On the one hand, he confesses that Malchen's domestic virtues are the only thing which makes his present life tolerable, and that he dreads the moment when he will be deprived of her company. But he also declares that he will never attempt to delay that moment out of self-interest, and even invites Elise to enquire whether one of Eva's relatives, or a sympathetic female of Elise's acquaintance, might be willing to take care of the girl until she should find a husband. On receiving this reply, Elise realized her indiscretion and apologized for her 'impertinent' letter.[51] Lessing continued to write to her and confide in her as before, and for the rest of her life, Elise continued to regret not having got to know him in

[49] See Spalding (2005) 173: a surviving draft is promised here for publication in the LYB.
[50] To Elise Reimarus, 7 May 1780. [51] To L., 13 May 1780.

earlier years.[52] After his death, as will shortly be seen, she unwittingly helped to instigate the controversy between Jacobi and Mendelssohn over Lessing's supposed Spinozism.

Since Lessing's relations, in his last years, with his friends in Berlin—namely Nicolai and in particular Moses Mendelssohn—also have a bearing on this controversy, they call for some discussion here. Already in 1769, there were signs of tension in his relationship with Nicolai, as when he delivered his damning response to the latter's praise of civil liberties in Prussia. Relations were further strained when Nicolai and his friends among the Berlin clergy found Lessing's apparent sympathy with Lutheran orthodoxy in the early 1770s, and his subsequent critique of neology in his theological polemics, uncongenial and difficult to comprehend. As his once prolific correspondence with Nicolai petered out in the late 1770s, Lessing blamed precisely these factors for their growing estrangement, which he certainly regretted.[53] But his last letter to Nicolai (of 30 March 1779) did nothing to improve the situation. Nicolai had recently published a German translation of Thomas Amory's novel *John Buncle*, which he knew Lessing had once considered translating himself, and since Wieland had recently published a circumstantial denunciation of the novel, Nicolai now sought Lessing's permission to cite what he presumed was his positive opinion of the work in response to Wieland. But Lessing wrote to say that he now found Amory's dogmatic unitarianism—and by implication the rationalism of Nicolai and the Berlin neologists—vastly inferior to Lutheran orthodoxy.[54] Nicolai's reply to this letter does not survive, but it marked the end of their correspondence nearly two years before Lessing died.

Lessing's relations with Moses Mendelssohn, which Jacobi would in due course suggest were equally tenuous, in fact remained much closer in his final years than his relations with Nicolai.[55] Whereas he saw Nicolai on only three occasions in the 1770s (on his visits to Berlin in 1771 and in the early months of 1775 and 1776), he saw much more of Mendelssohn; for in addition to his own three visits to Berlin, he was in turn visited by Mendelssohn on four occasions, namely in 1770, 1773, 1774, and at the end of 1777 shortly before Eva's death. Karl Lessing also kept the two informed of some of each other's doings, and if they heard little of each other in later years, this was partly because Karl Lessing left Berlin for Breslau in July 1779. Nevertheless, when Jacobi suggested to Lessing that they might visit Berlin and Saxony together in the summer of 1780,[56] Lessing expressed his willingness to do so, and when this proved impracticable, he repeatedly urged Jacobi to visit Berlin without him. As Jacobi later reported, 'His main motive was Mendelssohn, whom he valued most among his friends.'[57] And although Mendelssohn was, for various reasons, unimpressed by Lessing's *Education of the Human Race*, he was so impressed by *Nathan the Wise* that, as already mentioned, he named one of

[52] See Spalding (2005) 170. [53] See L. to Karl Lessing, 19 March 1779.
[54] L. to Nicolai, 30 March 1779; see also B XII, 448 and 545.
[55] See Strohschneider-Kohrs (1991) 126–86. [56] Jacobi to L., 1 June 1780.
[57] Scholz (ed.; see Bibliog. 'Primary Literature') 68.

his sons after the protagonist. Lessing's last letter to Mendelssohn in December 1780 was as cordial as ever.[58]

Jacobi's publication of his conversations with Lessing and his ensuing controversy with Mendelssohn were a major event in intellectual history. They touched on central problems of Enlightenment thought and influenced the development of German philosophy until well into the Romantic era. Before these conversations are considered, it may be helpful to recall the evidence for Spinoza's influence on Lessing's thought before he encountered Jacobi in 1780.

Lessing probably had some knowledge of Spinoza in the early 1750s, and perhaps even earlier. His rationalization of the Trinity in the fragment *The Christianity of Reason* of 1753, which suggests that the natural universe is a necessary creation—or emanation—of the divinity, is certainly reminiscent of Spinoza's pantheism. We also know that he discussed Spinoza in 1755 with Mendelssohn, whose *Philosophical Dialogues*, in which Spinoza figures prominently, he saw through the press in that year. When Mendelssohn sent the second edition of that work to him in Breslau, Lessing wrote two fragments on Spinoza's metaphysics, the first on its relation to Leibniz's doctrine of pre-established harmony and the second on the reality of things outside God. In both of these posthumously published fragments, he presents Spinoza's monism as logically more consistent than Leibniz's attempts to overcome dualism while retaining the Christian doctrines of personal immortality and moral freedom. On the other hand, he continued to draw on important elements of Leibniz's philosophy, especially in the 1770s, including its optimism, perspectivism, dynamic universe of monads, and providential interpretation of history. In his later writings on theology, there is some evidence of a debt to Spinoza's *Tractatus theologico-politicus*, with its naturalistic account of revealed religion and the role of religion in society. But there are no explicit references to Spinoza in his writings and conversations between the Breslau period and the last year of his life. In short, it appears that Spinoza's philosophy is a subsidiary element in Lessing's eclectic thought, less important than the influence of Leibniz.[59]

Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi, a successful young businessman, administrator, and writer, belonged for a time to the young Goethe's circle. He composed two sentimental novels, *From Edward Allwill's Papers (Aus Eduard Allwills Papieren,* 1775–76) and *Woldemar* (1777 and 1779), partly in letter form and clearly influenced by Rousseau's *La Nouvelle Héloïse* and Goethe's *Werther*; their heroes are racked by turbulent emotions in the manner of the Storm and Stress *Genie*.[60] But by the later 1770s, Goethe himself had put the cult of sensibility behind him, and losing patience with Jacobi's emotional self-indulgence and effusive religiosity, he 'crucified' *Woldemar* by ceremoniously nailing it to a tree, thereby greatly offending its author. But Jacobi had meanwhile turned his attention to Lessing, to whom he sent a copy of *Woldemar* in 1779. When Lessing thanked him with positive words

[58] See Mendelssohn to L., 18 February 1780 and L. to Mendelssohn, 19 December 1780.
[59] See Fick (2010) 525–6; Bell 28; Stiening 220. [60] See Pascal *passim*.

of the kind he employed to encourage aspiring young authors,[61] Jacobi expressed an ardent desire to visit him in the following year.[62] When Lessing agreed, Jacobi, with his half-sister Helene, visited Brunswick and Wolfenbüttel from 5 to 11 July 1780, staying with Lessing for most of that time. After continuing his travels with a visit to Hamburg—where, at Lessing's suggestion, he introduced himself to Elise Reimarus and members of her circle[63]—Jacobi returned to Brunswick and persuaded Lessing to join him for a visit to Gleim in Halberstadt from 12 to 15 August.[64]

Given that Lessing's published writings contained nothing to suggest any significant debt to Spinoza, Jacobi's *Über die Lehre des Spinoza in Briefen an den Herrn Moses Mendelssohn* (*On the Doctrine of Spinoza in Letters to Herr Moses Mendelssohn*) of 1785, with its report of conversations in which Lessing had told him that he was a convinced Spinozist, astonished many of Lessing's friends as well as the wider public.[65] Jacobi's account is quite unambiguous: he quotes Lessing as saying "En kai Pan![66] […] If I must call myself after anyone, I know of no other. […] There is no other philosophy than that of Spinoza.'[67]

The first question which this raises is, of course, whether Jacobi's report is authentic and accurate, for it has at times been alleged that it is untrustworthy or even largely invented.[68] The first, manuscript version was apparently written in 1783, some three years after the conversations, and Jacobi himself admitted that he had greatly condensed the material, retaining only what he considered essential.[69] There are also variations to the text of the three editions he published between 1785 and 1819. Nevertheless, none of these variations is substantial, and the evidence that the report is a faithful record is convincing. Above all, at least five of those who knew Lessing well—Karl Lessing, Mendelssohn (after initial scepticism), Elise Reimarus, Lessing's old teacher Kästner, and his student friend Weisse—were convinced that it was genuine.[70] There is also internal evidence of its authenticity, for Jacobi reports Lessing as saying that he had once discussed the reflections in § 73 of *The Education of the Human Race* (on the rationalization of the Holy Trinity) with Mendelssohn, but without reaching any agreement.[71] This can only refer to Lessing's early fragment *The Christianity of Reason*, which Jacobi cannot have known, for it was not published until a year after he first wrote his report of the conversations. There is also external evidence that Lessing's pantheistic formula 'En kai Pan (i.e. 'One and All', or 'All is One') featured in his conversations

[61] To Jacobi, 18 May 1779. [62] Jacobi to L., 20 August 1779. [63] See A (2005) 509.
[64] A (2005) 494–5, 499–500, 516.
[65] Jacobi had already written this report on 4 November 1783; see also A (2005) 499–500.
[66] 'En kai Pan: i.e. 'One and All' or 'All is One'; according to L., this inscription had been present in an ancient temple: A (2005) 505; cf. Jacobi I/2, 392–3.
[67] Scholz (ed.) 77. [68] See esp. Engel-Holland (1979) and Engel (1999) *passim*.
[69] Scholz (ed.) 79, note and 102.
[70] See Karl Lessing to Mendelssohn, 19 October 1785 in Mendelssohn JA XIII, 318–19; Goldenbaum (2002) 300–1; Scholz (ed.) 38 and 69–70; D 586; Bell 72.
[71] Scholz (ed.) 68–9; cf. Mendelssohn to L., 1 February 1774 and L. to Mendelssohn, 1 May 1774.

with Jacobi, who reinforces an invitation to Lessing in one of his letters with the oath 'by the great Pan and all his elements!'[72] Other witnesses testify that Lessing inscribed this Greek phrase on Gleim's summerhouse in August 1780 and subsequently in an autograph album.[73] For all these reasons, it is now generally agreed that Jacobi's account of Lessing's comments on Spinoza in the last year of his life is authentic and substantially accurate.[74]

The second major question raised by the conversations is why Lessing should have assured Jacobi so emphatically that he was a Spinozist, when we know that, throughout his later years, he had studiously avoided taking up any dogmatic position in either philosophy or theology. To answer this question, one must first examine Jacobi's motives for introducing himself to Lessing and seeking his company. His interest had first been aroused, as he tells us, by Lessing's writings on religion, which left him with the 'firm conviction' that Lessing was 'an orthodox theist';[75] he then wished to visit him in the hope that he might, as he put it, 'conjure up through him the spirits of some wise men whose views on certain matters I could not determine'. The chief of these 'wise men' was, of course, Spinoza, and Jacobi reports that, in his first conversation with Lessing, the main topic was 'atheists, deists, and Christians'. He subsequently told him 'I came mainly in order to receive your help against Spinoza.'[76]

Lessing must therefore have discovered almost at once what Jacobi's attitude towards religion was, even before the topic of Spinoza was explicitly raised. Jacobi was a Christian fideist who believed, unlike Lessing, that reason and rationality must inevitably lead to 'fatalism' and atheism, of which he saw Spinoza as the prime example, and that free will and religious faith alone, as facts of experience which require no further demonstration, can lead the way to truth and salvation. No sooner had Lessing discovered that Spinoza embodied everything that Jacobi found philosophically and theologically unacceptable than, true to character, he pronounced himself a convinced Spinozist. When Jacobi published his account of the conversations after Lessing's death, Karl Lessing, Elise Reimarus, and other close friends immediately recognized Lessing's ironic and provocative stance in the debate, even as reported by the stolidly literalistic Jacobi. To anyone familiar with Lessing's opposition in principle to closed systems, it is in any case inconceivable that he should suddenly have identified himself with the most systematic philosopher of the seventeenth century. His reluctance to do so can be detected even in his initial reply to Jacobi's question whether he agreed with Spinoza: 'If I must call myself after anyone, I know of no one else.'[77] As in so many other cases, his affirmative statements were not designed to express a dogmatic position of his own; their character was essentially reactive, with the aim of questioning a received opinion and obliging its advocates either to abandon it or to find new and better ways of defending it.

For the same reason, Lessing denies not only the existence of a transcendental God, but also the freedom of the human will, and he does not dispute Jacobi's

[72] Jacobi to L., 22 December 1780. [73] See A (2005) 517–18; D 539–40.
[74] See, for example, Baum 254; Goldenbaum (2002) 300 n. 118.
[75] See Scholz (ed.) 74 and 100. [76] Ibid. 74 and 78. [77] Ibid. 77.

questionable contention that, for Spinoza, this amounts to a blind and mechanical fatalism.[78] He had, of course, been down this road before. He had been familiar with the time-honoured debate on freedom and necessity at least since his first years in Berlin, when he studied and rejected the materialism of La Mettrie. He had also discussed this topic in 1757 with another earnest young man, the playwright Joachim Wilhelm von Brawe, who championed the freedom of the will and his own Christian faith against the rationalism of Leibniz and Wolff, which, like Jacobi, he considered presumptuous and erroneous. On that occasion too, Lessing had played the devil's advocate, outmanœuvering the hapless Brawe with his dialectical skills until others intervened to steer the conversation to less contentious subjects.[79] In the same spirit, when Jacobi showed him Goethe's as yet unpublished poem 'Prometheus' (it is unclear whether Jacobi told him who the author was), Lessing greeted it with enthusiasm, declaring 'the point of view which the poem adopts is my own one', and associated it with Spinoza.[80] In the context of the conversations, the poem's expression of human self-reliance, of defiance of the gods, and of the supremacy of fate suited Lessing's argument well, as in Prometheus' lines:[81]

> Was it not omnipotent Time
> That forged me into manhood,
> And eternal Fate,
> My masters and yours?

The form of the dialogues—or rather the relative share of the two speakers in them–confirms the above conclusions. They consist largely of a monologue by Jacobi, who expounds his own tortuous interpretation of Spinoza at great length.[82] Lessing's brief comments, in contrast, are for the most part questions, provocative statements, and ironic interjections, all designed to make Jacobi define his position more clearly and demonstrate it more convincingly. These comments are much too diverse and laconic to convey any coherent impression of Lessing's supposed Spinozism,[83] let alone of what Jacobi describes as his 'system'.[84]

The speculative and provisional character of Lessing's thinking comes over particularly clearly in his comments on the nature of God, as he turns to older pantheistic models in the hermetic, cabbalistic, and neo-Platonic traditions. Such is the model, attributed by Lessing to Leibniz[85] but in fact of earlier, cabbalistic origin, according to which the universe is created and sustained by a recurrent expansion and contraction of God.[86] This idea greatly appealed to Lessing, for as Jacobi reports, he associated the Christian image of God's unchanging perfection with infinite boredom, and the dynamic, cabbalistic model with constant change, with sleeping and waking, with the death and resurrection of all created things.[87] His

[78] Ibid. 81 and 89. [79] See KGL 112. [80] Scholz (ed.) 75–7.
[81] Ibid. 77; also D 531; cf. Goethe HA X, 48–9. [82] Cf. Regner 373.
[83] Cf. Altmann (1973) 621; Allison (1966) 74; Pätzold 302. [84] See Scholz (ed.) 96.
[85] Ibid. 84; A (2005) 664.
[86] Scholz (ed.) 92–6; cf. Hammacher 93 and 106; Altmann (1976) 33 and 40; Jacobi I/2, 401–2.
[87] See also A (2005) 505 and 507.

ironic attitude towards Jacobi's earnest philosophizing is particularly evident in this speculation, for as Jacobi tells us, he proceeded, 'half smiling', to suggest (perhaps with an allusion to his own fits of drowsiness) that he might himself be the supreme being, but at present in the state of extreme contraction.[88] Not even Jacobi could mistake the humoristic tendency of such remarks, and on their visit to Gleim, he and Lessing, to the mystification of their host, exchanged banter on which of them might be responsible for the sudden rainstorm which prevented them all from going outside.[89] In the same spirit, Lessing signed an autograph album on his visit to Hamburg a few months later with the dictum ''En ego kai panta' ('I am One and All Things').[90]

Given the light-hearted and non-dogmatic nature of Lessing's comments on Spinoza and pantheism, it may seem at first sight surprising that Jacobi's report caused widespread bewilderment, not only among Lessing's friends, but also among the wider public. This was no doubt due in part to the imprecise and divergent senses in which both Lessing and Jacobi use the term 'Spinozism' to denote something much wider than philosophies based on, or closely resembling, that of Spinoza. For Lessing, it seems to denote any philosophy with a pantheistic tendency, not necessarily excluding a transcendental element in the shape of a creator God and benevolent providence. It is in this sense that he applies it to a work by the Dutch Platonist François Hemsterhuis, *Aristée ou de la divinité* (1779), according to which God animates the entire universe, but within a basically dualistic framework.[91] Such combinations of immanence and transcendence would now be described not as 'Spinozism', but rather as 'panentheism'. Jacobi, on the other hand, treats Spinozism as virtually synonymous with fatalism and atheism, and applies it to a remarkably wide range of philosophies—in fact, to all forms of rationalism. Even Leibniz and Wolff, who retain an extramundane God and assert the freedom of the will in conjunction with natural causality, are in Jacobi's view Spinozists, because he considers all such compromises untenable.[92] They invariably fail to explain how supernatural intervention (or indeed free human choice) can be reconciled with rational and causal explanation.[93] As Jacobi puts it, 'there can be no natural philosophy of the supernatural'.[94] In short, Spinozism—or what Jacobi would later describe as 'nihilism'—is the logical end of rationalism. It follows from this that 'natural religion' is a contradiction in terms.

The hiatus which Jacobi discerns between rational explanation and the inexplicable sphere of religious truth and human freedom entails a radically dualistic epistemology, in some ways analogous to that of Kant. On the one hand, there is the realm of causal, mechanical necessity, and on the other, the immediate insights of feeling and intuition as irreducible facts of human experience; the latter alone are sufficient to underpin religious faith and belief in moral freedom. The difference

[88] Scholz (ed.) 92. [89] Ibid. 95. [90] D 540.
[91] Scholz (ed.) 97–8. [92] Ibid. 85–6 and 177.
[93] Cf. Beiser 81. [94] Scholz (ed.) 92.

between this view and that of Lessing is aptly conveyed in the following extract from the conversations:[95]

JACOBI: I believe that anyone who does not try to explain what is incomprehensible, but wishes only to know the limit beyond which it begins and to recognise that it is there, will achieve within himself the greatest scope for genuine human truth.

LESSING: Words, dear Jacobi; words! The limit you wish to impose is impossible to define. And beyond it, you give unlimited scope to dreams, nonsense, and blindness.

The late Lessing had reached the conclusion that there are no absolute solutions to metaphysical problems, and he valued those whose view of truth was open and inclusive.[96] In the conversations, he specifically praises Leibniz for this quality—in this instance surely without irony, for his own view of truth is far closer to Leibniz than to Spinoza.

But to return to the perplexity of those who read Jacobi's report, a brief account must be given of the increasingly bitter controversy with Mendelssohn to which, four years after Lessing's death, the report gave rise. Soon after Lessing died in 1781, Mendelssohn planned to write an appreciation of his character and writings, but put off doing so until he could retrieve his own letters from among Lessing's posthumous papers. Elise Reimarus, who visited Mendelssohn in 1783, informed Jacobi of this plan, whereupon Jacobi asked her advice on whether he should reveal to Mendelssohn his discovery that Lessing was a Spinozist, since he had reason to believe that Lessing had never told Mendelssohn that this was the case.[97] Elise replied that Mendelssohn would indeed welcome a full account of the matter, and on 4 November 1783, Jacobi duly sent her, for forwarding to Mendelssohn, his famous report on the conversations. A correspondence between Jacobi and Mendelssohn then began, the letters from each going initially to Elise to forward, in whole or in extract, to the other. This strange mode of communication could only complicate the issue, and it almost certainly sowed distrust between the two correspondents.

From the start, the correspondence was fraught with misunderstandings. In the first place, Jacobi had plainly misunderstood a remark by Lessing on his relations with Mendelssohn. Having noticed the pantheistic implications of § 73 of *The Education of the Human Race* with its rational deduction of the Holy Trinity, Jacobi asked Lessing whether he had ever discussed his Spinozistic 'system' with Mendelssohn. Lessing replied that he had once discussed with him the paragraph which Jacobi had noticed, but dropped the subject after no agreement was reached. Lessing must have understood Jacobi's question to refer only to the content of the relevant paragraph, which replicates much of his early fragment *The Christianity of Reason*, for we know that he had abandoned that fragment in the light of Mendelssohn's criticisms.[98] But he can scarcely have forgotten that he had

[95] Ibid. 90.
[96] Ibid. 84.
[97] Ibid. 65–9.
[98] Cf. Ch. 4 p. 131 above.

himself seen Mendelssohn's *Philosophical Dialogues* of 1755, half of which is devoted to Spinoza, through the press, or that he had discussed Spinoza in some detail in his correspondence with Mendelssohn during his years in Breslau, when he drafted his two fragments on Spinoza's system.[99] Jacobi's misunderstanding had unfortunate consequences. It led him to conclude that Lessing had taken him more fully into his confidence than Mendelssohn on his philosophical beliefs, and to treat the latter in a more patronizing manner than he might otherwise have done. A further misunderstanding arose when, after sending Mendelssohn his report of the conversations with Lessing in manuscript, he learned that Mendelssohn had decided to reply to it in print, in his *Morning Hours or Lectures on the Existence of God (Morgenstunden oder Vorlesungen über das Dasein Gottes*), the publication of which was imminent.[100] Convinced that Mendelssohn was trying to publish his own account of the affair before he could state his case, Jacobi now rushed to publish his original report, together with his correspondence with Mendelssohn and Elise Reimarus (now thinly disguised as 'Emilie'), much of it of a confidential nature, without seeking the permission of either party. The two publications appeared almost simultaneously.

Far from criticizing Jacobi, Mendelssohn does not even mention him in the relevant sections of his *Morgenstunden*.[101] He confines himself to a critique of Spinoza's pantheism, followed by a vindication of Lessing as one who, despite the pantheistic tendency of some of his writings, at the same time never lost his faith in a creator God and (especially in *Nathan the Wise*) in divine providence. Mendelssohn concludes by defining Lessing's philosophy as 'refined pantheism' (i.e. panentheism), which he illustrates by reproducing the fragment *The Christianity of Reason*, first published a year before by Karl Lessing from Lessing's posthumous papers.[102]

What troubled Mendelssohn when he now read Jacobi's *Über die Lehre des Spinoza in Briefen an den Herrn Moses Mendelssohn* was therefore not the allegation that Lessing was a pantheist or Spinozist. Nor was it anything that Jacobi reported Lessing as saying in the original conversations. It was rather the fact that Jacobi explicitly equated Spinozism with atheism, thereby implicitly branding Lessing 'as a covert blasphemer, hence also a hypocrite',[103] and so confirming the worst suspicions of the latter's theological enemies. Mendelssohn was also perplexed as to what Jacobi's own philosophical position was,[104] for in his less than lucid exposition of Spinoza's ideas, Jacobi seemed at times to be commending them—as indeed he was, in a sense, since one of his aims was to portray Spinoza as the most consistent of all rationalistic philosophers and his system as the apogee of rational thinking.[105] At the same time, there was no mistaking Jacobi's sudden leap from philosophy to religious faith, or the *ad hominem* tendency of his entire work, addressed as it was to Mendelssohn and concluding with a Christian homily from the 'pious, angelically pure lips' of Mendelssohn's old tormentor Lavater.[106]

[99] See L. to Mendelssohn, 17 April 1763 and Mendelssohn to L., May 1763.
[100] See Altmann (1973) 651–3. [101] Scholz (ed.) 1–44. [102] Ibid. 39–43.
[103] Ibid. 295. [104] Ibid. 311 and 318.
[105] Cf. Bell 77 and 83; also Jacobi, ed. Giovanni, 82–6. [106] Scholz (ed.) 199–200.

In declining health, Mendelssohn now drove himself to write *To Lessing's Friends* (*An die Freunde Lessings*), a dignified reply deploring Jacobi's betrayal of Lessing's confidence, his misrepresentation of Lessing's views, his unauthorized publication of private correspondence, and his renewal of Lavater's Christian proselytizing. On hastening on foot to deliver the manuscript to his publisher on 31 December 1785, Mendelssohn caught a chill from which he never recovered:[107] he died on 4 January 1786. His posthumously published work contains a preface by his friend J. J. Engel, who cites Lavater's earlier assault on Mendelssohn's Jewish faith as the first major blow to his health, and adds that the shock occasioned by Jacobi's allegations and the effort required to rebut them hastened his demise. The preface concludes with an account of Mendelssohn's last days by his friend and physician Marcus Herz, who describes how his life slowly ebbed away, a bust of Lessing always by his side.[108] An unedifying controversy ensued over the relative responsibility of various individuals and other factors for Mendelssohn's death.[109] It did, however, have the positive effect of generating new interest in Spinoza's thought and its significance for philosophy and theology in the closing years of the Enlightenment.

In a letter to Kant, Lessing's old teacher Kästner, who had first introduced him to philosophical disputation some thirty years before, recalls his final meeting with Lessing in 1777:[110]

> in our conversations on current philosophy, he [Lessing] expressed the hope that it would soon have to change, for it had become so shallow that its shallowness would not be able to retain the respect even of those who did not wish to give it much thought.

Lessing's esteem for Leibniz remained undiminished, but he was no longer satisfied with the philosophical orthodoxy of late-Enlightenment Germany, that blend of Wolffian rationalism and unreflecting common sense which Hegel, looking back from the early decades of the nineteenth century, found equally sterile. The change which Lessing hoped for was not long in coming, and Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, published shortly after Lessing died in 1781, was a major factor in it. But in Hegel's opinion, the main impulse for change came from another source, and one with which Lessing was closely associated. In Hegel's words:[111]

> What brought movement into this authority [of rationalist orthodoxy], which had attained complete immobility and certainty and did not dream of anything else, was the quarrel between Mendelssohn and Jacobi, first over whether Lessing was a Spinozist, and then over Spinoza's doctrine itself.

The revelation of Lessing's sympathy for Spinoza did indeed have far-reaching effects. It at last gave respectability to Spinoza, hitherto routinely condemned as an atheist (as he continued to be by Jacobi). At a time when growing numbers of people were dissatisfied with Christian dualism and with the new dualism of Kant's critical philosophy, Spinoza's monism, energized by Leibniz's monadology and with some creative reworking, offered an attractive alternative.[112] In opposition to

[107] Altmann (1973) 739. [108] Scholz (ed.) 287–90; Altmann (1973) 744.
[109] Altmann (1973) 744–52. [110] D 432–3. [111] Hegel XX, 311.
[112] See Schmidt-Biggemann (1977) 90–5.

the mechanistic models of the Enlightenment, Herder and Goethe elaborated a neo-Spinozistic *Naturphilosophie* in the 1780s and 1790s;[113] it is difficult to imagine that they would have done so had it not been for Lessing's example. And despite Kant's critique of speculative metaphysics, the legacy of Spinoza, and of the closely related metaphysics of Leibniz, remained alive until well into the Romantic period as Schelling and others sought to reconcile Kantian subjectivity with a spiritualized, pantheistic vision of the universe. At the same time, Jacobi's denial that reason could support valid moral and religious beliefs, like David Hume's analogous criticisms, elicited new attempts by Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel to restore the authority of reason.[114]

Just as Lessing had predicted a major change in philosophy, so also did he believe in his final years that a comparable change was imminent in religion. During the theological controversy, he had noted that, in the sixteenth century, Girolamo Cardano had prophesied such a change around 1800, and he asked himself—not without justification—whether this change was not already under way.[115] He returned to this topic in a letter of 1780 to 'Maler' Müller, who later recalled:[116]

> Lessing considered that the present condition of Christianity could not last for another half-century, and that it would therefore make better sense to demolish so dilapidated a structure lest it should cause excessive destruction when it collapsed.

His continued interest in this process is evident in his writings and conversations of those years, as when he recommends David Hume's recently published *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* to Jacobi,[117] and the first volume (1776) of Edward Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, with its deeply ironic treatment of institutional Christianity, to Elise Reimarus and her circle.[118] In what is possibly the last learned text he worked on, namely a draft response, requested by the duke, to a paper submitted to the Corpus Evangelicorum on relations between the different Christian confessions, he is no less even-handed than he had been towards the three world religions in *Nathan the Wise*. Likening their reciprocal influence to a process of fermentation, he declares 'The influence of the papacy on the state is now no less beneficent than that of the Lutheran church.'[119] (In a similar spirit, he had declared some years earlier that the suppression of the Jesuits in 1773 was no less unjust than the suppression of the Templars over four centuries earlier.)[120] In another late fragment, *The Religion of Christ*, he once again questions the dogma of the Trinity, drawing a sharp distinction between 'the Christian religion', which worships Christ as a supernatural being, and 'the religion of Christ', which seeks to follow the admirable moral principles taught and practised by him.[121] He was also horrified around this time by the intolerant measures advocated by the clergy of Jülich-Berg, whereby those who failed to attend church were liable to be fined, or even excommunicated and denied a Christian burial;[122] only

[113] See Beiser 59. [114] Ibid. 46–8. [115] LM XVI, 397–8.
[116] B XII, 591. [117] D 502; cf. R/S (2007) 144 No. 578. [118] A (2005) 456.
[119] LM XVI, 530; cf. D 514. [120] LM XV, 383. [121] LM XVI, 518–19.
[122] See L. to Jacobi, 4 December 1780.

moments before he died, his friend Alexander Daveson read him an account of this affair from a current periodical.[123] To conclude: just as in philosophy, so also in theology did Lessing foresee and help to inaugurate major new developments in Germany. He received little thanks for these efforts in his lifetime. On the contrary, his last years were darkened, and his life almost certainly shortened, by the opposition they aroused.

In his last letter to Mendelssohn, Lessing indicated that he now felt not only isolation in Wolfenbüttel, but coldness and hostility on the part of those around him.[124] He was more explicit to Jacobi, declaring that, since the controversy over the *Fragments*, his life had been made a misery. As Jacobi reports, 'at two points in particular, his expression changed in a manner that I shall never forget—this noble man's heart is broken',[125] and in a letter written soon after Lessing's death, he indicates what these two points were. After complaining that everyone was forsaking him, Lessing had named two specific instances. The first concerned 'a certain person who had been devoted to him for years in the closest friendship, and of whom he was certain that she would not have refused him her hand'.[126] Over the years, Lessing scholars have identified this person either as Elise Reimarus[127] (despite the fact that his closer friendship with Elise began only in 1778, and that her letters show no hint of estrangement) or his stepdaughter Malchen[128] (although Lessing had made it abundantly clear that his relationship to her was exclusively paternal). Only recently has the person referred to been correctly identified as Ernestine Reiske.[129] Though she destroyed nearly all her correspondence with Lessing, it is clear that she must have rebuked him for his heretical opinions, for on hearing of his death, she told Ebert that she believed he had put his immortal soul at risk, and that she had repeatedly prayed for his salvation.

The second, much more serious event which caused Lessing to feel abandoned is described by Jacobi as follows:[130]

> He led me dimly to suspect that his late wife had reproached him on her deathbed for having infected her with unfortunate opinions. Such a suggestion was appalling, and made it impossible for him to think of marriage, children, or love.

These two experiences were alone enough to break a man's spirit. But they were aggravated by other disappointments. Elise's brother J. A. H. Reimarus now treated him coldly, and Lessing was saddened to discover that the latter's son had visited Wolfenbüttel, and even the library, without calling on him.[131] Christian Leiste, who continued to contribute to Lessing's periodical *On History and Literature*, regarded him as a lost soul and warned his older pupils at the local grammar school against all that Lessing stood for.[132] There is also reason to believe that J. H. Ress preached against him in his sermons at St Mary's.[133]

[123] D 556; cf. E. Schmidt II, 570. [124] To Mendelssohn, 19 December 1780.
[125] D 518. [126] D 519. [127] See, for example, E. Schmidt II, 644 and Sieveking 110.
[128] D 520; Hildebrandt (1982) 445; Vierhaus (1998) 165.
[129] By Wolfgang Albrecht, in A (2003) 486. [130] D 519.
[131] See L. to Elise Reimarus, September/October 1780. [132] A (2005) 484.
[133] See Raabe (1997) 98.

Under these circumstances, it is not to be wondered at that Lessing's recurrent impulse to flee from an uncongenial situation reasserted itself. Apart from his trips to Hamburg, he considered leaving Wolfenbüttel altogether,[134] and he was attracted by the prospect of an extended tour to the Rhineland and Paris in Jacobi's company.[135] Only his indifferent health, and above all his responsibility for his stepchildren, held him back; for as he told Elise Reimarus, he would otherwise relapse into an itinerant existence, 'so that I would end my life as I began it; as a vagabond, and a much worse one than I was then, for not even the desire to study would detain me in one place for as long as it did in my youth'.[136]

Lessing's choice of terms may well have been influenced by his recent encounter with a genuine vagrant by the name of Könemann (prenames unknown). A self-styled 'philosopher' from Livonia, Könemann was an 'ill-dressed' vagabond and the owner of a large and unruly dog.[137] He may have heard in advance of Lessing's well-known generosity, for on his arrival in Wolfenbüttel in August 1779, he presented himself to him and bluntly asked for board and accommodation in order to complete his magnum opus, *On the Higher Destiny of Man*. Lessing quickly realized that Könemann was half-educated and his writing ungrammatical. But he took him and his dog in as house guests for around five months, until Könemann finally announced that he was leaving. Könemann was an anarchist,[138] and as Lessing observed, 'as confirmed and complete an *atheist* as he had ever encountered'.[139] Significantly, he made no attempt to keep Könemann out of the public eye, but accompanied him to the Brunswick fair, where he introduced him to Leisewitz, the ducal chamberlain von Kuntzsch, and others. Leisewitz noted in his diary 'I made every effort to prevent the philosopher appearing ridiculous',[140] despite the fact that Lessing had shown no sign of embarrassment; on the contrary, Lessing's behaviour suggests defiance of formal conventions. It is not difficult to imagine how the worthy citizens of Wolfenbüttel must have reacted to Hofrat Lessing's association with a vagrant, anarchist, and atheist. It cannot have helped to reduce his sense of isolation.

Another outsider whom Lessing befriended in his last years was Alexander Daveson, a Jew, art dealer, and lottery agent. Born in 1755, he was still in his early twenties when he first met Lessing, of whom he later wrote 'He was my friend, my teacher, and my protector.'[141] Lessing often called on Daveson and his wife when he was in Brunswick, and he stood by them when Daveson's fortunes took a turn for the worse. The government of Hessen-Kassel sought his extradition for alleged complicity in a lottery fraud, and although the Brunswick authorities did not hand him over, Daveson was arrested and imprisoned soon after the crown prince inherited the dukedom in the spring of 1780. He may also have been arrested because he had allegedly sought payment for expensive jewellery sold to the extravagant old duke against the crown prince's express instructions.[142] Although no charges were brought against him, he was disowned by both Christian and Jewish communities and compelled to vacate his house in Brunswick. Lessing visited him in prison and

[134] D 518. [135] See LM XVIII, 338 n. 1. [136] To Elise Reimarus, 7 May 1780.
[137] D 480–1. [138] D 484–5. [139] D 493.
[140] D 483. [141] D 438. [142] D 617.

gave him accommodation when he was released after six months.[143] Despite a planned move to Berlin, Daveson returned after a short visit and was back in Brunswick at the time of Lessing's death in February 1781.[144]

Whether or not Daveson was guilty of punishable offences can no longer be determined, although he certainly associated with others who were convicted.[145] Lessing said of him 'it is not true that this unfortunate man is entirely innocent. He has probably always been lacking in prudence.'[146] After Lessing's death, Daveson led an itinerant existence. He spent some time in England and worked as an editor in Hamburg, Altona, Bayreuth, and Berlin. He used various aliases and often styled himself 'Professor Lange'. In 1806, he was nearly lynched for editing a French-sponsored journal in occupied Berlin.[147] He was at all events a dubious character, an outsider who lived on the fringes of respectable society and is in some ways reminiscent of Lessing's early associate Christlob Mylius.

Lessing's unqualified support for Könemann and Daveson shows how far he was prepared to go in his solidarity with marginalized individuals. It also shows that his defence of individual autonomy was not just passive tolerance or an abstract principle, as it was for many Enlightenment thinkers, but an active commitment which took precedence over social convention. Some measure of this commitment, and of its exceptional nature, can be gained from Moses Mendelssohn's reply to a letter from Herder soon after Lessing's death. In his letter of condolence, Herder had lamely apologized for the distance he had maintained between himself and Mendelssohn when they met at the spa of Bad Pyrmont.[148] Mendelssohn's reply is direct and to the point. He has long been accustomed, he says, to reading the signal in other people's eyes that his company (as a Jew) was no longer desirable. He adds that Lessing, on the other hand, was 'the one man in whom, in over thirty years, I detected no sign of this attitude, and who, always whole-hearted and completely true to himself, remained entirely my friend and benefactor!'[149]

Having known Lessing for decades as one who always gave but never sought support or consolation, Mendelssohn had been shocked by the pessimistic tone of the last letter he received from Lessing, delivered by Daveson around the end of 1780.[150] In this letter, Lessing introduced Daveson with the following words:[151]

> He wants nothing from you, dear Moses, except that you show him the shortest and safest route to that European country where there are neither Christians nor Jews. I am sorry to lose him; but as soon as he has arrived safely there, I will be the first to follow him. [...] I do not think you know me as someone hungry for praise. But the coldness with which the world lets certain people know that nothing they do is right is, if not fatal, at least debilitating. [...] Ah, dear friend, this scene is over! But I do wish I could speak to you once more!

[143] Loc. cit. [144] See Altmann (1973) 581; A (2005) 669–70.
[145] G. Schulz (1973) 63–4. [146] To Mendelssohn, 19 December 1780.
[147] See Lüdtke 63–4.
[148] Herder to Mendelssohn, 21 February 1781, in Herder, Briefe IV, 165.
[149] To Herder, 15 March 1781, in A (2003) 371.
[150] See Altmann (1973) 581; D 582–3. [151] To Mendelssohn, 19 December 1780.

Having so often defended outsiders of every kind,[152] Lessing now felt he was one of them himself. Though his preferred role was to mediate, from a real or apparent position of neutrality, between marginalized groups or individuals and the reading public, he now found himself (especially in Wolfenbüttel) marginalized and forced into the all-too-unequivocal role of heretic himself. Under normal circumstances, he might have resumed his former role through his writings, and might well have left Wolfenbüttel in order to do so. But after *Nathan the Wise*, ill health and depression ruled this out. He did, admittedly, draft several dramatic plans, but none of them came to fruition. It is not without significance that the last three all have an outsider as protagonist. *The Dervish*, on the figure of Al-Hafi from *Nathan the Wise,* has already been mentioned. *The Good Samaritan* turns once more (like *The Jews* before it) to the parable closest to Lessing's heart, the tale of the heretic who, unlike the orthodox believers, comes to the aid of a man in distress without regard to his creed.[153] Finally, he planned a play based on *The London Prodigal*, a work at that time attributed to Shakespeare; its dissolute protagonist is saved by the loyalty of his wife, who follows him into prison, and is finally reconciled with his father. Lessing considered turning it into a tragedy, but eventually decided to retain the happy ending. His main preoccupation with this plan came shortly after Daveson's release from prison.[154]

After the religious conflict, Lessing had few real friends in Wolfenbüttel. Two in particular are known to have stood by him, namely his physician J. F. J. Topp, and Johann von Döring, who held the office of bailiff (*Drost*). Topp was a diminutive, hunchbacked figure with a ready sense of humour. He was Lessing's regular partner at chess, and he named one of his numerous children 'Ephraim' after him.[155] Döring was sufficiently in Lessing's confidence to read at least some of *Nathan the Wise* in manuscript while the work was being written; he also collected subscriptions for the published version. After Lessing's death, he looked after his stepchildren and took charge of his posthumous papers until Karl Lessing was able to collect them.[156] If Lessing's barbed epigram, entitled 'On Johann von Döring' by its earliest editor, does relate to this friend, it suggests that Lessing's feelings towards him were mixed, or had at some point changed. At all events, the epigram was not intended for publication.[157]

During his last two years, Lessing spent considerably more time in Brunswick than before. Illness and inability to work, and the need to relax in congenial company, were doubtless among his motives. He stayed in the apartment he had rented for several years on the first floor of a hostelry (the 'Neue Schenke') on the Ägidienmarkt run by Johann Hermann Angott, a prosperous wine merchant and well known local figure.[158] The other half of the building, all of which was destroyed in

[152] For further details see Nisbet (2005b) *passim*.
[153] See L. to Elise Reimarus, 25 May and November 1779; also Lüpke (1998) *passim*.
[154] See L. to Eschenburg, 9 November 1780; L. to Elise Reimarus, December 1780; A (2005) 668.
[155] See Mack *passim*; also Raabe (1997) 130–1.
[156] D 459 and 471–2; Raabe (1997) 132–3.
[157] LM I, 51.
[158] See Fig. 43; also another illustration in Raabe (1997) 153.

Fig. 43. Brunswick lottery in progress (middle); Lessing's lodgings, where he died, were on the first floor, extreme right. These buildings were destroyed in the Second World War.

the Second World War, housed the offices of the Brunswick lottery, where crowds regularly gathered to see the winning numbers drawn.[159] But the centre of Lessing's social life in the town was Rönckendorff's wine cellar in Breite Strasse; the building, at that time known as the Hotel d'Angleterre, is still extant.[160] Here, a mixed company of civil servants, officers, merchants, and scholars congregated to converse and drink champagne, and such gatherings became so popular that they were formalized in 1780 by the foundation of the 'Great Club'. Kuntzsch was elected president, Eschenburg and Count Marschall were deputies, and Leisewitz secretary;[161] Lessing, who designed a coat of arms for the club, was an honorary member. The club was open daily from 1 p.m. to midnight, four rooms were set aside for dining, gaming, smoking, and conversation, and a small reference library was established. A collective dinner, attended by fifty or more members, was held on the first Monday of each month.[162] At such gatherings, Lessing was usually to be found at the centre of the liveliest group. In addition to those named above, his regular companions included Warnstedt (with whom he had toured Italy), Jerusalem, Schmid, and Ebert.

It is to Leisewitz, who kept a diary and whose company Lessing regularly sought, that we owe most information on Lessing's movements in Brunswick, especially at the club.[163] Johann Anton Leisewitz, born in 1752, was a native of Hanover. He qualified as a lawyer at Göttingen university, where he joined its celebrated literary

[159] See also Hagen 638.
[160] Illustration in Raabe (1997) 157; see also Oehlke II, 499–500.
[161] A (2005) 662.
[162] D 546.
[163] See D 534–5; 546–50, 552–3, 567–8.

society, the Hainbund.[164] He moved to Brunswick in 1775 and soon became secretary to the duchy's Estates parliament, subsequently holding other senior offices. He first came to Lessing's attention in 1776 through his drama *Julius von Tarent*, which Lessing thought well of and initially mistook for the work of Goethe until Eschenburg corrected him.[165] A tragedy on the favourite Storm and Stress theme of rival brothers, it is akin in language and form to Lessing's *Emilia Galotti*, although its tempestuous passions and echoes of Shakespeare are more typical of the younger dramatists of the 1770s. It was successful on stage, and greatly impressed the young Schiller, in whose dramas, from *The Robbers* to *The Bride of Messina*, its influence can be detected. After this early success, and despite his marriage to Sophie Seyler, daughter of the theatre impresario, Leisewitz abandoned his literary career and stipulated in his will that all his literary remains should be burned. An insecure character, prone to self-doubt and hypochondria, he may have concluded that it was futile to compete with Lessing and some of the younger dramatists then emerging. But despite his many hours of conversation with Lessing and frequent references to him in his diary, it is unfortunate that, unlike Jacobi, he records relatively little of what Lessing actually said.

There is evidence that official disapproval of Lessing in Brunswick was confined to his publication of the *Fragments*, and that his social life was relatively unaffected. As Jerusalem, the senior cleric in Brunswick, put it: 'He may be beyond the pale, but one can still dine with him.'[166] When disturbing rumours that Lessing was surrounded by hatred reached Gleim, Eschenburg wrote in reply that this was not the case. He also reported that, a few days before his final illness, Lessing had dined with the duke and duchess, and on the following day with the dowager duchess.[167] As earlier mentioned, the new duke, when urged by the Corpus Evangelicorum to punish Lessing for publishing the *Fragments*, summoned him (in November 1780) to assure him that no action would be taken. Although Lessing replied gruffly that he had no wish for special treatment and was content to let normal procedures take their course, he later regretted having done so and acknowledged that the duke had behaved admirably.[168] This is confirmed by the duke's spirited reply to the imperial authorities, in which he pointed out that the opinions expressed in the *Fragments* were not those of Lessing himself, and that in the publicly expressed opinion of at least some theologians, the whole affair had been of more benefit than detriment to religion.[169]

One further event which interested Lessing shortly before his last illness was the publication of Frederick the Great's notorious essay *De la littérature allemande*.[170] On 2 October 1780, the dowager duchess Charlotte dined with her brother, Frederick the Great, and took issue with the king's negative and ill-informed opinion of German literature.[171] The king lost no time in composing and publishing his essay, in French and German translation, before the end of the year. In this work, as one

[164] See Rychner *passim*. [165] D 393. [166] D 542 and 468.
[167] D 570–1. [168] To Elise Reimarus, 28 November and December 1780.
[169] A (2005) 532–3. [170] See Friedrich II, ed. Steinmetz, 60–99.
[171] See Schieder 382–5; Kunisch 457–60.

historian puts it, the king reveals himself as a 'living fossil', repeating views on the inadequacy of German literature and the German language and their inferiority to those of France which he is known to have held as early as the 1730s.[172] While his criticisms may have had some validity then, they certainly had none in 1780. The only contemporary German author of note to whom he refers (without naming him) is Goethe, whose *Götz von Berlichingen* he condemns as 'repellent twaddle' and an 'execrable imitation' of the uncouth dramas of Shakespeare.[173] It is hard to believe that Duchess Charlotte did not mention Lessing as one of those who had raised German literature to new heights; but as on so many occasions in the past, the king either overlooked or chose not to mention Lessing's existence. (A withering comment on *Emilia Galotti* attributed to Frederick by a Frenchman sounds too precise and detailed to be anything other than apocryphal.)[174] Lessing must have read Frederick's essay, because he asked Leisewitz on 3 February to let him see his copy of the (predictably anodyne) response which J. F. W. Jerusalem had written at Duchess Charlotte's request.[175] It is, however, unlikely that he was able to read it, for his final illness began that very evening. He had, in any case, already commented on Frederick's attitude to German literature in one of his posthumous essays on the fable, where he conjectures that the medieval German emperors probably did no more for German literature than the present king of Prussia. He adds 'I would nevertheless not take an oath on it that some flatterer will not appear one day and see fit to call the present age of German literature the age of Frederick the Great.'[176] The only error in this prediction is that not one, but many literary historians, from Hermann Hettner onwards, would employ the designation in question. The stir over Frederick's essay and the duchess's opposing views must at least have reminded Lessing that the ruling family of Brunswick, like their relatives in Weimar, held far more progressive views on German culture than the Prussian monarch.

Lessing's last two years were marred by declining health. By the end of 1780, he had difficulty breathing and could not walk more than a short distance without stopping to rest.[177] He went to Brunswick on 28 January and spent the next few days at the club, visiting friends, and dining at court. On the evening of 3 February, he was taken ill with fluid on the lungs; scarcely able to breathe or speak, he was taken back to his apartment.[178] Next morning, he summoned the hairdresser and prepared to return to Wolfenbüttel, but a visitor noticed his weak condition and persuaded him to call a doctor. The court physician U. F. B. Brückmann, later assisted by his colleague J. C. Sommer, arrived and bled him, by which time Lessing was also coughing blood. His condition fluctuated over the following days. But he seemed to know that his end was near, for when the servant Mackwitz, whom he regularly hired in Brunswick to spare his own servant prolonged absences from Wolfenbüttel, was called away to assist at a funeral, Lessing urged him to be quick,

[172] Blanning (1997) 535. [173] Friedrich II, ed. Steinmetz, 82.
[174] Text in Oehlke I, 218; also in Dvoretzky I, 129 [175] A (2005) 538.
[176] LM XIV, 26; cf. Hettner II: Das Zeitalter Friedrichs des Grossen.
[177] KGL 235; A (2005) 537. [178] D 561–3.

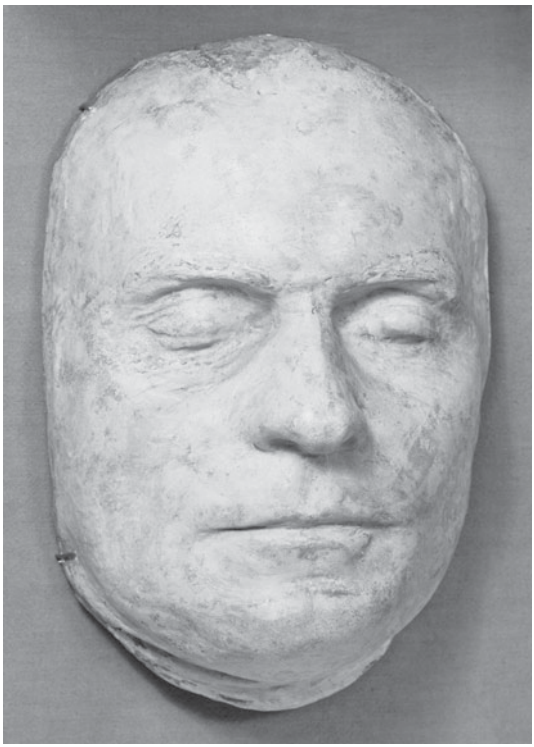

Fig. 44. Lessing's death mask.

as he would soon be required for another. Malchen had by this time joined him, various friends called to express their concern, and there were frequent enquiries about his condition from the duke, both duchesses, and Duke Ferdinand.[179]

Reports vary as to who exactly was with him when he died on the evening of 15 February. Both Daveson and Mackwitz claimed in later years that he died in their arms, but their accounts are suspect, for both were trying to impress other people. It would seem that, while Daveson was reading to him, he got out of bed, left the room, returned exhausted, gave the doctor his arm to be bled once more, and died peacefully at some time between 7 and 9 p.m.[180] Old before his time, he had just passed his fifty-second birthday. His last words, spoken to his distressed stepdaughter, were 'Calm down, Malchen'. His faith in providence (or chance, for he so often elides the difference between them) remained unshaken to the end: he took out a stake in the Brunswick lottery shortly before he died. Death overtook him before he could pay the agent (presumably Daveson), who was obliged to advance the money himself. As so often before, providence, or chance, was not on Lessing's side.

[179] D 571. [180] D 556 and 561.

A precise diagnosis of his final illness is impossible, despite the fact that an autopsy was performed by J. C. Sommer: medical terminology has changed since Lessing's time, symptoms were often confused with causes, and Lessing's brain was not examined. It is clear at least that, according to two analyses of Sommer's report by twentieth-century physicians, the main cause of death was coronary heart disease, with a final event of myocardial infarction.[181] The stresses and strains of the last ten years had plainly taken their toll.

Lessing's funeral took place on 20 February. The hearse, drawn by four horses and followed by four carriages and other mourners and pall-bearers on foot, proceeded from the Ägidienmarkt to the graveyard of the nearby Magnikirche.[182] Around twenty friends and wellwishers attended, including Kuntzsch, Eschenburg, Schmid, Ebert, Leisewitz, Sommer, Angott, and the court preacher H. J. C. Schulz. As custom dictated, no member of the ruling family was present. At the duke's behest, the costs of the funeral, which amounted to just over 154 talers, were advanced by the court and subsequently written off.

The small attendance at Lessing's funeral was probably due mainly to popular prejudice and the hostility of the Brunswick clergy. A baker is said to have closed his shop and shutters as a sign of his disapproval when the funeral procession went past.[183] Absurd rumours circulated, some to the effect that the doctors had deliberately allowed Lessing to die in order to rid the world of a wicked man.[184] Others claimed that he had committed suicide or been fetched by the devil. The most pernicious of such calumnies was an article in the *Kirchenbote für Religionsfreunde aller Kirchen*,[185] a periodical edited by the Zürich clergyman J. K. Pfenninger, a close friend and collaborator of Lavater.[186] The article, probably submitted through Lavater by a member of the Wolfenbüttel or Brunswick clergy, alleged that Lessing's mother had died of despair at her son's irreligious views, and that his sister had come to remonstrate with him, only to hear him prepare to die like Voltaire, denying his allegiance to any of the prevailing confessions. His fraternization with Jews, along with other malicious insinuations, was also held against him. Eschenburg wrote an indignant protest for inclusion in Nicolai's *Allgemeine Deutsche Bibliothek* in 1784, and a correspondence between Nicolai and Lavater ensued, in which Nicolai's robust defence of his friend's memory contrasts starkly with Lavater's sanctimonious evasions.[187] Only in the last issue of the *Kirchenbote*, at the end of 1785, did Pfenninger finally acknowledge that the offending article was unreliable.[188]

These rumours and calumnies were, however, an exception among the large number of tributes, in prose and verse, in private letters and public obituaries, to Lessing's memory.[189] The most impressive early tributes were those of the theatres.

[181] See Ebstein *passim* and Leibowicz *passim*. [182] A (2005) 547–8.
[183] Oehlke II, 577 ; this gesture might also, of course, be construed as a token of respect towards the funeral procession.
[184] See Rychner 205; cf. D 569–70. [185] A (2003) 350–2.
[186] See Altmann (1973) 734. [187] A (2003) 396–400.
[188] Altmann (1973) 734. [189] See A (2003) 350–96 and A (2005) 590–613.

In Berlin, Döbbelin organized a performance of *Emilia Galotti*, preceded by a memorial tableau, on 24 February, little more than a week after Lessing's death.[190] The tableau depicted a tomb, surmounted by a portrait of Lessing, around which members of the company, dressed in mourning, were gathered, while a choir sang funereal music. A verse tribute to Lessing by J. J. Engel was then recited, including the lines

> Had he not been a German, and had he been a Briton:
> His coffin would repose within the crypt of kings.

This performance was repeated, by popular request, three days later. In Hamburg, the authorities sought to ban the theatrical tribute planned by F. L. Schröder, until Schröder's spokesman replied that the cancellation, and the reasons advanced for it, would be reported in the press. The commemoration was similar to that in Berlin, and Schröder himself recited a memorial poem by J. C. Unzer. Having failed to prevent the performance, the authorities retaliated by banning any reference to it in the Hamburg newspapers.[191] At least one branch of the Prussian royal family saw fit to commemorate Lessing's death: on 11 March, the Margrave Friedrich Heinrich von Brandenburg-Schwedt commissioned a performance of *Emilia Galotti*, preceded by a more elaborate tableau than those in Berlin and Hamburg.[192] In a grove of oaks, with a temple of immortality, lamenting bards, allegorical statues of nature, poetry, tolerance, philosophy and other emblems of Enlightenment, Lessing's bust and funeral urn were ceremoniously crowned amidst clouds of incense. His association with Shakespeare was underlined by matching portraits on the curtain, with an inscription noting that both had died at the age of fifty-two. As in Berlin, the implicit criticism of German rulers, and of Frederick in particular, was underlined in the recited verses:

> Ah! had his fatherland been Albion,
> [...]
> How would his king a tear for him have shed
> And later shared his vault among the dead.

The recent publication of *De la littérature allemande* had not been overlooked.

More enduring memorials were much slower in coming. Lessing's old friend, the actor G. F. W. Grossmann, struggled in vain between 1788 and 1791 to persuade theatre directors throughout Germany to contribute towards a permanent monument, and when the appeal failed, he published his records in order to shame those who had refused to support it.[193] But thanks to the intervention of Count Julius von Soden, statesman and dramatist, and the Duke of Brunswick, the scheme finally came to fruition two months after Grossmann's death in 1796.[194] The result was the monument by F. W. E. Döll, erected outside the library in Wolfenbüttel and brought inside some years later; it stands today in the foyer of the present library.[195] One of

[190] Danzel/Guhrauer II, 581–2.
[191] A (2003) 367–70, 374–5, 377.
[192] Danzel/Guhrauer II, 582–3.
[193] Grossmann *passim* (Bibliog. 'Documents on L's Influence').
[194] Danzel/Guhrauer II, 628–9.
[195] See Raabe (1997) 69–70.

its four sides bears a relief of Lessing's head in profile, and another the masks of comedy and tragedy. (The latter were interpreted by the untutored as images of the good angel who guided Lessing in his early years and the devil who fetched him when he died.)[196] It is among the earliest public monuments erected in memory of a commoner in Germany. Brunswick followed in 1853 with the bronze statue by Ernst Rietschel which stands on the Lessingplatz close to where Lessing died. Other monuments were erected in Hamburg (1881) and Berlin (1890).

Soon after Lessing's death, the wranglings over his estate, and especially his unpaid debts, began in Brunswick. He had himself testified that he owed 1,160 talers to Eva's estate, blaming much of the shortfall in his own contribution to the household on the failure of his potentially lucrative agreement with Mannheim in 1777.[197] Over twenty other creditors presented claims for a total of 877 talers (less 146 talers for books bought for the library).[198] The auction of Lessing's personal effects, on the other hand, raised only 339 talers,[199] and of the 600 talers he had received in January 1781 as an advance on his salary, less than half was recovered from his estate.[200] He had repaid only some of the loan of 1,100 talers from Ernestine Reiske out of receipts from the sale of *Nathan the Wise*; but Ernestine, whose sole concern was to retrieve her letters to Lessing (which were duly returned to her and destroyed), did not press her claim.[201] An acrimonious dispute ensued between lawyers acting for Lessing's family and those representing Eva's children. The dispute was complicated by endless delays and by the fact that two different legislations (of Brunswick and Hamburg) were involved, and an agreement was finally signed in June 1791, over ten years after Lessing's death.[202] In short, Lessing's finances, in death as in life, were in a far from satisfactory state.

By far the most important part of Lessing's estate was, of course, his posthumous papers, most of which were placed under seal and handed over to Döring for safe keeping.[203] It is to Karl Lessing's credit that he finally managed to secure them towards the end of 1782,[204] at the price of agreeing to take responsibility for his brother's debts;[205] he thereby laid himself open to the ten-year legal dispute already mentioned. This service to his brother's memory was greatly enhanced by his publication of a large proportion of the posthumous material, and by his completion, in collaboration with Eschenburg and Nicolai, of the collected edition of Lessing's works which Lessing himself had begun and abandoned after the first volume appeared in 1771.[206] All this was accomplished by Karl Lessing in addition to his professional duties as mint director in Breslau. His achievement has never been properly recognized, perhaps because his own literary career was conspicuously inferior to that of his brother, and because his name was associated with Nicolai and late-Enlightenment rationalism. It is therefore appropriate that this account of early responses to Lessing's death should conclude with a brief appreciation of his work.

[196] Danzel/Guhrauer II, 629. [197] See A (2005) 465. [198] A (2005) 550–1.
[199] See Hagen 632. [200] A (2005) 548. [201] A (2003) 344 and 481.
[202] See G. Schulz (1975) 237–43. [203] See the list of items in A (2003) 341–2.
[204] Ibid. 346. [205] G. Schulz (1975) 232.
[206] See Seifert (L.-Bibliographie) 5–8, Nos 1–2.

Fig. 45. Karl Gotthelf Lessing.

After following in his elder brother's footsteps to St Afra and Leipzig university, Karl Lessing joined him in Berlin in 1765 and remained in regular contact with him thereafter. He idolized and imitated his brother, becoming a close associate of Mendelssohn, Nicolai, and Ramler, and seeking to embark on a literary career of his own.[207] He translated Henry Mackenzie's *The Man of Feeling* into German (1774), along with other works, and wrote eight comedies between 1768 and 1778, despite his brother's adverse criticism.[208] He abandoned his literary ambitions only after his brother's death, devoting himself thereafter to perpetuating the latter's memory. With Mendelssohn's help, he found employment as an assistant at the Berlin mint in 1770; he married Maria Friederike Voss, the daughter of Lessing's Berlin publisher, six years later. These two developments, enhanced by his promotion in 1779, left him in a financially secure position. Even in his move to Breslau, he was following in his brother's footsteps;[209] he made a point of visiting Lessing's old friend S. B. Klose, who told him a great deal about his brother's activities there in the early 1760s.

Some time after Mendelssohn died in 1786 without having written his planned account of Lessing's character, Karl Lessing conceived the idea of writing a biography of his brother.[210] It duly appeared in 1793. That same lack of originality which had led him to model his life and writings on those of his brother now stood him in good stead. For he knew more about Lessing's life as a whole than anyone else, and greatly extended his knowledge by evaluating Lessing's correspondence and

[207] See Wolff 32–81. [208] See L. to Karl Lessing, 6 July 1769.
[209] See Karl Lessing to L., 3 October 1777 and 17 July 1779.
[210] Karl Lessing (ed.), Gotthold Ephraim Lessings Leben, nebst seinem noch übrigen litterarischen Nachlass. Erster Theil, Berlin 1793; the edition cited in the present book is that by Otto F. Lachmann, Leipzig [1888].

interviewing various people, such as Richier de Louvain in Berlin and S. B. Klose in Breslau, who had known Lessing during the periods about which Karl Lessing was least informed. In writing the biography, he was guided by the same principle that underlay his decision to include even minor items, fragments, and failed projects in publishing his brother's posthumous writings: as he himself put it, 'the weaknesses of an excellent man may be just as instructive as his talents'.[211] Despite its gaps and not infrequent inaccuracies, this unvarnished account of Lessing's life and personality remains the most extensive source of its kind, to which all subsequent biographies, including the present one, are indebted. Karl Lessing's work as editor and biographer is the most substantial tribute to Lessing's memory by any of those who had known him.[212]

[211] A (2003) 347.

[212] Cf. Goethe's appreciative words in Dvoretzky I, 168–9.

22

Lessing's Reception: an Outline

The story of Lessing's reception is a long and complex one, and a great deal has been written about it. Excellent anthologies of contemporary comments on his works and personality are available,[1] as well as extensive collections of relevant material from the eighteenth century to the present.[2] Numerous books and articles have dealt with the reception of specific works, and with Lessing's influence on a wide range of groups and individuals—not just in Germany, but also in many other countries.[3] It is, of course, beyond the scope of a biography to examine this material in detail.[4] Attention has in any case already been given, in the present volume, to the reception of most of Lessing's individual works. The aim of this chapter is merely to supplement that coverage with a brief account of the main tendencies in the reception of his work and personality as a whole, with reference to a few representative figures.

For several reasons, it is difficult to generalize on this topic. In the first place, Lessing's support has been claimed for the most diverse, often mutually incompatible causes, from Prussian chauvinism to Marxism, from atheism to Lutheran orthodoxy and even Roman Catholicism.[5] Such diversity of opinion is encouraged by the sheer variety of his interests, and by the real or apparent inconsistencies between his own pronouncements, especially those on religion and philosophy. Besides, it has not always been recognized, as it generally is today, that no ideological programme or coherent system can be extracted from Lessing's work:[6] indeed he underlines this fact himself by repeatedly defining his own role as a writer in negative rather than positive terms, declaring not what he is, but what he is not, in order to avoid associating himself with any particular school or party.

To those who have recognized this fact, it is evident that much of Lessing's appeal lies not so much in what he says, but in the way in which he says it. And since so much of his writing is adversarial, his skill in polemics is often singled out for praise. Clearly, such praise implies a degree of sympathy with the ends to which this skill is applied—typically in order to unsettle received opinions and question hitherto unquestioned authority, very much in the spirit of Kant's celebrated answer (1784) to the question 'What is Enlightenment?' It follows from this that

[1] Braun; D (Daunicht); A (2003); A (2005); see also Bibliography 'Documents on L's Influence'.
[2] See esp. Steinmetz (ed.) (1969); Dvoretzky (1971–72).
[3] For example Göpfert (1981); Werner (1984a); LYB 32 (2000).
[4] For useful surveys see Barner et al. (1987) 344–427; Albrecht (1997) 105–23; Fick (2010) 2–55; Fischer/Fox 327–49.
[5] On the last of these see Cozzi (1960).
[6] Coulombeau (2005) is a rare exception.

criticisms of Lessing, and reservations on the part of those who genuinely admire him, often coincide with hostility towards the Enlightenment itself, both in the long aftermath of the French Revolution and again in more recent times: for those in need of reassurance, Lessing is not the most congenial company. In his conversations with Eckermann, Goethe draws attention to this subversive quality, contrasting it with his own more conciliatory approach:[7]

> In keeping with his polemical nature, Lessing is most at home in the realm of contradictions and doubts [...]. You will find that I myself am quite different: I have never gone in for contradictions; I have sought to resolve any doubts within myself, and have expressed only the results I have found.

Others, such as Friedrich Schlegel, praise Lessing's skill in rational disputation, but at the expense of his creative ability and poetic imagination. These and other reservations on the part of Lessing's critics, and their links with changing attitudes towards the Enlightenment, will be touched on in the following chronological survey.

The most memorable of the early tributes to Lessing is Herder's obituary of October 1781.[8] Among his contemporaries, Lessing had no more assiduous—though by no means uncritical—a reader than Herder, who repeatedly sought to emulate or supplement his works, from the *Letters on Literature* and *Laocoön* to the *Scattered Remarks on the Epigram* and Masonic dialogues. In keeping with this emphasis on Lessing's critical and theoretical writings, Herder's obituary specifies 'philosophical criticism' as his greatest strength, and has little to say on his dramas and other poetic works. The second aspect which he highlights is Lessing's search for truth, addressing him in his peroration as a 'noble truth-seeker, authority on truth, and champion of truth'. But as the last two terms indicate, Herder's view of truth lacks the sceptical component of Lessing's epistemology: as a theologian, he looks on truth as something in principle attainable. These two features of Herder's appreciation are echoed by many subsequent commentators.

Other discussions of Lessing in the 1780s are a mixture of unstinting admiration, and condemnation of his religious heterodoxy.[9] This, it should be remembered, was the era of the Wöllner Edict, which sought to eradicate religious dissent in Prussia, of the French Revolution, and of the acrimonious dispute between supporters and opponents of *Aufklärung*[10]—a controversy which polarized opinion along much the same lines as the simultaneous dispute over Lessing's spiritual legacy. But in the last two decades of the century, Lessing's writings were also studied with enthusiasm by members of the younger generation, several of whom, such as Friedrich Schlegel, Novalis, Fichte, and Hegel, were closely associated with the rise of Romanticism and German Idealism.[11] For the young Romantics in particular, Lessing's attraction lay precisely in his intellectual mobility, the provisionality and fragmentariness of his thought and expression, and his quest for an infinitely unattainable ideal. As the young Schlegel put it in 1797:[12]

[7] Conversation of 11 April 1827; cf. also that of 18 January 1825.
[8] Herder SWS XV, 486–512; also in Steinmetz (ed.) (1969) 123–34.
[9] See Albrecht (1991) *passim*. [10] See Schneiders *passim*.
[11] See Koepke *passim*. [12] Schlegel II, 101.

> Lessing was ultimately one of those *revolutionary* spirits who, like a sharp reducing agent, spread around them the most violent turbulence and powerful convulsions wherever they turn in the realm of opinion.

Novalis and Fichte were captivated by the visionary insights and philosophico-religious speculations of *The Education of the Human Race*, and the young Hegel by *Nathan the Wise* and its presentation of morality as the essence of practical religion.[13]

For all of these individuals, Lessing represented a progressive force in philosophy and religion; but in applying the terms 'revolution' and 'revolutionary' to him[14] and publishing his essay of 1797 on Lessing together with a sympathetic essay on the Mainz revolutionary Georg Forster, Schlegel also encouraged the view, later shared by numerous nineteenth-century liberals and socialists, that Lessing held equally progressive views in politics. The liberal literary historian Georg Gottfried Gervinus, for example, describes him in 1840 as a 'revolutionary genius'[15] (*Revolutionsgenie*), and Adolf Stahr, in his influential biography of 1859, declares 'Lessing [was] a republican, the first and also the best that Germany has had down to the present day'.[16] In his long essay of 1797, enlarged and completed in 1801, and in his editorial commentaries to an anthology of Lessing's writings in 1804, Schlegel probably did more to shape the image of Lessing, and of his poetic works in particular, than any other individual over the next two centuries.[17]

Like Herder, Schlegel contends that Lessing's greatest strength lies in his critical and philosophical abilities. But whereas Herder was content to play down Lessing's dramas and other poetic works without finding fault with them, Schlegel presents them (with the notable exception of *Nathan the Wise*) as distinctly inferior to his discursive writing, and especially to his polemical works. He goes so far as to claim that, in addition to its rhetorical vigour and stylistic brilliance, the *Anti-Goeze* is superior to all Lessing's other works 'in genius [*Genialität*], philosophy, even in the poetic spirit and ethical sublimity of particular passages'.[18] He then proceeds, with dire consequences for Lessing's reputation as a dramatist, to quote against him the famous passage from the *Hamburg Dramaturgy* in which, in order to dissociate himself from the self-proclaimed geniuses of the Storm and Stress movement, Lessing disclaims the title of genius and declares that his own literary works are essentially the product of conscious effort and critical reflection.[19] Schlegel presents this passage as an honest and accurate admission and the definitive text for everything that can be said about Lessing's poetic works.[20] He then selects *Emilia Galotti* as allegedly the most representative work of Lessing's poetic art, and famously condemns it as 'a great example of dramatic algebra' and 'a masterpiece of pure reason [*Verstand*], produced in sweat and pain'.[21] To single out this work, with its notoriously ambiguous motivation and contrived catastrophe, completed under extreme pressure and (as Schlegel himself noticed) leaving Lessing himself dissatisfied, as

[13] See Koepke 215–19. [14] Schlegel II, 101. [15] Steinmetz (ed.) (1969) 295.
[16] Ibid. 339. [17] Schlegel II, 100–25 and 397–419; III, 46–102.
[18] Ibid. II, 106. [19] See on this Strohschneider-Kohrs (1981) 15–17.
[20] Schlegel II, 114. [21] Ibid. II, 116.

his most characteristic product amounts to special pleading. Lessing wrote more comedies than tragedies, and even his tragedies have strong affinities with the comic form, so that a better case might well be made for *Minna von Barnhelm* as his most characteristic drama. Be that as it may, both Goethe and Heine had no hesitation in describing him as a genius.[22]

But although Schlegel's allegation stuck and the label 'unpoetic' became firmly attached to Lessing's literary works until well into the twentieth century, it does not represent Schlegel's final judgement on Lessing as a dramatist. On the contrary, he proceeds, in the same essay of 1797, to describe *Nathan the Wise* as 'the summit of Lessing's poetic genius', thereby according him the very title he had seemed to deny him a few pages earlier; *Emilia Galotti*, he adds, is merely 'the summit […] of his poetic art'.[23] This less than transparent distinction, together with Schlegel's earlier description of the *Anti-Goeze* as superior in 'genius' (*Genialität*) and 'poetic spirit' to all Lessing's other works, is no doubt part of his effort, as he moved towards his celebrated definition of 'romantic' poetry in the *Athenäum* of 1798, to break down traditional genre divisions and distinctions between poetry and other kinds of discourse; in a characteristic oxymoron, he accordingly describes *Nathan* as a product of 'the enthusiasm of pure reason'.[24]

One of Schlegel's aims is plainly to detach Lessing from the rationalism of Nicolai and the late Enlightenment,[25] and he undoubtedly succeeds in doing so. And while he does not attempt to turn him into a romantic poet, he is obviously at pains to stress Lessing's affinities with the romantic generation, and in particular with his own (i.e. Schlegel's) practice as a writer. For example, at a time when Schlegel was assiduously cultivating the fragment as a literary form, he maintains, less than convincingly, that the fragment is Lessing's most characteristic form of expression;[26] and in describing him as above all a critic rather than a poet,[27] he is likewise underlining what he sees as his own affinity with him. All this is put forward in a positive spirit, and there is no doubt that Schlegel's admiration for Lessing is genuine. In what is possibly a further attempt, immediately before his critique of *Emilia Galotti*, to take the sting out of his subsequent condemnation, he passes another judgement which would subsequently be echoed by numerous commentators, to the effect that the most admirable thing about Lessing was not so much his works, as his personal character: 'He himself was worth more than all his talents. His greatness lay in his individuality.'[28] But none of these attempts is really sufficient to neutralize his damning and unambiguous verdict on Lessing as a poet: 'I even *doubt* whether he was always a poet, indeed whether he had a poetic sense and feeling for art.'[29]

The overall effect of Schlegel's discussion of Lessing was to reaffirm the widespread belief, given currency earlier in the eighteenth century by Shaftesbury,

[22] See Goethe's conversation with Eckermann on 11 March 1828; also Heine, *Zur Religion und Philosophie in Deutschland* in Steinmetz (ed.) (1969) 255 and 263.
[23] Schlegel II, 118. [24] Ibid. II, 119. [25] See ibid. III, 66–70 and 90–2.
[26] Ibid. II, 398 and III, 68–9; cf. Pikulik (1993) *passim*. [27] Schlegel III, 51–60.
[28] Ibid. II, 112. [29] Ibid. II, 113; cf. Strohschneider-Kohrs (1981) 26–7.

Edward Young, and others, that poetic genius is a matter of natural and spontaneous creativity, in which rational reflection has no place. Shortly before Schlegel wrote, that belief had been given new currency by Schiller's definition of the 'naive' (i.e. spontaneous and unreflecting) poet: 'Every true genius must be naive, or it is not a genius.'[30] But Schiller had complemented this definition by that of the 'sentimental' poet, who achieves comparable success by means of conscious rational effort; he thereby provided a no less clear, and no less respectable, category in which writers like Lessing—and indeed Schiller himself—might be included. Schlegel, on the other hand, successively described Lessing as a unique and puzzling phenomenon, a 'mixture of literature, polemics, wit and philosophy',[31] a fragmentist, a combiner of reason and imagination (*Phantasie*),[32] and finally as a kind of prophet, pointing the way towards a revitalized Christianity to which Schlegel himself, in 1804, was struggling to find his way (he became a Roman Catholic in 1808). It is therefore hardly surprising that his unambiguous, and more forcefully expressed, classification of Lessing as a laborious reasoner, an 'unpoetic' poet, left a stronger impression on readers than his changing attempts, which shifted with his own current preoccupations, to define Lessing's more positive attributes. The fact that, even today, the traditional image of the genius as one who creates with quasi-somnambulistic ease is still by no means extinct, may help to explain the longevity of the cliché of Lessing as an 'unpoetic' poet.

Like many progressive-minded groups in the nineteenth century, most writers associated with the 'Young Germany' tendency of the 1830s, including Karl Gutzkow, Heinrich Laube, Ludolf Wienbarg, and Theodor Mundt, adopted Lessing as one of their heroes.[33] Seeing themselves as heirs of the Enlightenment, they claimed him as an ally against what they regarded as reactionary forces, especially the Romantic movement with its religious revival and love of the Middle Ages. Despite this fact, their view of Lessing was heavily influenced (without acknowledgement) by that of Friedrich Schlegel: for example, they invoke, like Schlegel, Lessing's vision of a third stage in the spiritual evolution of humanity, but present it not as a Christian revival, but as a secular emancipation from religion in general.[34] In a similar spirit, Wolfgang Menzel plays the libertarian Lessing off against the courtier Goethe as a servant of the oppressive old regime.[35]

Lessing's most enthusiastic admirer in the 1830s was Heinrich Heine, whose satirical flair, forceful rhetoric, utopian aspirations, and distrust of religious and political authority gave him a fair claim to regard himself as Lessing's successor. He describes Lessing as the writer to whom he is most attracted in the entire history of literature, and declares 'since Luther, Germany has not produced any greater and better man than Gotthold Ephraim Lessing'.[36] The parallel with Luther is not new: both Herder and Schlegel had already drawn it. But Heine combines it with that tripartite model of history to which so many admirers of Lessing appeal, and makes

[30] Schiller V, 704. [31] Schlegel II, 398. [32] Ibid. III, 85.
[33] See Hohendahl (1987) 83. [34] Ibid. 102–5.
[35] Steinmetz (ed.) (1969) 279; cf. Hohendahl (1987) 87.
[36] Steinmetz (ed.) (1969) 261–2.

Lessing the prophet of a third, post-religious age of Saint-Simonian character.[37] Heine's tributes to Lessing in *The Romantic School* and *On the History of Religion and Philosophy in Germany* are distinguished not so much by originality of substance as by their iconoclastic vigour and memorable metaphors, such as that of Lessing's forgotten adversaries, preserved like insects in the amber of his polemical writings.[38]

Like the writers of 'Young Germany' in the 1830s, the Young Hegelians of the 1840s saw themselves as heirs to the Enlightenment. As before, Lessing is one of those whose names are most often invoked, and both David Friedrich Strauss, who published further extracts from Reimarus's *Apologia*, and Bruno Bauer, who often refers to Lessing in his history of eighteenth-century culture, saw themselves as continuing Lessing's work of enlightenment.[39] In a ringing tribute to Lessing in his *History of Recent Poetry and Philosophy since Lessing* (1848), Arnold Ruge declares 'He has the same position in Germany as Voltaire has in France. He is the patriarch of German intellectual freedom.'[40] Similar notes are sounded from another quarter by Gervinus in his magisterial *History of German Poetry* (1835–42), but with a liberal and nationalistic bias. In his attempt to define the canon of German national literature, Gervinus elevates Lessing to a rank between Klopstock, Wieland, and the *Aufklärung* on the one hand, and the supreme achievement of Weimar classicism, soon to be celebrated throughout Germany in the Goethe and Schiller centenaries of 1849 and 1859, on the other.[41] With the honorific title of a 'pre-classicist' (*Vorklassiker*), Lessing became a kind of junior partner in the canonic trio of the classical age. He earned Gervinus' particular approval for having, in his opinion, forged that link between literature and the nation whose absence Gervinus lamented in Weimar classicism.

Gervinus' judgement confirmed the high literary status which Lessing had enjoyed since the beginning of the nineteenth century. He received a further accolade when the renowned philologist Karl Lachmann, pioneer of medieval German studies, prepared a historical-critical edition of his works (1838–40), the first such edition of any post-medieval German writer. These developments, together with the changing political climate, helped to enhance a tendency whose beginnings can already be detected in Schlegel, Heine, and many others in the first half of the nineteenth century, but which reached its strident climax with the unification of Germany in 1871 and the wave of German nationalism which accompanied it. In the course of these events, Lessing was transformed into a belligerent embodiment of chauvinism, and his supposed support for the German (and particularly Prussian) cause and opposition to French culture were presented as the most significant features of his works.

This process can be followed from the original and valid insight, voiced during Lessing's lifetime, that he did much to promote an indigenous literary culture and inspire a new generation of German writers with confidence in their own language

[37] See Grappin (1982) *passim*. [38] Steinmetz (ed.) (1969) 262–3.
[39] See Albrecht (1997) 111; also Bunzel 94. [40] See Bunzel 97.
[41] See Steinmetz (ed.) (1969) 293–6; Albrecht (1997) 112.

and traditions. But even then, especially during the Seven Years War, attempts were made by Gleim and others to recruit him to the cause of Prussian militarism, attempts which were successful enough to consolidate for over two hundred years the erroneous interpretation of *Philotas* as a glorification of patriotic heroism. Despite the fact that Lessing has hardly anything positive to say about German or Prussian patriotism—or indeed about Frederick the Great—his negative remarks on the excessive imitation of French literature by Gottsched and others are regularly cited, after the Wars of Liberation and the fall of Napoleon, as evidence of his supposed German nationalism and anti-French sentiments;[42] no mention is made of his admiration of Diderot, or his considerable debts to Molière, Rousseau, Du Bos and many other French writers. In 1841, the educationalist W. B. Mönnich describes him as 'a Frederick II for literature and true human life',[43] by which time Lessing's popular image bears little relation to what he actually wrote: he has become a mythical figure,[44] or in the words of Adolf Stahr's biography of 1859, 'the brilliant archetype of the German national spirit'.[45] The centenary of his death in 1881 further intensified this glorification, and in Julius Langbehn's notorious *Rembrandt as an Educator* (*Rembrandt als Erzieher*) of 1890, Lessing is recruited (not without difficulty) to the cause of nationalism and racism, in contradiction to everything he and the Enlightenment stood for.[46] By the time of the First World War, he has in turn become an aggressive militarist, or in the words of Theodor Kappstein, 'the armourer of the German spirit, who forged for us the weapons of progressive truth and national honour'.[47] It is a sobering thought that, throughout this period, Lessing was introduced to schoolchildren in terms such as these.

By this time, a fixed stock of images and clichés was applied to Lessing with monotonous regularity. That of the warlike hero, already present in Herder's obituary,[48] undergoes numerous, often mythological, variations, from Schlegel's 'Prometheus of German prose'[49] and Heine's (albeit ironic) 'literary Armenius'[50] to Wolfgang Menzel's (and Schlegel's) 'Hercules Musagetes'[51] and Erich Schmidt's 'hero and patron saint of intellectual freedom'.[52] The adjective 'manly' (*männlich*), likewise employed by Herder, takes on progressively more belligerent tones in the nineteenth century,[53] and in 1907, we are informed by Friedrich Lienhard that 'our manly, plain-speaking, combative and ever true Lessing' is an embodiment of 'good Prussianism'.[54] The image of Lessing as a 'fighter' (*Kämpfer*), the history of which has been traced by Jürgen Schröder, is even more frequent.[55]

It is a relief to note that not all of Lessing's admirers in the last decades of the nineteenth century were as bellicose as those just cited. The Masonic movement continued to look to him for inspiration,[56] and in a literary context, some of the theorists of Naturalism invoked his dramatic criticism as more relevant to their

[42] Cf. Steinmetz (ed.) (1969) 40–3. [43] Ibid. 301.
[44] See Barner et al. (1987) 392; Fick (2010) 4–5. [45] Stahr II, 354.
[46] Cf. Albrecht (1997) 115–16. [47] Steinmetz (ed.) (1969) 440.
[48] Herder SWS XV, 511; Steinmetz (ed.) (1969) 134. [49] Schlegel II, 92.
[50] Steinmetz (ed.) (1969) 260. [51] Ibid. 276 and 295. [52] E. Schmidt I, 2.
[53] Herder SWS XV, 502; Steinmetz (ed.) (1969) 300. [54] Steinmetz (ed.) (1969) 419.
[55] Schröder (1981). [56] See pp. 598–9 above.

aspirations than the example of Goethe or Schiller.[57] But the strongest opposition to the nationalist distortions came from the social democrat Franz Mehring, whose *Die Lessing-Legende* of 1893, a counterblast to the nationalists in general and to Erich Schmidt's biography (1884–92) in particular, interprets Lessing's life and achievement in the light of Marxist theory. Though little heeded at the time, Mehring's book successfully challenges the 'Lessing legend' of nationalism, declaring, for example, that it was inspired not by genuine insight but by the need to find a major figure in the cultural sphere to complement the cult of Frederick the Great and Prussian militarism.[58] Another service performed by Mehring was to draw attention to the hitherto neglected undertones of social and political criticism in Lessing's plays, a theme taken up over half century later by critics in the German Democratic Republic and in due course by West German scholarship.

In the early twentieth century and in the inter-war years, attempts were made to assimilate Lessing to the then fashionable 'irrationalism',[59] often closely linked to the cause of conservative nationalism. Lessing's views on metempsychosis are a frequent topic at this time,[60] and his simultaneous popularity in spiritualist circles has already been mentioned. Much of this literature is designed to dissociate him as far as possible from the Enlightenment, indeed to portray him as a 'vanquisher of the *Aufklärung*'.[61] Such tendencies were not difficult to reconcile with the Nazi ideology after 1933, although anti-semitism, already rampant in the later nineteenth century, had serious problems with Lessing. Eugen Dühring's solution, in 1881, of condemning him as a 'half-Jewish and a crony of the Jews'[62] was plainly unsatisfactory, not so much because it was based on the manifest falsehood that Lessing was of Jewish descent, but because Lessing was too useful an ally for the nationalists to dispense with. Nazism, however, was used to living with contradictions, and it proceeded to do so with Lessing. Though his works were downplayed and criticized in the early 1930s (the Nazis had already demonstrated against Manfred Noa's film version of *Nathan the Wise* in 1923), efforts were made in the second half of that decade to assimilate him to Nazi ideology.[63] *Nathan the Wise* was replaced on the German stage and in the school curriculum by Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice*,[64] Joseph Goebbels stressed the usefulness of the *Hamburg Dramaturgy* for the German film, and the neo-classicism of *Laocoön* and *How the Ancients Portrayed Death* was easily harmonized with Nazi art and the ideal of heroic death for the fatherland. Lessing's 'Nordic' qualities were emphasized, and *Minna von Barnhelm*, the most favoured of his dramas, was brought further into line in Hans Schweikart's film version, which set the action in, rather than after, the Seven Years War, and added Frederick the Great and Tellheim's comrade Marloff, shortly to die a heroic death, to the *dramatis personae*.[65]

[57] See Bernhardt *passim*.
[58] Mehring 35.
[59] See, for example, Koch (1928); Fick (2010) 5–7.
[60] See, for example, Kofink; Fittbogen; Krieck.
[61] See Barner et al. (1987) 404–5; Dvoretzky (1971–72) II, 430–2 No. 889.
[62] Steinmetz (ed.) (1969) 390–6.
[63] See Schmiesing (2005) *passim*.
[64] See Barner et al. (1987) 415.
[65] Schmiesing (2005) 268–75.

Fig. 46. Hamburg, Lessing monument, toppled by bomb damage in 1943.

One of the most conspicuous features of Lessing's reception from the beginning of the nineteenth century to the middle of the twentieth is its repetitiveness: much of it is more a reception of earlier recipients than of Lessing and his works. Another recurrent feature is the frequency with which he is pressed into the service of political ends; and however much the shades of political opinion have varied, the same concern with an idealized image of Lessing's personality rather than critical scrutiny of his works is prevalent throughout. Among the most welcome changes in the second half of the twentieth century, especially in West Germany, is the greater interest and variety of approach in Lessing studies. Another equally welcome development is the internationalization of Lessing scholarship, with greatly increased contributions from other European countries and from North America. Unfortunately, no adequate survey of this reception exists,[66] and the following account is necessarily selective and impressionistic.

In the Federal Republic, all of Lessing's major dramas regained their place on the German stage soon after the end of the Second World War. As in most areas of literary studies, political interpretations of his work went out of fashion for a time, and formal and aesthetic questions received greater attention;[67] freed from the pressures of a totalitarian regime, criticism developed in multiple directions, making any generalization difficult. Sociological and political criticism, strongly influenced by the Frankfurt School, became prominent towards the end of the 1960s and throughout the 1970s. These developments coincided with a general revival of

[66] For the years 1932–1962 see Guthke (1965); for the years 1945–2010 see Fick (2010) 7–13.
[67] See Barner et al. (1987) 420.

interest in Enlightenment studies, and increased attention was given to Lessing's place in the German and European Enlightenment. This change in emphasis did greater justice to the historical context of Lessing's life and works than the many politically inspired simplifications discussed earlier in this chapter. But it in turn generated its own variety of simplifications, as Lessing's reputation rose, and later fell, with that of the Enlightenment as a whole, which has come under attack in more recent times by various post-modernist thinkers.

Other important developments since 1960 were the foundation in 1966 of the Lessing Society, based in Cincinnati in the USA but international in character; its journal, the *Lessing Yearbook*, first published in 1969, has been a focal point of Lessing studies ever since. The Lessing-Akademie, founded in 1971 in Wolfenbüttel, has also initiated numerous conferences and publications on Lessing, while the Lessing-Museum in Kamenz, first established in 1929, has long performed a similar function in East Germany; it is also home to a 'Centre for the Study of Lessing's Reception' ('Arbeitsstelle für Lessing-Rezeption'). The anniversary years of 1979 and 1981 generated many conferences and collections of essays in Germany and abroad, in which the international character of Lessing's work continued to receive attention.[68]

For ideological and political reasons, Lessing's reception in the German Democratic Republic had a greater degree of unity, indeed of uniformity, than in the West. Mehring's insights of 1893 at last came into their own in the work of Paul Rilla, Georg Lukács, and others in Eastern Europe from the late 1940s onwards. Like Mehring himself, many such writers took over the 'Kämpfer' motif of nationalistic scholarship, applying it not to international conflicts but to the class struggle of Marxist theory; in this context, Lessing features as a champion of the rising bourgeoisie and an opponent of feudal oppression. Apart from the fact that the bourgeoisie in Marx's sense hardly existed in most of the German states during Lessing's lifetime, the main problem with this interpretation is that, while Lessing does indeed support the oppressed, the oppressed whom he supports are not a particular socio-economic class, but marginalized individuals and disadvantaged minorities of every description, irrespective of the social class (if any) to which they belong. In their efforts to accommodate Lessing in a Marxist framework, such interpretations also ignore or play down the sceptical, relativistic side of his thought, presenting his supposed Spinozism, for instance, as a direct anticipation of dialectical materialism.[69] Nevertheless, much useful work was done in the GDR on the social background to Lessing's writings, as well as on his reception: the monumental Lessing bibliographies of Siegfried Seifert (1973) and Doris Kuhles (1988) are indispensable aids to all areas of research on Lessing up to 1985. (Some idea of the exponential growth of Lessing studies since 1970 can be gained from the fact that Kuhles's bibliography, which covers works by and on Lessing published between 1971 and 1985, is well over half as long as that of Seifert, which covers all such

[68] On the journalistic reception see Bohnen (1982).
[69] See, for example, Liepert (1979) and Teller (1989) *passim*.

works from the 1740s to 1970.) From the mid-1970s, Lessing scholarship in Eastern Europe progressively freed itself from the party line and became more diversified and receptive to the insights of international scholarship.[70]

On Lessing's reception outside Germany, little can or need be said here.[71] There is little unity in the many publications on his reception by diverse countries and individuals, and it would exceed the scope of this biography to document even a representative selection of them—not to mention the translations of various works by Lessing into at least forty other languages. Suffice it to say that studies on his reception abroad, many of them limited to specific aspects of his work or to specific individuals, exist for well over twenty countries.[72] Beyond the material they explicitly discuss, most of these studies also throw into relief the vast areas in which further research remains to be done.

In 1971, Peter Demetz published a thought-provoking article entitled 'Lessing's Lack of Influence' ('Die Folgenlosigkeit Lessings'), in which he argued, with specific reference to aesthetics (*Laocoön*), the philosophy of religion, and drama, that a 'dearth of influence' separates us from Lessing.[73] This thesis, which had some plausibility at the time, has since been refuted in its wider application by the ponderous bibliographies of Seifert and Kuhles, and in its specific reference by subsequent scholarship on the three areas in question, much of which has been referred to in the course of this book. It is true that Lessing formulated no systematic doctrines in either philosophy or theology. But paradoxically, this served rather to increase than to diminish his influence by making it possible for numerous groups and individuals to claim him as a precursor of their own (often mutually exclusive) positions. Lessing's *fermenta cognitionis* have amply fulfilled the purpose for which they were intended.

[70] See Albrecht (1997) 122.
[71] See LYB 32 (2000), which is exclusively devoted to this issue.
[72] See the Lessing bibliographies of Seifert 746–53 and Kuhles 387–96; also LYB 32 (2000).
[73] Demetz 727.

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Conclusion

As the work of a brilliant intellect, major dramatist, and founding father of modern German literature, Lessing's writings are self-evidently still of interest. But in contrast to earlier periods, he is now no longer automatically cited as one whose basic attitudes have exemplary significance for the present. Some have indeed alleged, in recent times, that he has nothing significant to offer in the way of challenge, guidance, or reassurance.[1] Such allegations can no longer simply be dismissed as absurd. Although most Germans still know something of his work—if only through classroom acquaintance with *Nathan the Wise*—Lessing no longer encounters that universal familiarity and respect he once enjoyed among the educated populace.

There are, of course, good reasons for this change. Many of the problems to which he addressed himself are now of purely academic or antiquarian interest. More significantly, many of the causes for which he so tenaciously fought have long since been victorious and become part of the cultural and political establishment. This is true of his campaign in Germany for a national theatre, and for greater recognition of Shakespeare and native literary traditions; it is also true, throughout the western liberal democracies, of religious toleration, Jewish emancipation, and basic human rights. Like Voltaire in France, he is in these respects a victim of his own success. As Botho Strauss put it in his address on accepting the Lessing Prize of the city of Hamburg in 2001:[2]

> What a sad and unjust fate for such a man to survive only as the most politically correct of the German classical writers! As someone who can never be pushed off his pedestal, who cannot be 'reworked', reinterpreted, rediscovered or further developed.

Enshrined as they are in our national constitutions, many of the values Lessing fought for are now all too easily taken for granted. But we take them for granted at our peril, and we must constantly remind ourselves that the majority of mankind does not yet enjoy them. What we cannot so readily share today is his faith in the ultimate triumph of reason and rational moral principles in human history. Few would now endorse the optimism with which, in the *Hamburg Dramaturgy*, he dismissed the crimes of Weisse's (and Shakespeare's) Richard III as uncharacteristic of humanity:[3]

[1] See Botho Strauss, the subtitle of whose article ('Why the great Lessing can no longer help us') conveys its substance; cf. Albrecht (1997) 121 and Bohnen (1982) 180.
[2] B. Strauss 52. [3] LM X, 121.

> It is therefore highly necessary that we should be reminded as little as possible of the confusing examples of such terrible undeserved calamities. Off the stage with them! Out, if it were possible, of all books with them!

Such changes in perception have much to do with changing attitudes towards the Enlightenment since the middle of the twentieth century. The enthusiasm with which that movement was restored to favour, after long neglect, between the late 1960s and the 1980s presupposed a degree of sympathy with its belief in progress, though not necessarily in the unqualified form it assumed for some eighteenth-century optimists. For various reasons, including the decline and fall of communism (itself a product of the Enlightenment) in Europe, the Enlightenment, as popularly understood, fell out of favour in the last two decades of the twentieth century. Its legacy was further undermined by postmodernism, with its rejection of the *grands récits* of the past and its disillusion in the capacity of reason to transform our lot for the better.[4] In this climate, Lessing's thought seemed to have less to offer than, for example, the (by no means consistent) cultural relativism of Herder or the epistemological relativism of Nietzsche.

These factors may help to explain why Botho Strauss used his Hamburg speech to declare that Lessing, and the Enlightenment at large, are no longer relevant to our present needs: 'We no longer need any enlightenment [*Aufklärung*]. We are enlightened to the point of internal derangement.'[5] In this profoundly pessimistic address, Strauss adds that we, in the western liberal democracies, have exchanged the Enlightenment's belief in future fulfilment for an obsession with externalities, a present-oriented hedonism, and the doctrine (presumably Francis Fukuyama's) of the 'end of history'. But history invariably buries its undertakers; and only five days after the publication of Strauss's address on 6 September 2001, it showed once again that it was still very much alive. The liberal democracies now faced far more serious problems than those of coming to terms with their own supposedly final state or finding new ways to satisfy their hedonistic impulses—problems which, in the history of German literature, no one had addressed more memorably and constructively than Lessing.

Strauss's attack on the Enlightenment is cited here not because it says anything new, but because it is typical of many similar attacks over the last two decades. Most of them reiterate views expressed over half a century ago in Horkheimer's and Adorno's *Dialectics of Enlightenment*, perhaps reinforced by Heidegger's critique of modern technology and Foucault's association of the Enlightenment with oppressive mechanisms of social control. The term *Aufklärung*, in most accounts of this kind, bears little relation to history or to the work of specific eighteenth-century thinkers.[6] For Horkheimer and Adorno, for example, it is rather a term of abuse, encapsulating the origin and essence of every evil in modern society, from fascism and militarism to commercialism, dehumanization, and stultification of the masses; its tool is 'instrumental reason', and its aim the domination of nature, and ultimately of human society, with the help of science and technology. Significantly, the

[4] Cf. Sauder (2007) 15–16. [5] B. Strauss 52. [6] See Darnton 12–19; also Mason xxxi.

only eighteenth-century figure discussed at length in *Dialectics of Enlightenment* is the grossly unrepresentative Marquis de Sade.[7] There are, it must be said, no distortions of this magnitude in Strauss's address. But there is the same tendency to sweeping generalization. Lessing is here associated with one of the Enlightenment thinkers with whom he had least in common, namely Condorcet, although there is no hint in his works of Condorcet's 'social mathematics' and belief in salvation through the progress of science and technology. The progress which Lessing envisaged, with many qualifications and caveats, in *The Education of the Human Race* was that of speculative reason and practical morality, and the tripartite scheme in which he presents it has far less in common with Condorcet than with Hegel and German Idealism.

Generalizations of this kind run the risk of replacing the simplifications and clichés of earlier times with new ones. Lessing is certainly an Enlightenment thinker. In his critical activity, his questioning of received opinion and dogmatic authority, he conforms very well to Kant's definition of enlightenment as an ongoing process of free enquiry. His belief in tolerance, freedom of conscience, of speech, and of the press, and in equal rights for all is likewise in keeping with Kant's views, as well as those of Voltaire, Diderot, and other leaders of the Enlightenment. But none of these qualities, admirable and important as they are, fully captures what is most valuable and distinctive about him.

There is, for one thing, the scepticism which qualifies and tempers so many of his pronouncements in the last decade of his life. In his last major works in particular, the opinions he expresses are emphatically provisional. This sceptical tendency, nourished in his early years by intensive study of Pierre Bayle, is deepened and diversified by his equally intensive studies of Leibniz in the early 1770s. It is not enough, he now concludes, simply to doubt whatever truth-claims we encounter. We must also attempt to assess their relative degree of truth by examining the perspective from which they are made and comparing it with other possible perspectives, including our own. There is, in other words, no absolute test of the truth or falsehood of any opinion, not least in religion and metaphysics. The most reliable tests we can apply are that of continued rational debate (as in *Ernst and Falk*) or, less directly, the pragmatic test of moral conduct (as in *Nathan the Wise*), whereby the beliefs of those who do most to enhance the lives of others are likely to be more valid—or at any rate more constructive—than the beliefs of those who fail to do so.

None of these views is unique or original to Lessing. What is original (or, bearing in mind the present context, relatively original) is the manner in which he puts them across. It is often observed that he encourages his readers to think for themselves. This is true of most of his writings from his earliest years onwards, and it is familiar enough in the century of the Enlightenment, inasmuch as received opinions are often questioned and new ones put forward in their stead. But in his later writings, the dynamics of his arguments become increasingly subtle, and his real opinions—if any of them can be so described—increasingly elusive. To read these

[7] Horkheimer/Adorno 93–127; cf. Darnton 15–17.

works (for example, most of his late theological writings, including *The Education of the Human Race*) is to note his often vehemently stated opinions and to agree or disagree with them, only to discover, on reading further and more closely, that they may not be his true opinions after all, and that some of the opinions he had seemed to reject reappear disconcertingly in new and apparently plausible guises. The opinions in question include not only those which are rationally formulated, but also those based on pre-rational feeling or faith, which may, in keeping with Leibniz's theory of knowledge, eventually prove capable of rational formulation. The effect of all this is to make us continually question not only what we initially thought were his opinions, but our own opinions as well, until we begin to realize that, from different perspectives, some or all of them, though at first sight apparently incompatible, may at least be relatively true. It follows that to take for granted what appear to be his firmly held opinions and to ignore the manner in which he relativizes them is simply to reveal that we have not read him properly. In employing this strategy, Lessing's aim is not to sow universal doubt in the manner of the ancient sceptics, but to prevent his opinions—or, indeed, those of anyone else—from claiming more than provisional validity and hardening into dogma, the basis of all intolerant and tyrannical authority. This strategy is nowhere more aptly described than in the address of another recipient of the Hamburg Lessing Prize, namely Hannah Arendt:[8]

> As far as Lessing is concerned, he delighted in what has troubled philosophers so much since time immemorial, namely the fact that truth, as soon as it is given expression, is at once transformed into one opinion among others, to be challenged, reformulated, and made an object of discussion like all other such objects. Not just the insight that there cannot be a single truth in human affairs, but the joy that it does not exist and that the endless discussion between people will never end as long as people exist is what distinguishes Lessing's greatness.

Few writers have used such techniques so memorably and consistently. Some of them can be found in Plato's Socratic dialogues, but on a firmer cognitive basis and with fewer ambiguities and unresolved tensions. Analogous effects are achieved by Diderot, for example in the medium of the prose narrative (notably in *Jacques le Fataliste*), or again by Kafka, but in a surreal and subjective world which defies rather than conforms to our customary standards of credibility.

It is probably easier now than ever before to appreciate this aspect of Lessing's work, for it is congenial to the present philosophical climate, in which various forms of relativism compete for attention. In all varieties of relativism, a balance must be struck between, on the one hand, the extreme view that, since all opinions are equally true (or equally false), there are no grounds for preferring any one of them, and on the other, the view that at least some opinions have objective (i.e. absolute) validity. This latter view is inherently inconsistent, unless some objective criterion can be found to separate the true from the false without requiring a further criterion to demonstrate its own validity, and so on in an infinite regress. But

[8] Arendt 48; reprinted in Steinmetz (ed.) (1969) 491.

the alternative position of extreme relativism is equally inconsistent, inasmuch as it presupposes that the doctrine of relativism itself has absolute rather than relative validity. Faced with these aporias, the relativist can either opt for resignation and abdication of responsibility, or fall back, as Lessing did, on pluralism and (at least provisional) respect for inherited or pragmatic values. But even among postmodernist thinkers, from Michel Foucault and Jean-François Lyotard to Luce Irigaray and Fredric Jameson, there are few who do not unequivocally share Lessing's belief in individual freedom, equal rights, and resistance to arbitrary authority. These values are the bedrock of western society and a legacy of the Enlightenment, which even its detractors, with few exceptions, continue to respect.

This aspect of Lessing's thought is closely linked to another of his basic convictions, his passionate belief in the autonomy of the individual. In this case again, his belief is by no means original, but the degree to which he supports it and puts it into practice is quite exceptional in the age and country he lived in. In one of his earliest philosophical statements, *The Christianity of Reason* (1753), he defines the basic law for moral beings (his equivalent of Kant's categorical imperative) as follows: '*act in accordance with your individual perfections*.'[9] The word 'individual' is particularly significant. Most eighteenth-century philosophers are chiefly concerned with what they describe as 'human nature', i.e. that which is common to all human beings. Lessing is more concerned with what makes them different. He certainly believes that each individual should develop his or her powers as fully as possible. But he does not believe that this development can or should take the same form for everyone; he believes rather that all individuals should be free to develop their distinct aspirations, however humble, unfashionable, eccentric, or heretical these may be, provided they do not infringe the freedom of others to do likewise. In this respect he is emphatically a pluralist. This is also the root of that 'persistent non-conformism' which Ernst Gombrich detected in him,[10] and of his association with and championship of disadvantaged minorities and outsiders. It is also the source of that blunt directness he reserves for those, such as Samuel Gotthold Lange, who sought to patronize or denigrate him: 'Well that's just the way I am. What I have to say to people I say to them in their faces, even if they explode as a result.'[11] His fierce defence of his own autonomy and that of others is no doubt one of the reasons why, from the late eighteenth to the first half of the twentieth century, he was so often described as a 'hero' of one sort or another. Few would apply that unfashionable term to him now, and he certainly would not have approved of it. But the quality in question can still elicit our sympathy and admiration today.

[9] LM XIV, 178. [10] Gombrich 134. [11] LM V, 225.

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Quotations from Lessing's works are taken, wherever possible, from the Sämtliche Schriften, edited by Karl Lachmann and Franz Muncker, which remains the most comprehensive edition to date (see 'LM' below). For material not included in this edition, several more recent editions (notably the Werke und Briefe, edited by Wilfried Barner and others; see 'B' below) are also cited, as are numerous editions by various hands of Lessing's individual works and translations (also listed below). Letters to and from Lessing are identified only by author, recipient, and date, for although the most complete edition of the correspondence is that in the last three volumes of Barner's edition (vols XI/1, XI/2, and XII), this procedure should enable readers to consult the letters in whatever edition they may be using. There are two exceptions to this rule. Firstly, since the official letters which Lessing composed between 1760 and 1764 on behalf of his employer, General Tauentzien, do not appear elsewhere, references to them (in Chapter 9) are to vol. XVIII of the Lachmann-Muncker edition. And secondly, in Chapter 6 of this work, which contains a detailed discussion of the correspondence on tragedy between Lessing, Mendelssohn, and Nicolai (1756–7), references to these letters (some of which are extremely long) are to Vol. XI/1 of the Barner edition: for although these letters also appear in Vol. III, the complete correspondence in the last three volumes of that edition is likely to be more widely available than the earlier volumes.

As to eighteenth-century currencies, I have not attempted to convert these into their modern equivalents, since such equivalents are never precise and often arbitrary. For the sake of simplicity and internal comparability, I have wherever possible expressed such figures in terms of the most commonly cited unit of currency, namely the (Reichs-) taler, using the following rates of conversion in use at the time: one taler equals one and a half gulden (or florins); one ducat equals three talers; one pistole (or Louis d'or or Friedrich d'or) equals five talers.

Finally, the bibliography to this work does not include all the publications I have consulted, let alone the vast corpus of secondary literature on Lessing. In the interest of economy, I have included (with rare exceptions) only those items explicitly mentioned in the text or notes.

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