Theodor Lessing: Between Jewish Self-Hatred and Zionism

BY LAWRENCE BARON

There seem to have been two Theodor Lessings. The first was the self-hating Jewish writer who mocked the piety and poverty of Eastern European Jews and the materialism and rationalism of Western European Jews. Philosophically he belonged, as Hans Mayer has noted, to the ranks of "counter-Enlightenment" thinkers whose *völkisch* critique of modern society paved the way for Nazi ideology.[1] The second Theodor Lessing was the courageous Jewish professor who was hounded out of his teaching position by right-wing students protesting against his opposition to the election of Hindenburg as President of the Weimar Republic. Politically he belonged to the Left and championed the causes of communism, feminism and pacifism. Confronted with the intensification of antisemitism and the rise of Hitler, Lessing advocated Zionism as an antidote for the self-hatred which wracked assimilated German Jews like himself who had internalised the antisemitic attitudes of their host society. His outspoken Jewish nationalism and condemnations of Nazism ultimately led to his death in 1933 when he was tracked down and murdered in Czechoslovakia by Nazi assassins.

To explain this dichotomy in Lessing's Jewish identity, some historians have divided Lessing's career into two distinct stages. According to their interpretation, Lessing initially "strutted about as a German super-patriot" and "exercised his wit and scholarship in furthering anti-Jewish feeling". Supposedly he embraced Zionism only after the First World War had shattered his faith in Germany and the Balfour Declaration had kindled his hopes for a Jewish renaissance.[2] Such a scenario implicitly assumes that Lessing could not have been a detractor and defender of the Jews simultaneously.

Yet Lessing's derogatory characterisations of European Jewry reflected the same ideological criteria he employed to justify his Zionism. Indeed, he dated his

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[1]Hans Mayer, *Aussenseiter*, Frankfurt a. Main 1975, pp. 414–421. For a similar view of Lessing, see Kurt Hiller, *Köpfe und Tröpfe. Profile aus einem Vierteljahrhundert*, Hamburg–Stuttgart 1950, pp. 301–307 and Georg Lukacs, *Die Zerstörung der Vernunft*, Neuwied–Berlin 1960, pp. 16, 458. After this article was completed I learned of an American dissertation which perceptively captures the tensions in Lessing's Jewish identity. See Herbert Poetzl, *Confrontation with Modernity. Theodor Lessing's Critique of German Culture*, Ph.D. Diss., University of Massachusetts/Amherst 1978.

[2]Solomon Liptzin, *Germany's Stepchildren*, Philadelphia 1944, pp. 165–169; Peter Gay, *Freud, Jews and Other Germans. Masters and Victims in Modernist Culture*, New York 1978, pp. 197–198.

entry into the Zionist movement back to 1900[3] which was a decade before he penned his most derisive articles about Jews, namely, his descriptive sketches of the Galician Jews he met on his travels[4] and his satirical polemic against the egoistic intellectualism of the Jewish literary critic Samuel Lublinski.[5] Lessing never saw any discrepancy between his commitment to Zionism and his disparagement of assimilated and unassimilated Jews alike. His pronounced cultural pessimism bridged the ostensible contradictions between the two stances. The exposure of the degeneration of Jews who were either demoralised or co-opted by their host societies was part of his broader attack on the material and philosophical foundations of modern civilisation. By highlighting the corruption of Diaspora Jewry, Lessing also demonstrated the need for its regeneration in a Jewish state. The plight of the Jews, he reasoned, had taught the Zionists to recognise the evils of contemporary culture which would be eliminated in the society they planned to found. Ashamed of his fellow Jews and, unconsciously, of himself, Lessing managed to retain a sense of honour by projecting his romantic ideals on to a future generation of Jews who would build a model organic community which respected the value of both humanity and nature.

Lessing's rejection of his Jewish origins was to a great extent a rejection of his parents. Born on 8th February 1872, Lessing always felt that he was the unwanted child of an unhappy marriage. His father Sigmund, a Hanover physician, married Adele Ahrweiler, the daughter of a Düsseldorf banker, for her sizeable dowry, even though he had once tried to break their engagement and marry her younger sister. After Adele was already pregnant with Theodor, Sigmund was notified that her father was unable to pay the full amount of the dowry due to business difficulties. This prompted Sigmund to demand an annulment of the marriage and to propose again to Adele's sister. Eventually he resigned himself to remaining with Adele. When Theodor grew older and learned about this sordid episode, he became convinced that his father had hated him even before he was born.[6]

In return Lessing hated both his father and mother. Sigmund required complete obedience and attention from the members of his family. Sickly, withdrawn, listless, and apparently untalented, Lessing could never fulfil his father's expectations at home and at school. Sigmund interpreted his son's behaviour as recalcitrance which he duly punished with either verbal or physical thrashings.[7]

[3]Theodor Lessing, *Einmal und nie wieder* (hereafter cited as *Einmal*), Gütersloh 1969, p. 397. *Einmal und nie wieder* was originally published in Prague in 1935. The 1969 edition also contains Lessing's 'Gerichtstag über mich selbst', which first appeared in *Junge Menschen*, VI (October 1925), No. 10, pp. 238–244 and his essay from 1928, 'Meine Beziehung zu Ludwig Klages'.

[4]Theodor Lessing, 'Eindrücke aus Galizien', in *Allgemeine Zeitung des Judentums*, LXXIII (3rd, 17th, 24th, 31st December 1909), Nos. 49, 51, 52, 53, pp. 587, 610–611, 620–622, 634–635.

[5]Theodor Lessing, 'Samuel zieht die Bilanz', in *Die Schaubühne*, VI (20th January 1910), No. 3, pp. 65–73.

[6]Lessing, *Einmal*, pp. 50–59.

[7]*Ibid.*, pp. 60–72, 81–126. Ekkehard Hieronimus has suggested that Lessing may have exaggerated the horrors of his childhood and the faults of his parents. Lessing's daughter Judith claims that she has Adele's memoirs which confirm Lessing's version. See Ekkehard Hieronimus, *Theodor Lessing. Otto Meyerhof. Leonard Nelson. Bedeutende Juden in Niedersachsen*, Göttingen 1964, pp. 11–12 and Judith Lessing, 'Gefühlsmord. Theodor Lessing (ermordet 30. August 1933 von den Nazis). Ein Protest

Adele, on the other hand, accepted her subservient position so long as she could continue to live in the pampered style to which she was accustomed. Satisfied with the comfort, possessions and social status which Sigmund provided her, Adele ignored his faults as a husband and father. Thus, in Lessing's opinion, she indulged and deluded herself at the expense of her children.[8] In his autobiography he bitterly confessed:

> "However conscientiously I try to reconstruct my childhood: my aversion to my mother was just as primal and instinctive as my hatred of my father."[9]

The domineering egoism and crass materialism of both his parents epitomised the traits which Lessing subsequently denounced as pernicious features of the Occidental mentality which most European Jews had adopted. As he put it,

> "It was money, power, and success which they courted and wanted and which was the most decisive factor in life to them. In this, my parents' home was no different from millions of other homes in this period."[10]

Lessing's contempt for his parents and the qualities they symbolised was one source of his self-hatred. With Lessing's case in mind, Freud explained the etiology of self-hatred in these terms:

> "It may arise because one hates one's father intensely and yet identifies with him as well. This may produce the self-hatred and the conspicuous split in personality."[11]

Lessing admitted that this dilemma tormented him:

> "Can a plant disown the soil out of which it grew? Am I myself not the fruit of people and conditions which I hate and want to destroy? Am I not handicapped, inferior, ill-bred, botched?"[12]

Although his vices were not the ones he ascribed to his parents, it must have distressed Lessing psychologically to denigrate the appearance and intellectuality of Jewish scholars and publicists whose attributes he shared.[13]

Nevertheless, Lessing's early disavowal of his Jewish background cannot be seen solely as a revolt against his parents. It also represented the logical continuation of their attempt to assimilate. In separate accounts Lessing and his sister Sophie agreed that their parents had failed to instil them with any religious or ethnic identity.[14] Indeed, Lessing claimed that he did not even realise that he

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gegen seine zweite Ermordung durch die Kommunisten', 1969 (unpublished manuscript in possession of Manfred Küchler, Hanover), pp. 3–4.

[8]Lessing, *Einmal*, pp. 73–78; Theodor Lessing, 'Der Dialog', 1912 (unpublished manuscript in possession of Ruth Gorny, Hanover), pp. 10–12.

[9]Lessing, *Einmal*, p. 101. This translation is from Frederic V. Grunfeld, *Prophets Without Honor. A Background to Freud, Kafka, Einstein and Their World*, New York 1979, p. 79.

[10]Lessing, *Einmal*, p. 76.

[11]Quoted in a letter from Sigmund Freud to Kurt Hiller, 9th February 1936, which appears in Hiller, *op. cit.*, p. 308. Also see Ernest Jones, *The Life and Work of Sigmund Freud*, New York 1955, vol. 3, pp. 159–160.

[12]Lessing, *Einmal*, pp. 77–78, 113–114. Also see Theodor Lessing, *Das Recht des Lebens*, Munich 1896, pp. 62–63.

[13]Grunfeld, *op. cit.*, pp. 83–85; Gay, *op. cit.*, p. 198.

[14]Lessing, *Einmal*, pp. 71–72, 112, 396–397; LBIA (Leo Baeck Institute Archives, New York) Theodor Lessing Archive, Sophie Leffmann, 'Deposition', 1959, pp. 1–2.

was Jewish until he encountered antisemitism at school. At first he joined his classmates in taunting other Jewish pupils until one of them told him, 'You're one yourself." Shocked by this insult, he ran to his mother for assurance that it was not true. Her method of assuaging his insecurity merely heightened it:

> "She laughed and gave me an evasive answer. But once, on the street, she showed me a man wearing a kaftan and said, 'There goes a Jew.' I gathered from the remark that we were not 'real' Jews. But the word itself took on a sinister meaning for me. Since I had childishly absorbed all the patriotic and religious prejudices of the school, and there was nothing to counterbalance them at home, I became convinced that being Jewish was something evil."[15]

Thereafter the young Lessing pathetically tried to dissociate himself from the onus of being Jewish by belittling Jews in his poems and diary. To be sure, his hatred of his parents and his Jewish descent reinforced each other.[16] However, although he argued with his father about almost everything else, Lessing's conversion to Protestantism in 1895 did not become a bone of contention between the two.[17]

Another contributing factor to Lessing's acute feelings of inferiority was his dismal school record. The teachers he describes in his autobiography were every bit as tyrannical and insensitive to him as his father. Uninterested in most subjects and uninspired by the pedantic way in which they were taught, Lessing constantly daydreamed in class instead of paying attention. Despite additional tutoring, his marks went from bad to worse. In 1885 he failed the *Untertertia* and had to repeat it the following year.[18] The principal of his school wrote to Sigmund Lessing in 1888 and advised him to withdraw Theodor from school and provide him with vocational training. That year the boy briefly worked at a bank and then attended an agricultural school for prospective Jewish settlers in Palestine.[19] He disliked both activities and returned to school to face several more years of humiliation. It was no wonder that Lessing later referred to himself as the "class dunce" who had remained "curiously ineducable" for fourteen years.[20]

What saved Lessing from succumbing to despair was the intense friendship he developed with Ludwig Klages whom he met when he repeated the *Untertertia*. Both boys were budding poets who found little understanding for their artistic inclinations from their parents. Sharing a sophomoric penchant to philosophise about the meaning of the universe and an adolescent rebelliousness against bourgeois values, the two became inseparable. They apotheosised each other, com-

[15]Lessing, *Einmal*, p. 112. This translation is from Grunfeld, *op. cit.*, pp. 80–81.

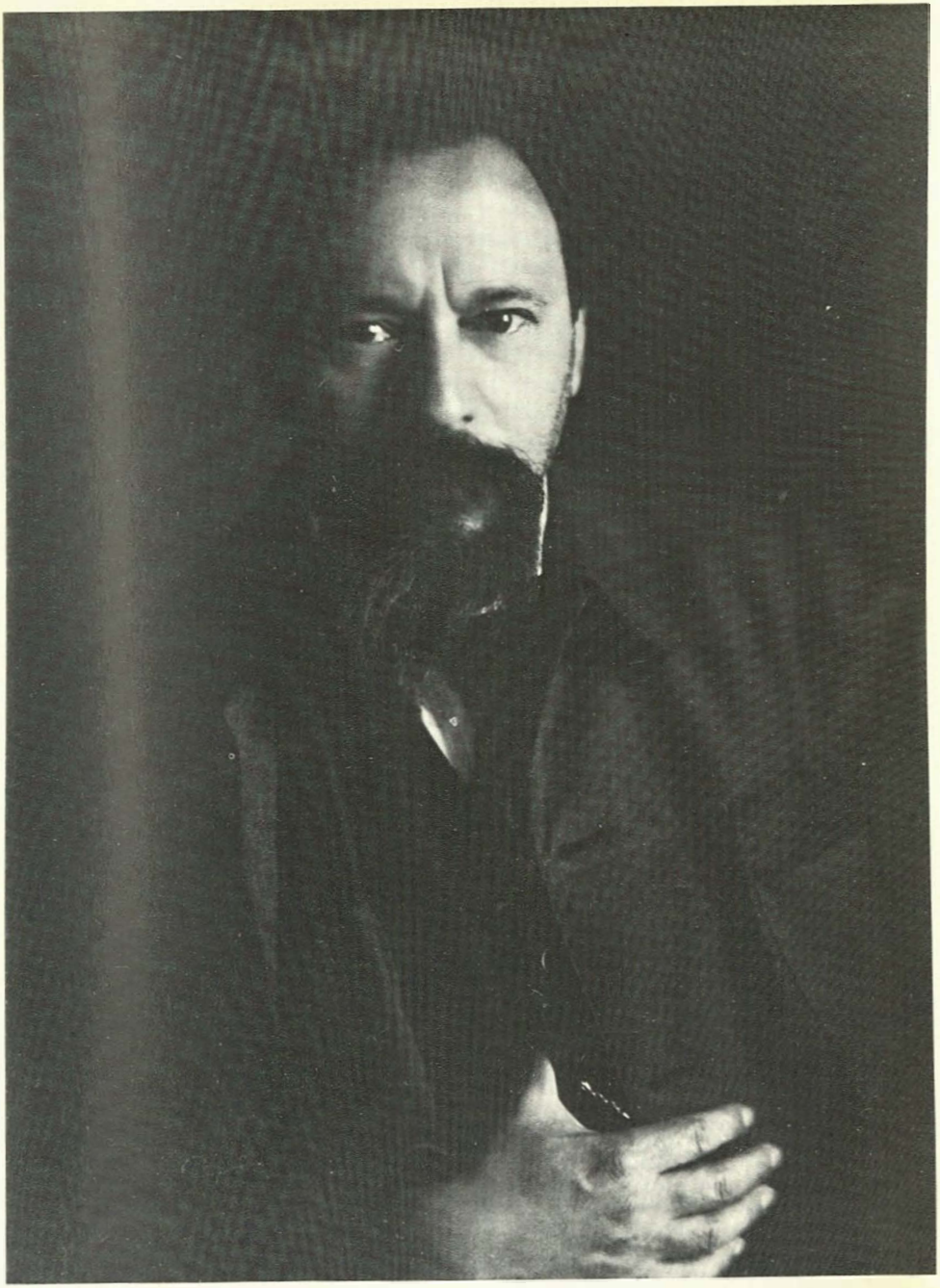
[16]Lessing, *Einmal*, pp. 113–114.

[17]Staatsbibliothek preussischer Kulturbesitz, West Berlin – Brümmer Nachlass, Briefe II, Theodor Lessing to Franz Brümmer, 27th October 1896. Although in other places, Lessing dates his conversion back to 1893, I have used the 1895 date which he himself used when his memory was fresher. See Lessing, *Einmal*, p. 397 and Hieronimus, *op. cit.*, p. 20.

[18]Lessing, *Einmal*, pp. 104–126, 135–150, 162–171.

[19]*Ibid.*, pp. 186–194; LBIA – Theodor Lessing Archive, Sophie Leffman, *op. cit.*, pp. 1–2. The agricultural school was located in Ahlem outside Hanover. Moritz Simon, a friend of Lessing's father, was its founder. Although Lessing showed no interest in this project, he later applauded its aims after he became a Zionist. See Theodor Lessing, 'Die Landerziehungsheime', in *Das Buch dem Kinde*, ed. Adele Schreiber, Leipzig–Berlin 1907, vol. 2, p. 191.

[20]Lessing, *Einmal*, p. 105.



THEODOR LESSING
(1872–1933)

By courtesy of Mrs. Ruth Gorny, Hanover

paring themselves to Schiller and Goethe, Mozart and Beethoven, and Nietzsche and Schopenhauer. Lessing sought refuge from his "two hells", home and school, in his relationship with Klages. At the end of his life, he fondly remembered the critical role Klages had played in his boyhood: "At thirteen years old you were my mentor, leader, disciple, brother, companion, and everything that I needed."[21]

Through his perpetual exchange of ideas with Klages, Lessing learned to channel his alienation from his family, religion and education into a vitalistic and idealistic critique of contemporary German society. Voraciously devouring the works of the prophets and pundits of the *Jahrhundertwende*, the two precocious adolescents derived the theoretical foundations of the philosophical systems which they would formulate as adults.[22] Both subsequently wrote scathing indictments of modern man's rational consciousness in books that even bore similar titles: Klages's *Der Geist als Widersacher der Seele* (1929) and Lessing's *Der Untergang der Erde am Geist* (1924). Indeed, it has become a topic of controversy whether Klages influenced Lessing or vice versa.[23] This is really a moot point since both of them were attuned to the same philosophical trends in their formative years.[24]

Their common enthusiasm for Wilhelm Jordan's works significantly deepened Lessing's identity crisis. Jordan was a nationalistic author whose best known book was a modern rendering of the *Nibelungenlied*. He glorified the unselfish devotion, valour and physical perfection of the ancient Germanic heroes to inspire his fellow German citizens to cultivate these characteristics and place them in the service of the Second *Reich*.[25] This theme struck a responsive chord in Klages and Lessing who aspired to deliver Germany from the clutches of commercialism and individualism.[26] Unfortunately, Lessing doubted whether he as a Jew could measure up to the lofty standards set by Jordan. Klages, who had picked up the antisemitic biases of his father, only made matters worse by counselling Lessing to struggle "against his inborn racial soul".[27] Lessing anguished over his inadequacies:

[21] *Ibid.*, pp. 172–187; Hans Eggert Schröder, *Ludwig Klages. Die Geschichte seines Lebens. Die Jugend*, Bonn 1966, pp. 51–54.

[22] Lessing, *Einmal*, pp. 174–183. This constant exchange of ideas is evident in the correspondence between Lessing and Klages from 1889 to 1898 which can be found in the Ludwig Klages Archiv of the Deutsches Literaturarchiv/Schiller-Nationalmuseum, Marbach a. N. Also see Ludwig Klages, *Rhythmen und Runen. Nachlass*, Leipzig 1944, pp. 492–508.

[23] Lessing, *Einmal*, pp. 415–447; Hans Eggert Schröder, *Theodor Lessings autobiographische Schriften*, Bonn 1970, pp. 145–161. Schröder accuses Lessing of plagiarising from Klages's works. Schröder's objectivity, as a close disciple of Ludwig Klages, has been challenged by Manfred Küchler, *Die literarische und philosophische Entwicklung Theodor Lessings*, Prüfungsarbeit, Technische Hochschule–Hannover, 1976, pp. 67–75. Schröder's charge that Lessing paraphrased entire paragraphs from Klages's work without ever citing Klages is untrue. See Theodor Lessing, *Die verfluchte Kultur. Gedanken über den Gegensatz von Leben und Geist*, Munich 1921, p. 10.

[24] Ekkehard Hieronimus, *Theodor Lessing Eine Lebensskizze*, Hanover 1972, pp. 16–17; Gerd-Klaus Kaltenbrunner, 'Vom Weltschmerz des technischen Zeitalters. Ludwig Klages und Theodor Lessing', in *Tribüne. Zeitschrift zum Verständnis des Judentums*, VIII (1969), No. 29, pp. 3126–3146; Hans Dieter Huesgen, *Geschichtsphilosophie und Kulturkritik Theodor Lessings*, Phil. Dissertation, Mainz 1961, pp. 59–63.

[25] Eugen Zabel, 'Wilhelm Jordan. Ein literarisches Porträt', in *Westermann's Illustrierte Deutsche Monatshefte*, LII (June 1882), No. 309, pp. 332–347.

[26] Lessing, *Einmal*, pp. 200–205; Schröder, *Ludwig Klages*, pp. 54–61.

[27] Lessing, *Einmal*, pp. 186–189.

> "How would I survive in this Aryan world of joyful muscular Siegfrieds with their healthy and crude ideals of strength and blood? I considered myself the offspring of the most disgusting mercenary marriage. I hated both parents and the graves of my ancestors."[28]

Lessing countered his anxieties with a fervent idealism which motivated him to discipline his body and mind to overcome his tainted past.[29]

Thus, Lessing in the 1890s went through a phase of what he described as "exclusive devotion to *Deutschtum* and exclusive defensiveness against *Judentum*".[30] Trying to impress the few figures whom he deemed true German patriots, he corresponded with Jordan[31] and momentarily ran away from home intent on persuading Maximilian Harden to give him a job.[32] In 1892 Lessing delivered a stirring speech at a public commemoration of the Battle of Sedan.[33] About the same time he finished his first novel, *Komödie*, which he published in 1894 under the pseudonym Theodor Lensing. The book is prefaced with a poem pledging that the author's love for Germany is not diminished by his criticism of her present course.[34] *Komödie* depicts the destruction of a German forest by industrialisation and the demoralisation of its stalwart keeper and his family by the machinations of all those associated with the industrialists and financiers responsible for the project. In a lengthy chapter Lessing focuses on how the Jewish factory owners, Cahn, Cohn and Goldstücker, callously exploit their workers.[35] Lessing culminated his endeavours to maximise his Germanness and minimise his Jewishness by converting in 1895. When he wrote an autobiographical sketch of himself for a literary lexicon the next year, he made a point of noting that he had severed his ties to Judaism.[36]

Lessing's strenuous efforts to gain acceptance as a German rather than as a Jew did not succeed. As a medical student from 1893 on, he patiently endured the antisemitic slurs directed at him by some of his professors and fellow students.[37] In 1894 he transferred to the university in Munich to be closer to Klages. By this time Klages had joined Stefan George's circle of disciples and had immersed himself in its aestheticism and elitism. Lessing failed to ingratiate himself with Klages's new colleagues and found George insufferably arrogant.

[28]*Ibid.*, p. 203.

[29]*Ibid.*, pp. 204–205. Also see Theodor Lessing, 'Wilhelm Jordan', *Der Vortrupp. Deutsche Zeitschrift für das Menschentum unsrer Zeit*, VIII (1st February 1919), No. 3, pp. 84–87.

[30]Theodor Lessing, *Jüdischer Selbsthass*, Berlin 1930, p. 40; Theodor Lessing, 'Jüdisches Schicksal', in *Der Jude*, (1927), *Sonderheft* No. 3, p. 12.

[31]The correspondence between Lessing and Jordan spanning the years 1890 to 1898 is located in the Wilhelm Jordan *Nachlass* of the Stadt-und Universitätsbibliothek, Frankfurt a. Main.

[32]Lessing, *Einmal*, pp. 223–234; Lessing, *Jüdischer Selbsthass*, pp. 167–207. Lessing was never an "associate" of Maximilian Harden as stated in Liptzin, *op. cit.*, p. 165. When both Lessing and Harden were under attack by German nationalists during the twenties, Lessing renewed his contacts with Harden. Lessing's letters to Harden and Harden's wife from 1924 and 1925 are in the Maximilian Harden *Nachlass* of the Bundesarchiv, Koblenz.

[33]Lessing, *Einmal*, pp. 393–394.

[34]Theodor Lensing, *Komödie*, Leipzig 1894, pp. II–III.

[35]*Ibid.*, pp. 28–54.

[36]Staatsbibliothek Preussischer Kulturbesitz, West Berlin – Brümmer Nachlass, Briefe II, Theodor Lessing to Franz Brümmer, 27th October 1896. Also see Franz Brümmer, *Lexikon der deutschen Dichter und Prosaisten*, Leipzig 1913, p. 240.

[37]Lessing, *Einmal*, pp. 278–280, 397.

Embarrassed by Lessing's conduct, Klages became less tolerant of his sardonic wit and moral righteousness and more critical of his style of writing.[38] Although George did not discriminate against Jews,[39] Klages grew increasingly antisemitic under the influence of one of George's followers, Alfred Schuler. Together they exalted the instinctual spontaneity and amorality of primitive peoples and castigated the inhibiting rational and ethical consciousness of modern men. In this Manichean ideology, the former exemplified Aryan virtues, the latter Jewish vices.[40] Klages's formulation of such a doctrine did not bode well for the future of his already strained friendship with Lessing. Despite Lessing's incessant attempts to revive the relationship, Klages ended it with a polite, but cold letter in 1899. Lessing tried once again to salvage the friendship, but Klages rebuffed him with this parting insult: "You are a disgusting, pushy Jew!"[41] Lessing, though embittered by this traumatic incident, still hoped for a reconciliation with Klages for the rest of his life.[42]

In order to understand the evolution of his Jewish identity following the rift with Klages, it is necessary to discuss Lessing's *Philosophie der Not* (perhaps best translated as the philosophy of misery and exigency)[43] and his application of it in support of the women's movement because his analysis of feminism served as the prototype of his rationale for Zionism.

Lessing had developed an embryonic version of the *Philosophie der Not* before 1900. Sensitised to suffering by his troubled childhood and his clinical contact with the sick and dying,[44] Lessing was attracted to the tragic vision of life pre-

[38]*Ibid.*, pp. 287–320. Compare the account in Schröder, *Ludwig Klages*, pp. 125–203 and Schröder, *Theodor Lessings . . . Schriften*, pp. 106–129.

[39]Ernest Kahn, 'Jews in the Stefan George Circle', in *LBI Year Book VIII* (1963), pp. 171–183; Wera Lewin, 'Die Bedeutung des Stefan George-Kreises für die deutsch-jüdische Geistesgeschichte', in *LBI Year Book VIII* (1963), pp. 184–213.

[40]Martin Green, *The Von Richthofen Sisters*, New York 1974, pp. 73–80; Roderich Huch, *Alfred Schuler, Ludwig Klages, Stefan George*, Amsterdam 1973, pp. 5–19; Franziska Gräfin zu Reventlow, *Herrn Dames Aufzeichnungen*, in *Franziska Gräfin zu Reventlow, Romane*, ed. Else Reventlow, Munich–Vienna 1976, pp. 153–160, 239–250; Franz Schonauer, *Stefan George in Selbstzeugnissen und Bilddokumenten*, Hamburg 1960, pp. 74–89; Friedrich Wolters, *Stefan George und die Blätter für die Kunst*, Berlin 1930, pp. 240–275; Schröder, *Ludwig Klages*, pp. 178–190.

[41]Lessing, *Einmal*, pp. 373–388, 415–424. Compare to Schröder, *Ludwig Klages*, pp. 204–206 and Schröder, *Theodor Lessings . . . Schriften*, pp. 76–129. Schröder claims that Klages was not antisemitic and broke with Lessing only because he could not tolerate Lessing's annoying personality. This flies in the face of abundant evidence that Klages was an antisemite and left George's circle because George refused to ban Jews from it. For information on Klages's antisemitism, see the sources cited in note 40. For Klages's characterisation of Lessing, see Ludwig Klages, 'Ahasver. Ein Dichter', in *Ludwig Klages Sämtliche Werke*, ed. Ernst Frauchiger *et al.*, Bonn 1974, vol. 3, pp. 605–609, 770–772.

[42]Lessing, *Einmal*, p. 384. In an interview conducted on 22nd June 1979 in Hanover, Ruth Gorny, Lessing's daughter, told me that when they were on vacation in Switzerland during the twenties, her father arranged to walk by the house where Klages was staying in the hope of seeing his old friend. There are other examples of Lessing's attempts to rekindle his friendship with Klages. See the Deutsches Literaturarchiv/Schiller-Nationalmuseum, Marbach a. N.-Ludwig Klages Archiv: Theodor Lessing, *Die Saat im Schnee*, Berlin 1908. The front page of this book carries the following inscription by Lessing which is dated 4th April 1908: "Ludwig Klages in unveränderter, unveränderlicher Gesinnung."

[43]Huesgens, *op. cit.*, pp. 4–6; Küchler, *op. cit.*, pp. 29–32. The *Theorie der Not* is already evident in Lensing, *Komödie*, pp. I, 38–40, 44–45.

[44]Lessing, *Einmal*, pp. 112–113, 280–284, 343, 370–371, 400. Lessing's sympathy for the poor and oppressed was also a product of his own poverty after the death of his maternal grandfather in 1899 who had helped support him financially after Sigmund Lessing died in 1896.

sented in the works of the historian Johannes Scherr and the philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer. Scherr taught Lessing that history was a meaningless chronicle of human agony and cruelty inflicted by individuals and states in their quest for power.[45] From Schopenhauer, Lessing not only appropriated the pessimistic belief in a blindly destructive universal Will, but also the idea of transcending personal pain and desire through sympathy with and the alleviation of the suffering of all living creatures.[46] He synthesised these insights with his medical knowledge about how the human body sustained itself by a constant process of detoxifying its own wastes. Consciousness, Lessing maintained, was engendered by an analogous need to counteract or justify the agony of existence.[47] Although this analysis could easily lead to a Nietzschean demystification and repudiation of altruism,[48] Lessing viewed it as an ethical imperative for helping the poor and oppressed:

> "The last decree of my wisdom reads: 'Reduce misery!' Thus the circle was closed. For in my youth I recognised that misery is the mainspring of life, and, when I was older, I recognised that it is our duty to abolish it."[49]

Lessing's growing sense of moral responsibility eventually led him into the women's movement. Originally he had been ambivalent in his relationships with women. On the one hand, he treated them as playthings to gratify his ego. On the other hand, he felt guilty for exploiting them because he had hated his father for acting in the same way and his mother for tolerating it.[50] Lessing's early fictional works illustrate this contradiction. In the plays *Das Recht des Lebens* (1896) and *Christus und Venus* (1897), he portrayed admirable women who struggled to liberate themselves from repressive marriages.[51] In contrast *Weiber* (1897), his collection of satiric poems about the "fairer sex", ridiculed stereotypical female foibles.[52] Maria Stach von Goltzheim, an ardent feminist who had been impressed by Lessing's previous writings, sent him a letter chiding him for his betrayal of his commitment to women's rights. This rebuke pricked his con-

[45]Lessing, *Einmal*, pp. 205–210; Theodor Lessing, 'Johannes Scherr', in *Die Aktion*, VII (6th October 1917), pp. 540–542; Heinrich Reintjes, 'Johannes Scherr', *Geist und Zeit*, (1958), No. 1, pp. 153–157. Scherr's lasting impact on Lessing is evident in Lessing's critique of historical determinism. See Theodor Lessing, *Geschichte als Sinngebung des Sinnlosen, oder Die Geburt der Geschichte aus dem Mythos*, Munich 1919.

[46]Lessing, *Einmal*, p. 239; Theodor Lessing, *Schopenhauer. Wagner. Nietzsche. Einführung in moderne deutsche Philosophie*, Munich 1906, pp. 5–208; Theodor Lessing, 'Schopenhauer gegen Kant', in *Jahrbuch der Schopenhauer Gesellschaft*, XII (1923/1925), pp. 3–25; Huesgens, *op. cit.*, pp. 43–47; Küchler, *op. cit.*, pp. 29–32.

[47]Lessing, *Einmal*, pp. 248–252; Lessing, *Schopenhauer. Wagner. Nietzsche*, pp. 84–132; Theodor Lessing, *Philosophie als Tat*, Göttingen 1914, pp. 96–101.

[48]Lessing, *Schopenhauer. Wagner. Nietzsche*, pp. 322–329, 408–466; Theodor Lessing, *Nietzsche*, Berlin 1926; Huesgens, *op. cit.*, pp. 47–51; Küchler, *op. cit.*, pp. 41–42. Although Lessing admired Nietzsche's anti-positivism and insights into the genesis of morality, he opposed the idea of an *Übermensch* who was beyond good and evil.

[49]Lessing, *Einmal*, p. 252.

[50]*Ibid.*, pp. 71–74, 89, 330–341, 396; Lessing, 'Der Dialog', pp. 10–13.

[51]Lessing, *Das Recht des Lebens*; Theodor Lessing, 'Christus und Venus', in *Die Gesellschaft*, 13/III (1897), pp. 346–389.

[52]Theodor Lessing, *Weiber! 301 Stossseufzer über das 'schönere' Geschlecht*, Berlin 1897.

science.[53] Within a year, Lessing was defending feminist authors and their cause.[54] Captivated by the earnestness and beauty of the woman who had reminded him of his moral mission, he married Maria in 1900.[55]

By 1901 Lessing had completed the preliminary draft of a book which was published nine years later under the title *Weib, Frau, Dame*.[56] Therein Lessing utilised the principles of the *Philosophie der Not* to argue that women by nature were more ethical and intellectual than men because their minds had to offset the excruciating pangs of giving birth. Patriarchal dominance, he asserted, had forced women to sublimate and squander these qualities in mastering the "petty and degrading tricks and arts of slavishness".[57] Denied the opportunity to achieve their full potential, most women restrict themselves to one of the following roles: *Weib*, the sensual sex object, *Frau*, the moralistic wife and mother, and *Dame*, the sophisticated and charming lady of the salon. In the era of capitalism, the *Frau* was often forced to abandon her traditional role to work in a factory or in a business.[58] Lessing concluded that only the abolition of political, socio-economic and personal inequalities between the sexes would allow women, as well as men, to be truly themselves.[59] This egalitarian solution also reflected Lessing's involvement in the socialist movement from 1904.[60]

The reasoning behind Lessing's advocacy of women's emancipation paralleled his justification for becoming a Zionist. Lessing abandoned his attempt to conceal his Jewishness when Maria's parents disinherited her for dishonouring her family's aristocratic lineage by marrying a Jew. It became a matter of honour for Lessing to affirm his Jewish heritage in response to this affront, which hurt him even more in the wake of being spurned by Klages:

> "In 1900 I heard about Zionism for the first time and stumbled on to a self-proclaimed principle for cultivating esteem. I certainly was not mistaken about my essentially Germanic character, but I sensed that it was in bad taste to want to be German; I definitely felt that people excluded and ostracised me."[61]

[53]Lessing, *Einmal*, p. 368; Franziska Gräfin zu Reventlow, *Gesammelte Werke in einem Bande*, ed. Else Reventlow, Munich 1925, p. 207.

[54]Theodor Lessing, 'Zwei Münchener Dichterinnen. Ernst Rosmer und Helene Böhlau', in *Die Gesellschaft*, 14/III (1898), pp. 16–28; Theodor Lessing, 'Frauenfrage', in *Die Gesellschaft*, 16/III (1900), No. 6, pp. 386–387; Theodor Lessing, 'Zur Frauenfrage', *Die Gesellschaft*, 17/III (1901), No. 3/4, p. 260.

[55]Lessing, *Einmal*, pp. 368–372, 382. Maria left Lessing in 1904 to have an affair with Bruno Frank, who was one of Lessing's students at that time. See Lessing, 'Der Dialog' and Küchler, *op. cit.*, pp. 7–9.

[56]HUJ-MBA (Hebrew University, Jerusalem – Martin Buber Archive): MS Varia 350/1/416, Theodor Lessing to Martin Buber, 27th June 1901.

[57]Theodor Lessing, *Weib, Frau, Dame. Ein Essay*, Munich 1910, pp. 11–17. Also see Lessing, *Schopenhauer. Wagner. Nietzsche*, pp. 329–335.

[58]Lessing, *Weib, Frau, Dame*, pp. 9–37, 47–89.

[59]*Ibid.*, pp. 91–122.

[60]Lessing, *Einmal*, p. 402.

[61]*Ibid.*, pp. 396–397. In another account Lessing claims that he was twenty-four years old when he returned to Judaism via Zionism, but this seems unlikely since it predates his rejection by Klages and Maria's parents. See Theodor Lessing, *Deutschland und seine Juden*, Prague 1933, p. 3. Thomas Mann later confirmed that Lessing considered himself a Zionist in the period in which he lived in Munich before 1902. See Thomas Mann, 'Der Doktor Lessing', in *Die Literatur: Monatsschrift für Literatur Freunde*, XII (1909/1910), p. 824. Another indication that Lessing had started to identify with the Jewish condition at this time is contained in his poem 'Alter Judenfriedhof', which he claimed was written in 1899. See Theodor Lessing, *Die Saat im Schnee*, p.60.

In a letter to Martin Buber the next year, Lessing announced that his forthcoming book about the women's movement would contain a section dealing with the "essence and calling of the Jewish race".[62] In *Weib, Frau, Dame* and several other of his pre-war writings, Lessing compared the oppression of Jews and women, noting that both had evolved a keen intellectuality to compensate for their "history of dependency and suffering". Zionism for Jews, like feminism for women, offered its supporters the chance to discover their real identity, rather than always having to react to the hardships and expectations imposed on them by a hostile environment.[63]

Lessing's reorientation towards his Jewish identity entailed a shift in emphasis, and not a radical revision of his earlier ideas. He still inveighed against the forces and doctrines of modernisation which he blamed for the decimation of the flora and fauna of the earth and the exploitation of the workers of the world. He continued to excoriate European Jews for their emulation of these prevailing modes of business and thought. The difference now was that Lessing viewed such undesirable behaviour on the part of Jews as a response to their perennial persecution. To ward off threats and obstacles to their psychological and physical well-being, the Jews, according to Lessing, developed many abhorrent traits which had obscured their genuine merits. As late as 1925, Lessing described himself as an "unrelenting scourger of Jewish degeneration".[64] By hammering away at the faults of Diaspora Jewry, he aimed at persuading it to heal its body and soul through the establishment of a Jewish homeland.

Lessing's series of newspaper articles on the Galician Jews must be understood within the above context. On one level it reads like an antisemitic tract which merely reiterates common stereotypes of Eastern European Jews. Lessing starts his account of his trip to Poland in 1906 with a story about how the first Jewish innkeeper whom he met cheated him. He portrays the dwellers of the *shtetl* as repulsively dirty and frail. He scorns their fanatical piety and pilpulistic quibbling over the most trifling matters. He unmasks the hypocrisy of devout communal leaders who are so obsessed with money that they even pander for their daughters.[65] The tone of the series was sufficiently negative to prompt a number of antisemitic newspapers to reprint excerpts of it. Binjamin Segel dashed off a booklet censuring Lessing for providing grist for the propaganda of anti-Jewish demagogues.[66]

[62]HUJ-MBA: MS Varia 350/1/416, Lessing to Buber, 27th June 1901. Lessing told Buber that he had already collected much material on the Jewish psyche, but did not have time to write a book on it because he wanted to articulate his philosophical system first.

[63]Lessing, *Weib, Frau, Dame*, pp. 14, 62–65. Also see Theodor Lessing, *Theater Seele. Studie über Bühnenaesthetik und Schauspielkunst*, Berlin 1907, pp. 35–40; Theodor Lessing, 'Jude und Kunstleistung', in *Die Schaubühne*, VIII (29th August 1912), No. 34/35, pp. 149–150; Lessing, *Philosophie der Tat*, pp. 311–317; Lessing, *Schopenhauer. Wagner. Nietzsche*, pp. 329–335. During Lessing's time, the comparison between women and Jews usually carried negative connotations as in Otto Weininger's *Geschlecht und Charakter*, Vienna 1903, but a number of studies have appeared in the last thirty years which compare the treatment and responses of Jews and women as oppressed groups. See Helen Mayer Hacker, 'Women as a Minority Group', in *Social Forces*, XXX (October 1951); Mayer, *op. cit.*; Julius Carlebach, 'The Forgotten Connection. Women and Jews in the Conflict between Enlightenment and Romanticism', in *LBI Year Book XXIV* (1979), pp. 107–138.

[64]Lessing, *Einmal*, p. 397.

[65]Lessing, 'Eindrücke aus Galizien'.

[66]Binjamin Segel, *Die Entdeckungsreise des Herrn Dr. Theodor Lessing zu den Ostjuden*, Lemberg 1910.

Lessing, however, replied that his purpose had been to document the "physical and moral distress" of the *Ostjuden*. He likened his articles to an exposé of the destitution of workers living in slums. This sort of journalism aimed at indicting the systemic causes and effects of impoverishment, rather than at demeaning its victims. Lessing asked his readers, "If I show that a body has wounds, then have I shown that it bears stigmata?" At this level of argumentation, Lessing's fixation on the shortcomings of the *Ostjuden* constitutes a critique of the conditions in the *shtetl* where poverty and prejudice had compelled Jews to seek an escape in ecstatic religious ritual and abstract Talmudic scholarship. Likewise he contended that these Jews compromised the Jewish ideals of moral righteousness and group solidarity by engaging in fraudulent and abject practices only because endemic indigence forced them to eke out a living by whatever means were necessary. Although Jewish leaders might counsel him to remain silent about Jewish depravity in the East, Lessing adamantly claimed that it was his duty as a concerned Jew to publicise this "tragedy of the Jewish exile".[67]

Lessing's objections to the ways of Western European Jews represented the other side of the same coin. Unable to cast off the propensities their forebears had acquired in the ghetto, the emancipated Jews of the West discovered that their didactic and commercial skills were valuable commodities in the secular societies which had freed them. To Lessing, the *Ostjuden*, at least, had retained an awareness of social justice and collective responsibility which was the legacy of persecution and privation. He reprimanded their Western descendants for betraying this heritage for the ephemeral fame, power, and wealth they could attain either as capitalists or *Espritjuden*, his epithet for the assimilated Jewish intelligentsia.[68] The spectacular success story of Western European Jewry was a Pyrrhic victory in Lessing's opinion:

> "Modern, freethinking, liberal, progressive, and highly cultured Jews are proud that in the last century Jews also became prime ministers, cabinet members, generals, officers, great researchers, professors, authorities, producers, writers, poets, and I don't know what else. It may have been better if we were ashamed of the many adulterators of our people's treasure. Perhaps they were only the phosphorescent shimmer of a dying body. Perhaps they were only the brief flickering of a European bonfire in which our nobility immolated itself."[69]

As a prominent and prolific Jewish essayist on modern European literature, Samuel Lublinski provided an inviting target for Lessing's animosity towards the *Espritjuden*.[70] In a flurry of diminutives and pejoratives, Lessing lampooned

[67]Theodor Lessing, 'Galizien zur Abwehr', in *Allgemeine Zeitung des Judentums*, LXXIV (18th February 1910), No. 7, pp. 77–78. This concern for the proletarisation of the *Ostjuden* is more evident in a series Lessing wrote on the Jews of East London. See Theodor Lessing, 'Jiddisches Theater in London', in *Die Schaubühne*, VI (28th April, 15th May 1910), No. 17, 18, pp. 451–455, 481–486.

[68]Theodor Lessing, 'Besprechungen', in *Die Gesellschaft*, 18/III (1902), Nos. 17/18, pp. 410–411; Lessing, 'Jude und Kunstleistung', pp. 149–152; Lessing, *Philosophie der Tat*, pp. 307–342.

[69]Lessing, *Jüdischer Selbsthass*, p. 26. The translation of the last two sentences in this quotation are from Grunfeld, *op.cit.*, p. 85. Lessing made an almost identical statement in his 'Jude und Kunstleistung', p. 150.

[70]For an overall view of the Lublinski affair, see Kurt Loewenstein, 'Rand–Juden, Rand–Zionisten und Deutsche. Samuel Lublinski–Theodor Lessing–Thomas Mann. Zu einem Vorläufer der "Kunstwart" Debatte', in *MB. Wochenzeitung des Irgun Olej Merkas Europa*, XXXIII (1st January 1965), No. 1, pp. 4–5.

Lublinski's atrophied body and tortuous Talmudic logic as the products of his orthodox Jewish upbringing in East Prussia. In Lessing's eyes, Lublinski's habit of endlessly pontificating on every subject appeared comical and grotesque. It typified the egoism of Jewish intellectual parvenus whose insatiable appetite for public recognition especially irritated Lessing because it reduced the search for truth and beauty to a personal pursuit of fame.[71] Since Lublinski had been one of the first critics to praise *Buddenbrooks*, Thomas Mann rushed to his defence in an equally intemperate article which categorised Lessing as a slanderous, worthless, despicable self-hating Jew.[72] Lessing dismissed these charges with the plea that he had merely written a satire which humorously caricatured Lublinski's deficiencies in the "stark outlines of coarse black and white".[73] Conceding that Lublinski's sagacity had been honed on the whetstone of Jewish hardship, Lessing still refused to countenance the unhealthy Jewish preoccupation with the life of the mind.[74] In an impassioned letter to Martin Buber, Lessing designated himself as a gadfly who made German Jews face their defects so that they could overcome them:

> "Now, for the first time, I am alarmed by the weaknesses of our kind. What should be done with this race of ghetto heroes who feel incapable of standing naked in front of a mirror?"[75]

Did Lessing protest a bit too much? Was he a Jewish antisemite in this phase of his life? Whether it be in his generalisations about the *Ostjuden*, Jewish entrepreneurs, or *Espritjuden*, Lessing's observations mirrored the antisemitic stereotypes of the period. Yet he fought against any form of discrimination against Jews based on these stereotypes. In 1903, he strongly objected to an exhibition of antisemitic magazines at Hermann Lietz's country boarding school in Haubinda

[71]Lessing, 'Samuel zieht die Bilanz', pp. 65–73. Lessing had satirised literary critics as a whole in an earlier series of articles. See Theodor Lessing, 'Die Kunst, in zwanzig Minuten ein bedeutender Kritiker zu werden', in *Die Schaubühne*, V (April 1st, 8th, 15th 1909), No. 13–15, pp. 358–362, 390–391, 426–430.

[72]Mann, 'Der Doktor Lessing', pp. 821–824; Thomas Mann, 'Berichtigungen', *Die Literatur*, XII (1909/1910), pp. 977–980; Kurt Loewenstein, 'Thomas Mann zur Jüdischen Frage', in *Bulletin des Leo Baeck Instituts*, X (1967), No. 37, pp. 20–21; *Thomas Mann Briefe 1889–1936*, ed. Erika Mann, Berlin–Weimar 1965, p. 104; *Thomas Mann Briefe 1948–1955 und Nachlese*, ed. Erika Mann, Oldenburg 1965, pp. 454–459; Nigel Hamilton, *The Brothers Mann. The Lives of Heinrich and Thomas Mann 1871–1950 and 1875–1955*, London 1978, New Haven 1979, p. 138.

[73]Theodor Lessing, 'Wider Thomas Mann', *Die Schaubühne*, VI (10th March 1910), No. 10, pp. 253–257; Theodor Lessing, 'Berichtigung', *Die Literatur*, XII (1919/1910), p. 1201; Theodor Lessing, *Samuel zieht die Bilanz und Tomi melkt die Moralkuh oder Zweier Könige Sturz. Eine Warnung für Deutsche, Satiren zu schreiben*, Hanover 1910. Hieronimus has argued that Lessing's article on Lublinski reflected his view that satire by its very nature never could be slanderous, no matter how unflattering it was. See Hieronimus, *Theodor Lessing–Otto Meyerhof*, pp. 21–26. Lessing maintained this view throughout his career. See Theodor Lessing, *Der Fall Panizza-Eine kritische Betrachtung über "Gotteslästerung" und künstlerische Dinge vor Schwurgerichten*, Munich 1895 and Theodor Lessing, 'Darf der Dichter in seinem Werk Privatpersonen porträtieren? Eine Rundfrage über die Diskretion und Freiheit des Schriftstellers', in *Die literarische Welt*, III (9th September 1927), No. 36, p. 1.

[74]Theodor Lessing, 'Samuel Lublinski. Gedenkworte', in *Die Schaubühne*, VII (12th January 1911), No. 2, pp. 41–46; Lessing, *Einmal*, pp. 397–398.

[75]HUJ-MBA: MS Varia 350/5/416, Theodor Lessing to Martin Buber, 30th May 1910. Two other letters in this collection concern the Lublinski affair as well. See MS Varia 350/3/416, Lessing to Buber, 22nd May 1910 and MS Varia 350/4/416, Lessing to Buber, undated but circa 1910.

where he taught.[76] Lessing resigned his post there the following year to protest against Lietz's decision to ban the admission of any more Jewish students to the school.[77] The *völkisch* criticisms levelled against Jews by notorious antisemites like Paul de Lagarde and Houston Stewart Chamberlain struck Lessing as "always true and always unjust". After all, the Jews undeniably had contributed to the modernisation of Germany, but they had done this solely to rise above their past misery and oppression.[78] Finally, Lessing accused the leading Jew baiters of projecting the faults which they detected in themselves or in their countrymen on to the Jews in order to enhance their self-image or national identity.[79]

Lessing's analysis of the motives of antisemites partly clarifies his own lack of tolerance for what he perceived as Jewish transgressions. His abusive remarks about Jews were an exercise in self-criticism as well. Recalling the emotional scars left by his childhood, Lessing candidly confessed:

> "I learned to survive every attack and disparagement by always punishing myself more sternly and despising myself more severely than anyone else ever could have."[80]

In retrospect, it is obvious that Lessing carped most about the Jewish mannerisms and tendencies which he himself exhibited. As a teacher at Haubinda, he made snide comments about the "unnatural" literary ambitions of his Jewish pupils, even though he had nurtured the same ambitions in his youth.[81] He pilloried Jewish academics and authors without explaining why he earned his living as a professor and writer. His tirade against Lublinski as the archetypal Jewish literary critic belied the fact that Lessing was an active drama critic too. During the Lublinski affair, Lessing confided to Buber that he did not consider himself any better than Lublinski.[82] In 1913 Lessing concluded his essay on Georg Simmel with a similar admission. There he characterised his critique of the Jewish intellect as his "soul's judgment of itself".[83] It is indicative of Lessing's frame of mind that he stressed that one of the distinguishing features of the Jews

[76] *Hermann Lietz-Zeugnisse seiner Zeitgenossen*, ed. Elisabeth Kutzer, Stuttgart 1968, p. 135. For background to Lietz's country boarding-school movement, see Sterling Fishman, *The Struggle for German Youth. The Search for Educational Reform in Imperial Germany*, New York 1976, pp. 42–89.

[77] Lessing, *Jüdischer Selbsthass*, pp. 249–250; Lessing, *Einmal*, p. 401. Lessing had viewed the presence of Jewish students at Haubinda as a "good indication of the modern Jewish striving for regeneration". See Theodor Lessing, 'Eine deutsche Schulreform', in *Hermann Lietz-Zeugnisse*, p. 33. Lietz claimed that he fired Lessing for conspiring with the Jewish students to undermine the school. See Hermann Lietz, *Von Leben und Arbeit eines deutschen Erziehers*, Veckenstedt am Harz 1920, pp. 186–187. Yet there seems to be little doubt that Lietz's growing nationalism and antisemitism was causing problems even with his non-Jewish teachers. See Heinrich Kupffer, *Gustav Wyneken*, Stuttgart 1970, pp. 51–53.

[78] Lessing, *Philosophie der Tat*, pp. 309–325.

[79] Lessing, *Schopenhauer, Wagner, Nietzsche*, pp. 243–244; Lessing, *Philosophie der Tat*, pp. 263–302; Theodor Lessing, *Dührings Hass*, Hanover 1922. For Lessing's analysis of antisemitism during the Weimar Republic, see Theodor Lessing, 'Vorwort', in Fritz Marburg, *Der Antisemitismus in der Deutschen Republic*, Vienna 1931, pp.III–IV; Theodor Lessing, 'Die Unlösbarkeit der Judenfrage', in *Der Jud ist schuld . . .? Diskussionsbuch über die Judenfrage*, Basel–Berlin–Leipzig–Wien 1932, pp. 405–410.

[80] Lessing, *Einmal*, p. 125.

[81] Lessing, *Jüdischer Selbsthass*, pp. 249–250; Mayer, *op. cit.* pp. 416–417.

[82] HUJ-MBA: MS Varia 350/5/416, Lessing to Buber, 30th May 1910.

[83] Lessing, *Philosophie als Tat*, pp. 341–342.

throughout history was their habit of blaming themselves for the misfortunes which had befallen them.[84] Lessing carried on this custom both personally and collectively.

At the same time, Lessing's idiosyncratic Zionism provided him with a positive Jewish alter ego, which was as much German as Jewish in inspiration. Lessing's memorial to Ludwig Jacobowski, which was published in 1901 in a Jewish cultural magazine, contained the rudiments of his new Jewish consciousness. He discernibly empathises with Jacobowski's struggle as a German Jew to overcome the psychological burdens of self-hatred and bitterness through "pride in and awareness of the dignity and grandeur of our *Judentum* and its fate". But the Jewish greatness, which Lessing praises in Jacobowski, Heine, Börne and Auerbach, is the creative ability to unite the best elements of Jewish moral pathos and German traditionalism in their personalities and works.[85] Lessing sporadically expanded this theme into a rationale for Zionism in the years before the First World War. He postulated that the Biblical Jews were a priestly people with an abiding attachment to the agrarian society which they had established in the Promised Land. After their banishment from Israel, they were torn between a deracinated cosmopolitanism and an atavistic attraction to the parochialism of their host countries. The first path led to their extinction as a nation, the second to the frustration of their longings for rootedness by native antisemites. Since they most closely resembled the Germans in their fidelity to their adopted lands and the past, European Jews had the strongest affinity for German culture. For this reason, Lessing viewed Zionism as a boon for both Jews and Germans. He recommended that Germany sponsor Zionist settlement of Palestine to regenerate the Jews, who, in turn, would propagate German culture there. In 1910 he declared:

> "If I were a political organiser, then I would join today's living Jews, who once left Asia for Europe and now are conquering Asia for Europe. And Bethlehem would be the place where I would found a German university for Asia."[86]

The ensuing world crisis did alter Lessing's conception of Zionism. This change reflected modifications of his philosophical and political outlook as a whole. The carnage of the First World War vindicated his fears of the destructive potential latent in the individualistic and materialistic values of Western civilisation. Lessing now alleged that the violent xenophobia unleashed by the

[84] *Ibid.*, pp. 322–323, 331–334; Lessing, *Jüdischer Selbsthass*, pp. 9–37.

[85] Theodor Lessing, 'Ludwig Jacobowski', in *Ost und West. Illustrierte Monatsschrift für Modernes Judentum*, I (August 1901), No. 8, pp. 565–576; Fred B. Stern, 'Ludwig Jacobowski, der Autor von "Werther der Jude"', in *Bulletin des Leo Baeck Instituts*, VII (1964), No. 26, pp. 127–130, 136–137. Lessing's article on Jacobowski is also important because it is his first analysis of Jewish self-hatred and anticipates his later study of that problem.

[86] Lessing, 'Jiddisches Theater in London', pp. 454–455; Lessing, *Theater Seele*, pp. 36–40; Lessing, *Schopenhauer. Wagner. Nietzsche*, pp. 443–445; Lessing, *Philosophie als Tat*, pp. 334–335; Theodor Lessing, *Europa und Asien*, Berlin–Wilmersdorf 1918, p. 87. In this last reference, Lessing says that he supported the idea of a Germanising Zionism as early as 1901. Lessing was not alone in his hopes that Germany would sponsor Zionist settlement of Palestine. See Isaiah Friedman, *Germany Turkey and Zionism, 1897–1918*, New York 1977 and Isaiah Friedman, 'The Hilfsverein der deutschen Juden, the German Foreign Ministry and the Controversy with the Zionists, 1901–1918', in *LBI Year Book XXIV* (1979), pp. 291–319.

war stemmed from the Christian doctrine of Incarnation which implicitly encouraged men and states to deify themselves. He juxtaposed the anthropocentrism and egocentrism of the European mentality to the pantheism and communalism of the Asian mentality, casting the latter in a more favourable light. He lamented that this Oriental outlook was disappearing rapidly under the impact of Western imperialism and modernisation. To avert future wars and end the exploitation of the proletariat and the masses of the non-Western world, Lessing aligned himself with the global struggle for communism and national self-determination during the twenties.[87]

Lessing fitted his Zionism into this new framework. He speculated that the perpetual persecution of the Jews should have sensitised them to the debilitating effects of economic inequity and to the dangers of chauvinism and racism. Thus he urged Jews to found an egalitarian and tolerant society which would serve as a model for other proletarian and national revolutions.[88] He emphasised the internationalism inherent in his Zionism by professing:

> "For me (who am more moved by the class struggle than by all the conflicts among races and nations) the task and goal of life is the creation of such conditions on the earth which enable every *Volk* to sustain itself and enjoy its distinctiveness, including my own, the Jewish *Volk*."[89]

After the British were granted mandatory power over Palestine, Lessing regarded the Zionist movement as part of the anti-imperialist wave started by Gandhi in India. Since the Jews had partaken of the wisdom of both Europe and Asia, he considered it their destiny to act as a bridge between the two continents. He hoped that they could temper Western scientific and technological progress with the Eastern reverence for nature, as well as with the Jewish ethical concern for mankind.[90]

Lessing's expectations for Zionism rested on *völkisch* assumptions about primeval Jewry. He simply transposed the venerable qualities he once had associated with the Teutons to the first Jews. He envisaged these Jews as pagans who lived symbiotically with nature and whose tribal religion verged on pantheism. The absence of dualism in Biblical Judaism, the agricultural origins of many Jewish festivals, and the respect for both animal and human life in Jewish law were cited by Lessing to confirm his idyllic impression of Jewish beginnings. He interpreted the prohibitions against making graven images and uttering the

[87]Theodor Lessing, *Die verfluchte Kultur. Gedanken über den Gegensatz von Leben und Geist*, Munich 1921; Theodor Lessing, *Europa und Asien oder Der Mensch und das Wandellose*, Hanover 1923; Theodor Lessing, 'Die Kulturmission der abendländischen Völker', in *Das Flammenzeichen vom Palais Egmont*, ed. Liga gegen Imperialismus, Berlin 1927, pp. 205–214.

[88]Lessing, *Jüdischer Selbsthass*, pp. 211–223; Lessing, 'Die Unlösbarkeit der Judenfrage', pp. 410–412; Lessing, *Deutschland und seine Juden*, pp. 3–10, 22–31.

[89]Theodor Lessing, 'Internationalismus und Nationalismus. Eine Kontroverse über nationales Judentum', in *Jüdische Rundschau*, XXXIV (24th April 1929), No. 32/33, p. 207. See also Archiv der Sozialen Demokratie, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung/Bonn: Theodor Lessing to Fräulein Breling, 3rd April, 1929. In this letter Lessing declares himself a member of the *Poale-Zion* and disavows any ideology that claims that the Jews are a chosen or superior people.

[90]Lessing, *Jüdischer Selbsthass*, pp. 9–26; Lessing, 'Die Unlösbarkeit der Judenfrage', pp. 402–203; Theodor Lessing, 'Stellungnahme zur Judenfrage', in *Jüdische Zeitung*, (1926); Werner Kraft, *Spiegelung der Jugend*, Frankfurt a. Main 1973, pp. 136–137. For more on Lessing's admiration of Gandhi, see Theodor Lessing, 'Gewalt und Liebe. Eine philosophische Abhandlung', in *Die Gandhi Revolution*, ed. Fritz Diettrich, Dresden 1930, pp. 178–204.

divine name as proof that the early Jews were an intuitive people who communed directly with their God without the aid of cognitive symbols. Turning the tables on the antisemitic racists of his day, Lessing theorised that the Jews had descended from Aryan stock because they had purportedly intermarried with the Persians after Cyrus the Great had liberated them from the Babylonian Captivity. It was the loss of their ancestral homeland and two thousand years of wandering which, in Lessing's words, "had disfigured the [Jewish] national character beyond recognition".[91]

As the above quotation indicates, Lessing never ceased being critical of contemporary Jewish life. He expressly refused to repudiate his earlier appraisals of European Jewry as an excessively urban, commercial and intellectual people.[92] But now he stressed the Zionist rehabilitation of the Jews, rather than enumerating their imperfections. If Jews could experience the inspiration and invigoration of tilling their native soil, Lessing surmised, they would forsake their habitation of cities. The Herculean labour of making the deserts bloom would restore the withered muscles of a people accustomed to depending only on its wits.[93] Most importantly for Lessing, Zionist activism would eradicate the Jewish vulnerability to self-hatred by breaking the vicious dialectic of Jewish history which retrospectively justified Jewish suffering as a deserved punishment for Jewish sins.[94]

Lessing's intermingling of Jewish self-hatred and self-affirmation should dispel any simplistic explanation of his Jewish identity. His critique of Judaism and Jews served different purposes at various stages of his life. First, the psychological wounds of his childhood never fully healed. His hatred of his parents and himself and his dependency on Klages for emotional sustenance triggered his adolescent rebellion against his Jewish background. Second, the antisemitic attitudes which he encountered in his teachers, classmates and best friend overwhelmed what was already a tenuous Jewish identity.[95] Lessing's attraction to the neo-romantic trends of this period deepened his antipathy to Jewish intellectualism and commercialism. Third, the gap between assimilation and acceptance, as graphically illustrated by the rebuffs he received from his parents-in-law and from Klages, compelled him to reassess his relationship to his Jewish heritage to bolster his self-esteem. Lessing then perused his previous ideas and ex-

[91]Lessing, *Europa und Asien*, pp. 269–316; Lessing, 'Jüdisches Schicksal', pp. 14–17; Ruth Pierson, *German Jewish Identity in the Weimar Republic*, Ph.D., Yale University, 1970, pp. 226–229, 234–235; Mayer, *op. cit.*, pp. 417–418. Whereas Mayer calls Lessing's Zionist theories racist, Pierson recognises that they are in the tradition of the humanistic strains of *völkisch* theory.

[92]Lessing, *Einmal*, pp. 397–398; Lessing, *Europa und Asien*, pp. 316–332.

[93]Lessing, *Jüdischer Selbsthass*, pp. 215–223; Lessing, 'Die Unlösbarkeit der Judenfrage', pp. 410–412; LBIA – Theodor Lessing Archive: Theodor Lessing, *Flowers*, trans. Max Alexander, Cranston R. I. 1970, pp. 4–9. Lessing's concern with the physical degeneration of Jewry reflects his interest in the body characterology of Carl Gustav Carus. See Theodor Lessing, 'Einleitung', in Carl Gustav Carus, *Symbolik der menschlichen Gestalt. Ein Handbuch zur Menschenerkenntnis*, Celle 1925, pp. 9–7 and Theodor Lessing, *Prinzipien der Charakterologie*, Halle a. S. 1926.

[94]Lessing, *Jüdischer Selbsthass*, pp. 9–17, 27–51, 227–230; Pierson, *op. cit.*, pp. 209–213. Lessing's rejection of the Jewish theory of history was part of his overall rejection of historical determinism. See Lessing, *Die Geschichte als Sinngebung*.

[95]For the standard analysis of how the majority culture can create feelings of self-hatred in a minority, see Kurt Lewin, *Resolving Social Conflicts. Selected Papers on Group Dynamics*, New York 1948, pp. 159–200.

tracted from them the rationale for an eclectic Zionism which promoted both Jewish and German interests. After the war years, he redefined it in communist and anti-imperialist terms. In both versions, Lessing saw the Jews of the past and future through *völkisch* glasses. Holding the Jews of the present up to this romanticised image, Lessing could remain the "scourger of Jewish degeneration".

Lessing's case may not be as unique as it seems. His hypersensitivity to Jewish "failings" represents an extreme version of the insecure consciousness of many German Jews. Even though most assimilated Jews did not lapse into self-hatred, they did, as Peter Gay has noted, experience "feelings of shame and rejection that would overcome them as they witnessed what they identified as 'Jewish' display in public places, business dealings, in political controversy, in the gutter press".[96] They were often embarrassed by the alien appearance and customs of the unassimilated *Ostjuden*. Lessing articulated the disconcerting emotions which some German Jews probably felt when they had cursory contacts with their anachronistic cousins from the *shtetl*.[97] It should not be forgotten that it was a Jewish publication, the *Allgemeine Zeitung des Judentums*, which carried his series on the Jews of Galicia.[98]

The influence of German *völkisch* ideology on German–Jewish intellectuals like Lessing is also not that atypical. The generation of Jews which grew up after German unification could hardly have avoided being exposed to the *völkisch* currents of that age. The promise of a pastoral and humane *Gemeinschaft* appealed to those who were alienated both as Jewish outsiders and as members of an industrialised and depersonalised *Gesellschaft*. Threatened and repelled by the ethnocentrism and militarism of most German *völkisch* thought, they gravitated to its more pluralistic and cultural variants. The concept of the *Volk* was particularly well suited to the needs of German Zionists. It furnished them with a model for a Jewish national identity which was couched in terms presumably understood and respected by German Gentiles.[99]

That Zionism was compatible with Lessing's harping on the unsoundness of European Jewish life is not surprising either. After all, the Zionist stress on the normalisation and regeneration of the Jews presupposed their degeneration in the Diaspora.[100] German Zionists often acknowledged the validity of negative

[96]Gay, *op. cit.*, pp. 199–200.

[97]Eva Reichmann, 'Der Bewusstseinswandel der deutschen Juden', in *Deutsches Judentum in Krieg und Revolution 1916–1923*, Ein Sammelband herausgegeben von Werner E. Mosse unter Mitwirkung von Arnold Paucker, Tübingen 1971 (Schriftenreihe wissenschaftlicher Abhandlungen des Leo Baeck Instituts 25), pp. 538–545, 562–563, 576–577; Gay, *op. cit.*, pp. 182–187; Steve Aschheim, *Strange Encounter: The Ostjude (East European Jew) in German and German Jewish Consciousness, 1800–1923*, Ph.D. diss., University of Wisconsin/Madison 1980.

[98]The editor of the *Allgemeine Zeitung des Judentums* at this time was the anti-Zionist Ludwig Geiger. For Geiger's opposition to Zionism, see Jehuda Reinharz, *Fatherland or Promised Land. The Dilemma of the German Jew, 1893–1914*, Ann Arbor 1975, pp. 207, 225.

[99]George L. Mosse, *Germans and Jews. The Right, the Left, and the Search for a 'Third Force' in Pre-Nazi Germany*, New York 1970, pp. 77–115; Pierson, *op. cit.*, pp. 145–241; Stephen M. Poppel, *Zionism in Germany 1897–1933. The Shaping of a Jewish Identity*, Philadelphia 1977, pp. 127–135; Jehuda Reinharz, 'Ideology and Structure in German Zionism', in *Jewish Social Studies*, XLII (Spring 1980), No. 2, pp. 119–146.

[100]Yehezkel Kaufman, 'The Ruin of the Soul', in *Zionism Reconsidered*, ed. Michael Selzer, New York 1970, pp. 117–129; Raphael Patai, *The Jewish Mind*, New York 1977, pp. 456–463; Jacob B. Agus,

Jewish stereotypes to buttress their call for a Jewish state. In her study of German–Jewish identity in the Weimar Republic, Ruth Pierson correctly observes:

> "The Zionist picture of the 'old Jew', of the Jew in need of rejuvenation, had many points in common with the German-*völkisch* stereotype of the Jew – over-developed intellectually, under-developed physically, rootless, remote from nature."[101]

One can hear the echo of Lessing's complaints in this passage. Hence, Lessing turned to another "*völkisch*" Zionist, Martin Buber, for consolation during the Lublinski affair. Although Buber rebuked him for his vicious *ad hominem* attack on Lublinski, he admitted that he shared Lessing's "aversion" to that type of insincere Jewish intellectual who only knows things vicariously.[102]

Where does constructive self-criticism leave off and Jewish self-hatred begin? To be sure, Lessing overstepped that line of demarcation by singling out Jews to exemplify disturbing tendencies which he believed permeated all modern societies. By doing this, he thought that he could induce German Jews to embark on the Zionist road to restoration. Lessing claimed that his satirical barbs were a token of his love for the Jewish people.[103] But his love was always bitter-sweet.

Jewish Identity in an Age of Ideologies, New York 1978, pp. 211–231; Frederick Busi, 'Anti-Semites on Zionism – The Case of Herzl and Drumont', in *Midstream*, XXV (February 1979), No. 2, pp. 18–27; Jacques Kornberg, 'Theodor Herzl: A Reevaluation', in *Journal of Modern History*, LII (June 1980), No. 2, pp. 226–234.

[101]Pierson, *op. cit.*, pp. 227–241.

[102]Martin Buber, *Briefwechsel aus sieben Jahrzehnten*, ed. Grete Schaeder, Heidelberg 1972, vol. 1, pp. 281–283. Also see Pierson, *op. cit.*, pp. 208–209.

[103]Lessing, *Philosophie als Tat*, p. 342; Lessing, *Jüdischer Selbsthass*, pp. 39–40.