

*The*  
OPEN COURT

Devoted to the Science of Religion,  
the Religion of Science, and the Extension  
of the Religious Parliament Idea

FOUNDED BY EDWARD C. HEGELER

JULY, 1931

←—————→  
VOLUME XLV

NUMBER 902

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# THE PHILOSOPHICAL REVIEW

EDITED BY

FRANK THILLY

and G. WATTS CUNNINGHAM

OF THE SAGE SCHOOL OF PHILOSOPHY, CORNELL UNIVERSITY  
WITH THE CO-OPERATION OF

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GOTTHOLD EPHRAIM LESSING  
(1729-1781)

*Frontispiece to The Open Court*

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## LESSING

BY BIRGER RICHARD HEADSTROM

### A BIOGRAPHICAL ESSAY

**G**OTTHOLD Ephraim Lessing, one of the greatest figures in German literature, was born at Kamenz, in Upper Lusatia, Saxony, on the 22nd of January, 1729. His father was a Lutheran minister, a man of high ideals and a steadfast character, but, unfortunately, somewhat narrow-minded in his views, a fault which later was to be a source of much vexation to the poet. Furthermore, he was very industrious; and it is said that he rarely allowed himself any relaxation; rarely took a walk; and paid visits only when his duties as pastor made them obligatory. Obviously, such an example could have nothing but the happiest influence on his children.

And to provide his sons with a university training, which he considered indispensable for success, he often denied himself even those things which are necessary to a normal existence. As Lessing's brother Karl says, he did this "with almost unimaginable self-denial...and literally starved himself. He gave away the last penny for his children with a willingness scarcely paralleled." And when we read that he was accustomed to help the needy despite his own meager circumstances, we are vividly reminded of the kind-hearted poet of "Nathan" who, poor himself, shared with those still poorer. With a touch of humour, Karl remarks that his father did not know the meaning of the expression: "to give of his superfluity" for never in his life had he known what superfluity was. And with moving fervor he adds that "he considered it his foremost duty to give to the poor out of his poverty. In his house it was the rule and custom to send no beggar from the door without some alms. And one may be sure that at that time the gates of Kamenz were open to all sort of tramps."

Karl's judgment shows the characteristic conscious energy of his father's whole moral nature. "To be forced to surmount all the hardships of life seemed to him a comfort, and he was neither proud of it nor did he complain about the ingratitude of the world for not rewarding him deservedly." And, finally, in his theological convictions, we see that honest search for truth, and that gentle forbearance of differing opinions, which made Lessing the noblest representative of scientific truth and religious toleration. "If striving after perfect insight," writes Karl, "and actions in harmony with it are enlightenment, then my father belongs to the most enlightened theologians of his time. He fought against many prejudices of Christianity and began to reform it with the noblest of purpose. What he considered true, he defended with whole-hearted sincerity."

Lessing grew up under the influence of a beautiful family life. Piety, respect for his parents, and strict obedience were, without question, the virtues inculcated upon him; and in this the greatest influence was his mother, who, above all else, displayed true moral energy for she was able, in straitened circumstances, to give to a large family care and training, and withal earn the reputation of a model wife. Thus, the constant example of earnest, steadfast performance of duty, as exemplified by his parents who knew nothing of the effeminate pleasures of life, became a standard for Lessing, who only under such influence could unfold that sturdy, prematurely strong character which he developed ever afterwards in the same direction. Yet, the best heritage given him was unquestionably the keen sense of justice and a strong love for truth, ever the pride of former generations.

At the age of seven he was given in charge of a student such as it was customary to employ in teaching the young, though it is certain that his father superintended his instruction and taught him religion. As he was the eldest son his father wished him to follow in his footsteps; and with this end in view Lessing was sent some five years later to the famous monastery school of St. Afra, in Meissen, which had been consecrated, according to a Latin inscription, to "Christ and studies," and where he was to prepare for the university.

From an account of its organization one is able to form a fairly clear idea of the methods and subjects of instruction which Lessing received at the Afraneum. It seems that all the pupils were taught

together and that Latin was the most important subject: in fact, half the time was devoted to this subject alone. A great deal of importance was also attached to Greek, and a little attention was given to French and Hebrew. Religion, of course, was most important, especially for future divines. But mathematics, science, and history were sadly neglected. And in the upper classes, as well as in the lower, Latin translations took the place of systematic training in composition in the mother tongue. Even in oral instruction the students did not learn much German, as the Greek authors were translated into Latin while philosophy and other studies were conducted in the same language. Indeed, the ideal of St. Afra seemed to be: ability to write Latin easily, to produce Latin verses, and to acquire a verbal knowledge of Lutheran dogma.

Moreover, the strict discipline of the school, the constant study, and the almost total absence of recreation could exert nothing but a most baneful influence on the growing and developing students. Lessing, however, was fortunate at this critical period in his life in having for a teacher a mathematician, Klimm, whose broad-mindedness and common sense did much to offset the harmful tendencies of the school. Yet, despite the pedantic atmosphere in which he moved, the five years which Lessing spent at St. Afra were decisive for the tenor of his entire life, for it was there that his interest in classical antiquity was encouraged. And, happily, he soon became conscious of his poetic talents and so was able to make his best studies subservient to it. "Theophrastus, Plautus, and Terence were my world; I studied them within the narrow limits of monastic discipline entirely to my satisfaction. I must confess, in spite of the danger of being laughed at, that among all works of wit comedy is the one I approached first. In those years when I knew people only out of books I was busy creating fools in whose existence I was not interested."

In view of this interest it was inevitable that he should attempt a comedy of his own, which he called "The Young Scholar," and which was intended to humourously scourge his own narrow-mindedness and that of his surroundings. Later on he explained the origin of such a work by saying: "A young pedant was the only sort of fool who at that time could not possibly be unknown to me. Having grown up among this sort of vermin, was it to be wondered at that I aimed my first shafts of satire against it?"

On the 30th of June, 1746, Lessing was graduated from St. Afra; and in the following September he entered the University of Leipzig. At first he continued his monastic existence and saw little of the thriving and industrious city, which, at a later time, the young Goethe called "a little Paris." Gradually, however, he began to realize that though books might make him a wise man they would never make him a human being. "So he goes out among other people and notices that he is an unfavorable contrast to his surroundings: he finds his body is stiff and clumsy, his habits boorish, his social manners awkward, and his behaviour unfriendly; and accordingly he tries to remedy the mistakes of his earlier education by learning to fence, to dance, and to ride, in which he makes such rapid progress that soon the jeering of his friends is transformed into admiration."

This newly-won standpoint he now attempted to strengthen by means which seemed to him "far more agreeable but perhaps just as useful" as the study of books, to wit: by attending the theatre. It was, no doubt, a happy coincidence that when Lessing became interested in the stage Leipzig was being entertained with presentations by the Neuberin company—perhaps the most talented company of players in Germany at that time—for thus he was able to witness the best in dramatic art. Then, too, his interest in the theatre was further promoted by his friendship with a young journalist, Mylius, who had already written two plays for the Neuberin and who could thus give him many valuable suggestions as to stage management.

Under these circumstances it was not long before Lessing began to give expression to his own dramatic instincts; and by a combination of causes was eventually influenced to finish his "Young Scholar," which he had begun at St. Afra, and which he gave to the Neuberin, who welcomed it as the forerunner of a new epoch in German national drama. The comedy perfectly satisfied the demands of the stage, and, what was more, compared most favorably with the tragedies of Gottsched. But above all else, its unusual success tended to more and more convince its author that he had real talent for dramatic art.

While Lessing was in high spirits over his success, a most embarrassing correspondence ensued between his father and himself. The former had instituted inquiries concerning his son and



had become bitterly indignant on learning that he was leading a more independent life than he deemed suitable. But when he discovered that Lessing was associating with actors and actresses he became furious, and, with all the passion of his violent temperament, he heaped on his son the strongest of reproaches, saying that he was acting without conscience and contrary to his parent's intentions by spending his time with evil companions and thereby inviting temporal and eternal damnation, instead of assiduously devoting himself to his studies and thus being a credit to his family. Lessing tried to pacify his father with a number of conciliating letters, but they only resulted, in the end, of his being ordered to return home.

Surprisingly enough Lessing did not receive the reproofs which he had expected; on the contrary his parent's greeting was very warm and friendly when they observed the favourable change in his behaviour and that his morals were unspoiled. His father, especially, was very much pleased with his wealth of learning, but his mother was terribly disappointed at not having the prospect of seeing him in the pulpit of Kamenz despite his willingness to convince her of his ability for theology by writing a sermon as proof that he could become a minister at any time. Unquestionably, Lessing's visit home at this time was greatly beneficial: in one particular the unbiased criticism of his relatives somewhat cooled his infatuation for the theatre which, if left unbridled, would perhaps have carried him to the point where everything connected with it would have filled him with disgust, for it is said that upon receiving the first of his father's letters he had become so enraged that he had resolved to go to Hamburg and become an actor.

Shortly before Easter (1748) Lessing was permitted to return to Leipzig, where he registered as a student in medicine although he does not appear to have studied it very much. Indeed, it is rather amusing to learn that, according to his own statement, the first lectures he attended were on obstetrics. Most of his time he spent on his dramatic works; and with his friends, especially Mylius, he attended rehearsals and performances, and thereby acquired a most exact knowledge of stage management and technicalities. But what was, perhaps, most important of all was the competition with a student-friend in the composition of plays, as

this greatly influenced the development of his latent ability to greater artistic expression.

And now began the first of those financial embarrassments that were to continue intermittently throughout his life. He became surety for some shiftless actors who decamped leaving him to shoulder the burden of their debts. His position at this time was so hopeless that he considered going on the stage as a means of liquidating his debts, but the wise counsels of his friends prevented him from taking such a rash step. Meanwhile, Leipzig had become intolerable to him, and so we find him going to Wittenberg, ostensibly to visit his cousin, who was a student at the University, but in reality to escape the persecutions of his creditors.

He planned to remain only a short time in Wittenberg and then to journey on to Berlin, whither his friend Mylius had gone some time before. Against his wishes, however, he had to remain for he fell seriously ill, evidently in consequence of the nerve-racking incidents connected with his financial difficulties of the past weeks in Leipzig. Moreover, he learned shortly after his arrival that Mylius had failed to find conditions in Berlin as favorable as he had expected and intended to return. This news put an end to his plans of going to the Prussian capital, and instead he matriculated at the University as "*studiosus medicinae*," a step which did not prove to be a happy one as he soon discovered that here also he had no interest in medicine and none whatsoever in theology. Lessing's position was by no means an enviable one, for there was, besides the uncertainty of his future, the discouraging aspect of his material circumstances. But when he suddenly learned that Mylius after all had remained in Berlin, where he had become editor of a newspaper, all doubts as to the course he should follow seemed magically dispelled: he left for Berlin in such haste that he left his clothes and books behind which were, however, later redeemed by his father.

Lessing's decision to go to Berlin seems to have been a happy one for he soon found congenial employment there, which effected a slight improvement in his financial circumstances. Unfortunately, however, when his parents learned of his whereabouts, and, from ill-informed friends, that he was living a godless life their indignation was once more aroused, and again they demanded his return. But this time he paid no heed to their command; instead he

wrote to his mother explaining as clearly and convincingly as he could the reason for his refusal and the exact state of affairs. But this letter did not pacify his parents, and his father again demanded his return. Lessing again refused; and his letter to his father at this time deserves our serious attention because of its marked earnestness and moral superiority, as well as for the clarity and firmness exhibited by this youth of twenty in discussing his studies and plans for the future. Moreover, it is very evident how difficult and oppressive were the conditions he was forced to fight, placed as he was on his own resources and receiving no help from his home.

"You insist on my coming home," he writes. "You are afraid I may go to Vienna to become a writer of comedies there. You say that I am working like a slave and enduring hunger and affliction at the same time. You even write quite plainly that all I had told you about various opportunities of earning a living here was all a mass of lies. I beg you most earnestly to put yourself in my place for a moment and consider how such unfounded reproaches must pain me. . . . But most of all I am surprised that you could repeat your old objection to comedies. I never promised you that I would never read any more of them and you have always been far too sensible toward me to really demand it. . . . Do not say that only comedians know me. If they know me then all those who have seen my work performed by them know me. However, I can show you letters not written by comedians to prove that my correspondence is not merely based on plays. And it is a pleasure to me to enlarge it every day. . . ."

"You say my manuscripts show that I have begun much but have completed little. Is that to be wondered at? 'Musae secessum scribentis et otia quærent' But 'nondum nobis deus hæc otia fecit?' Nevertheless, were I to name everything I have written, scattered about here and there, it would amount to a good deal (even omitting my plays because most people imagine they are things requiring little work of the author and being as little credit to him). But I shall be very careful not to tell you the slightest thing about my various writings as they would please you perhaps less than my plays. I only wish I had always written comedies: I would now be in far different circumstances. Those I sent to Vienna and Hanover were paid very well. Please do have the goodness to wait

a few months more and you shall see that I am not idle in Berlin and that I do not work only for other people."

It would seem that such words, uttered with the deepest conviction, could not have failed to be effective, yet his parents gave more credence to the doubtful information of their correspondents than to the sincere words of their own son. His father again severely reproached him for the obstinacy with which he clung to his dramatic writing and his "scandalous habits." And Lessing, in a letter dated the 28th of April, 1749, replied: "I do not believe that the severest judge of morals can find fault with me on this account 'Vita verecunda est, Musa jocosa mihi.' And you must know me very little if you believe my feelings harmonize with them in the least. The poems do not at all deserve the title which you have given them. If they did, the odes and songs of the greatest poet of our time, Herr von Hagedorn, should be given a much worse name. Indeed, the reason for their existence is merely my wish to practice writing all kinds of poetry. If we do not experiment to find out what sphere of work is congenial to us we often get into a wrong one where we can barely rise to mediocrity, while in another we might soar to admirable heights. Perhaps you will also have discovered that I broke off in the middle of this kind of work and became wary of practising such trifles. If the title of 'German Moliere' could be given me with good reason I should be sure of eternal fame. To tell you the truth I have the keenest desire to earn it, but its greatness and my own impotency together are enough to extinguish the highest ambition. Seneca gives us the advice: 'Omnem operam impende, ut te aliqua dote notabilem facias.' But it is very difficult to become famous in a profession in which so many have already excelled. Was it then so very unwise of me to choose something for my early writings on which as yet very few of my compatriots have tried their strength? And would it not be foolish of me to stop before I had produced some real masterpiece?"

Lessing's literary activity at this time was as diverse as it was feverish, and consequently he finished little that he began. With Mylius he founded his first periodical, "Contributions to the History and Development of the Theatre"; and in the preface to these "Contributions" stated that the future of the German national theatre lay in an imitation of the English rather than of the French

drama. There also appeared in these "Contributions", of which only four parts were issued, a life of Plautus and a translation of the *Captivi*, of which he said it was the best play ever put on the stage.

Because of his work an intellectual estrangement gradually developed between him and his family, for their narrow views could never be in sympathy with his love for the theatre. But his relations with his parents, and brothers and sisters, were, nevertheless, always characterized by the same feelings of faithfulness and respect which he had felt towards them as a boy; and, perhaps, it was a feeling of duty which, at length, influenced him to submit to his father's wish to leave Berlin, and, by securing his degree, to finish, at least, to all appearances his study at the University. But it is very likely that the distracting intercourse which he carried on with his many friends had no mean part in forming his decision, for in Berlin it was difficult for him to concentrate on his work. And so we find him leaving the Prussian city in the last days of December (1751) to return to the more quiet Wittenberg.

At first he did not find the quiet which he sought for he had the misfortune to become embroiled with Voltaire, who was then a guest of Frederick, in an affair that was destined to have the most serious and lasting consequences for him. Towards the end of December, shortly before his departure for Wittenberg, he had borrowed from Voltaire's secretary, with whom he was intimate, a choice copy of "*Siecle de Louis XIV.*," but on the condition that he was not to show it to anyone as Voltaire intended to present the first volumes to the king. This Lessing, unhappily, failed to do; and so when Voltaire learned that others had seen the book before he had presented it to the court he became furious and demanded its instant return. Here the affair might have ended, but in the meantime Lessing had left Berlin and, what was worse, had taken the book with him. This thoughtlessness on the part of Lessing instantly aroused Voltaire's suspicions, and he dictated to his secretary a letter in which he accused Lessing of the basest motives; and which Lessing answered in part as follows: "Sir: You could really think me capable of the greatest fraud? You treat me no better than a thief of whom one cannot get hold.... Here is your copy; I have never intended to keep it. I would have sent it to you without your letter which seems most extraordinary

to me. You ascribe intentions I am not in the least guilty of. You imagine I have begun to translate a book the translation of which is already in the press. No, good friend, in literary matters I do not like to trespass on anyone's grounds. I assure you when I do translate I want to do it well; and to translate Voltaire well one must become the devil's own, which I would not like to be. I hope you will admire this fancy; it is not mine."

Such a reply only added more fuel to the kindling fire, and before long the affair was common property, gossip even having it that Lessing had betaken himself to Wittenberg to escape Voltaire's revenge. Nor was this the limit of the slanderous attacks directed against him for the Frenchman Risbeck, in one of his books, writes: "Only my sympathy with everything connected with my Fatherland induced me to commit an offense against a friend here in this country similar to the one Lessing perpetrated on Voltaire by translating his book, 'The Times of Louis XIV.'" But such statements were just as asinine as the foolish tale that Voltaire, to avenge himself against his merciless critic, had Frenchified the name Lessing in "Le Singe" (The Monkey).

Moreover, to ascribe Lessing's later severe criticism of Voltaire's works to personal chagrin would be to contradict our knowledge of his character as well as the historical facts of literature. Some time before their differences he had been perfectly clear in his judgment about Voltaire, for immediately after the notorious law-suit in which the favorite of the Prussian king had become involved with a Jew, Hirsch, over some petty financial dealings he had openly expressed his contempt for the man. And in this connection, we have the epigram which ends with the poignant words:

"Um kurz und gut den Grund zu fassen,  
Warum die List  
Dem Juden nicht gelungen ist,  
So fällt die Antwort ungefähr:  
Herr V. war ein grössrer Schelm als er."

In every way he recognized the avarice of the rich French poet, which Goethe also characterizes so strikingly: "It is unusual that a person should make himself so dependent in order to be independent." And Frederick, himself, wrote to his favorite: "As you have won the lawsuit I wish you joy of it. I am very much

pleased that this wretched affair has at length come to an end. I hope you will have no more squabbling either with the Old or the New Testament, for thereby your honour is always hurt, and with all your talents which you, the finest intellect of France, possess you cannot hide the blemishes you have made and which disgrace your reputation." And in answer to the question why the great poet, read by the whole world and posterity, was a rich miser, Lessing gives us, in a witty epigram, the sarcastic words:

"Weil nach des Schicksals ew'gem Schluss  
Ein jeder Dichter darben muss."

Moreover, on a paper which contains a note on a fable of Phaedrus he says that "the real moral of the affair is that it is a very ticklish thing to settle a quarrel where both sides are known to be frauds. For example, during the lawsuit here between Voltaire and the Jew Hirsch a few years ago, one could have said to the Jew very fittingly: 'Tu non videris perdidisse quod petis!' (Thou dost not seem to have lost that which thou art asking for). And to Voltaire: 'Te credo surripuisse, quod pulchre negas!' (I believe thou has stolen that which thou skilfully deniest)."

Lessing always maintained this sarcastic attitude in most of his opinions on Voltaire;<sup>1</sup> and, especially, in his "Dramaturgy" he

"Here lieth one, who if ye truly prate  
Ye pious folk, here lieth all too late.  
Forgive his *Henriade*, O God of mercies,  
Forgive his tragedies and little verses;  
I will not ask forgiveness for the rest  
Of what he wrote, for that was much the best."

turned upon his former persecutor that wit which, according to the expression of Heine, "plays like the cat with a mouse before it kills it."

With the passing of his affair with the French poet, Lessing found the quiet for which he had gone to Wittenberg. He remained there for about a year; and in December (1752) we find him returning to Berlin. His literary labors now became extraordinarily diverse, and we find dramatic and critical writings alternating with translations. And, to be sure, he still received the old complaints from his parents but to which, however, he maintained a discreet silence as his circumstances could not be changed by correspondence.

About this time he again had the misfortune to become embroiled in another affair which, equally as well, was to have an important

<sup>1</sup>When Voltaire died in 1778, Lessing wrote the following epitaph on him:

bearing on his future. By his adverse criticism of a translation of Horace by S. G. Lange, a minister in Laublingen and also a favorite of Frederick's, he earned that man's undying hatred. One might question what was the real underlying reason of his attack on a book which in no way could have had any significance in the literary world. Nor can one easily understand why he failed to heed the warning of a Prof. Nicolai, who wrote him: "I would not advise anyone who hopes to make his fortune in Prussia to openly attack Herr Lange, for by certain methods of his he can accomplish a great deal at court." But as it was, Lessing published his criticism, and thereby exposed himself to the charge of having an ulterior purpose in mind. He promptly replied to this charge, however, with his annihilating "Vademecum" which not only held Lange up to open ridicule but, what was more, earned for its author the reputation of a critic to be both honored and feared. In fact, so well was his answer received that the distinguished Professor Michaelis even declared that his (Lessing's) "Vademecum" would live long after Lange's writing was forgotten. And this reminds us of Heine's words that Lessing's adversaries are related to him as insects to amber: by it they are preserved for posterity. Finally, it is very probable that as long as Lange lived he tried to avenge himself on his critic, and took every opportunity of slandering him in the presence of his "most gracious master, the king."

Lessing's second stay in Berlin was one of the brightest periods in his life, for his work met with encouraging success and he made many warm friendships that were to endure until his death. In 1755, he again came forward as a dramatist with a play that was destined not only to be the death-blow to the dramatic theories of Gottsched's school but to lay, as well, the foundation of a national drama. "Miss Sara Sampson" (a tragedy of common life), produced at Frankfort-on-the-Oder on the 10th of July before an audience "bathed in tears," was based on George Lillo's "Merchant of London" (1731) and was thereby a practical illustration of Lessing's assertion that the salvation of the drama was to be effected only by shaking off the trammels of French classicism and imitating the freer, more natural style of the English. As a whole, the play is very faulty and within twenty years was out-of-date. But it was the first of those plays of social life and social problems which have formed, since the end of the eighteenth



century, a constant element in the dramatic literature of Northern Europe.

Shortly after the presentation of "Miss Sara Sampson," a variety of circumstances again made it desirable for him to leave Berlin; and this time we find him hastening in the direction of Leipzig. Shortly after his arrival in the city, which had been for him the gateway to the world, he became acquainted with the young son of a rich merchant, from whom he received the offer to attend him as companion on a three year's tour throughout the continent. Such an opportunity of seeing the world he eagerly accepted; and in his enthusiasm he wrote to his friend, Mendelssohn: "I shall travel not as tutor, not with the burden of having a boy under my care, not according to the orders of a willful family, but merely as the companion of a man who lacks neither money nor intentions to make the trip as profitable to me as I could wish to make it."

But as events turned out they had gone no further than Amsterdam when the Seven Years War broke out and put an end to their plans; and soon after Lessing found himself once more in Leipzig and in unsettled circumstances. Moreover, his embarrassing position was made the worse by illness; and he found himself in a "hundred entanglements and embarrassments." It seems that all his friends did to help him at this time was to offer him their sympathy—as one of them wrote to his staunchest friend, Kleist, a Prussian major: "I am terribly grieved that a man like Lessing is obliged to worry about his daily bread and that the little he needs is impossible to get." Only the faithful Kleist never wearied in looking about for something, yet all his efforts seemed destined to failure.

Meanwhile, Lessing took a deep interest in the political, as well as literary, events of the time. And when he heard of the taking of Berlin, and of its being laid under contribution by Austrian troops, he was profoundly shocked. "What a frightful thing it was after all!" he wrote to Mendelssohn. "Do make peace soon or name a spot where I shall no longer hear the laments of unfortunates. Berlin will not be this spot any more." Still of his longing to be there, he says: "I long, more than you can believe, to be in Berlin again soon for the life I am obliged to lead here is disastrous to all my intentions and inclinations."

The defeat of the French at Rossbach, however, soon put him in gay spirits; and, when he received Gleim's poem on the victory, he wrote: "What would I give if one could translate the whole song into French! The wittiest Frenchman would be so ashamed as though he had lost the battle of Rossbach a second time."

Often his desperate circumstances would make him furious; and then his acrid humour would find its fullest expression, as when he wrote to Ramler: "Just see how much harm the war is doing me! The king of Prussia and I shall have a mighty account to settle between us. I am only waiting for peace to come to an understanding with him one way or another. Since he, he alone, is to blame for my not seeing the world, would it not be fit that he should give me a pension so that I might forget the world? You are thinking, of course, he will never do that! I think so too, and therefore I wish...that none but wretched verses may be made on his victories. But why need I wish that? It must happen anyway if only Herr von Kleist and you would promise me to make none. Oh, I beg of you to promise me!"

The year 1757 came to a close without any improvement in his circumstances; and in the following year he returned to Berlin where he still hoped he might secure something permanent. He now completed his "Theatrical Library," which he had begun some years before, and with Ramler edited an edition of Logau's epigrams. But the depressing influence of his unsettled life made it difficult for his mind to endure the strain of intense work, possible only under conditions of comfort and security, and he developed a certain over-sensitiveness which was gradually to take the morbid form of torturing mental depression, irritability without cause, and often even continued incapacity for work.

Yet in spite of this there now followed one of the most active periods of his life. He published a collection of prose "Fables" of his own, translated Diderot's dramatic works, completed "Philotas," a tragic dramatic episode in one act inspired by the war, and together with Mendelssohn and Nicolai began his famous "Literary-Letters." In these "Literary-Letters" in which an attempt was made for the first time to criticise reasonably and scientifically, in other words to preserve the judgment from the tyranny of tradition and empiricism, Lessing's critical powers found their greatest expression. The "Letters" cover most of the important

literary topics of the day: Wieland and Klopstock, translations, the historical tragedy, the pretensions of the Copenhagen theologians, and, above all, Shakespeare, who, he says, observed the Aristotelian laws more faithfully than either Corneille and Racine. In their essentials of method, they are the foundation of modern criticism, and, are, moreover, a monument to eighteenth century criticism for in them is to be found the best in the aesthetic theories of the time. And, finally, it was these "Letters" which led Macaulay to call him "the first critic in Europe."

And then came the day when he learned that Kleist had been severely wounded in the battle of Kunersdorf. "He still lives, our dear Kleist," he wrote to Gleim, "his wish has been fulfilled; he has fought and proved himself a brave man. He will soon recover from his little wound and this occurrence will make him more content with himself. Meanwhile, comfort yourself with this agreeable hope, dearest Gleim, till we hear more accurate news about him." But his hopes faded more and more, while a feeling of bitter grief mingled with his solicitude about his noble friend. "He is said to have not less than six wounds, daring man that he is," he again wrote to Gleim. "He distinguished himself wonderfully on that unfortunate day. He paid no attention to his first wounds, but still remained on his horse before his battalion; and when at last he fell he still called to his men from where he lay on the ground, and encouraged them as best he could. But it was of no avail; he had to remain lying on the battle-ground and thus with others severely wounded fell into the hands of the Russians." At last he knew the bitter truth. "Ah, dearest friend, it is too true. He is dead. . . ."

The death of Kleist was undoubtedly the greatest blow Lessing could suffer standing as he was then on the threshold of manhood, for he never again found as staunch a friend. To seek forgetfulness he turned to his literary labours with feverish activity; and to his father, who had probably suggested he should seek some kind of a position, he wrote April 3rd, 1760: "So long as I still can support myself by my work, and that fairly comfortably, I haven't the least desire to be the slave of an office. If one is offered me I shall accept it; but to take the smallest step towards securing one I am perhaps not too conscientious but too lazy and careless." A few months later he was offered the position as secretary to the gover-

nor of Breslau, which he accepted as the increasing coolness of his relations with Nicolai, the occupation of the city by the Austrians and Russians, and the vast amount of work in which he was engaged and which gradually began to undermine his health, together with his penurious way of living, made a change highly desirable.

The post as secretary was a very lucrative one, but, unfortunately, Lessing did not know how to conserve his finances. Moreover, his generosity went the lengths of absurdity: and when anyone remonstrated with him, telling him to be less generous and to think more of his future, he always returned the characteristic answer: "I hope I shall never be in need as long as I have these three fingers and as long as this here will not fail me." And saying this he would show the three fingers with which he held his pen and point to his forehead. It is said that he carried gold and silver coins in the same pocket and gave away whichever came first to his hand: if a poor beggar returned the gold coin he would praise him for his honesty but would allow him to keep it with the remark "that fate had decreed it thus." And when he was criticized for often supporting unworthy people he would say: "Great God! if we, too, received only what we deserved I wonder how much we would have?"

His perverted way of living during this period—he gambled and drank to an excess—eventually laid him on his back. A "burning," that is a typhoid fever, attacked him of which Karl says: "He suffered much from it; but most of all he was tormented by the conversation of his physician whose principal subject was Gottsched, and which disgusted him even in his well days. When the sickness reached its crisis, he lay there very gently with a significant expression of countenance. This so struck his friend that he asked sympathetically what he was thinking of at the moment. 'I am just now anxious to discover what will take place in my soul while on the point of death.' When it was shown to him that this would be impossible he said quite abruptly: 'You are deceiving me!' After he had recovered his intellect received a curious tension which he had not experienced for several years."

He felt the effects of this illness for some time afterwards, frequently suffering from dizziness and other disorders; and in a letter to Ramler remarked that when the last traces disappeared he would feel "newborn." Yet this illness had the beneficial result

of giving him a correct idea of the relation between the intellectual and physical sides of his nature. "All changes of temperament, I believe, are connected with the activities of our animal economy." And, moreover, to his illness he ascribed a happy influence on his spiritual life: "The momentous epoch of my life draws near; I am beginning to be a man and flatter myself that in this burning fever I have run through the last bit of my youthful follies. Fortunate illness!"

As is usually the case with such a sickness, his weakness persisted for many weeks; and on this feebleness he once said: "For some time now I have considered sickliness worse than sickness. A disgusting life when one is up and vegetating, and is thought to be well without being so." Likewise, he complained on his ability to work as formerly: "I still cannot get into it, try as I may." But above all else he regretted that he could not put the finishing touches to his favorite work since he "did not wish to work with half a head."

This favorite work was his comedy "Minna von Barnhelm"<sup>2</sup> which, on publication in 1767, at once placed him at the head of the dramatic writers of his time. Though Lessing can hardly lay claim to originality, and, especially in "Minna" to the plot to which Shakespeare, Farquhar, Moliere, and Goldoni have all contributed, the play is a masterpiece of eighteenth-century comedy: its most distinctive feature is its close touch with the events of the time. It is, as Goethe said, "die wahrste Ausgeburt des sieben jährigen Krieges, die erste, aus dem bedeutenden Leben gegriffene Theaterproduction, von specifisch temporärem Gehalt." And, finally, it is one of the very few comedies of that period that can still interest a modern audience.

Lessing spent five years in Breslau; and when he failed to secure the advancement which he sought he returned to Berlin, after first paying a visit to his home for the first time in nine years. Although he did not return to the Prussian capital for "the miserable business of earning his daily bread" he did not, however, entertain very great hopes of securing a permanent position there. Yet, with the death of the court-librarian shortly after

<sup>2</sup>In a letter dated August 20th, 1764, Lessing wrote to Ramler: "If it is not better than all my former dramatic pieces, I am firmly resolved to have nothing more to do with the theatre." Certainly his confidence was not misplaced.

his arrival, his hopes revived in that direction for the position was one suitable to his talents. But, obviously, Frederick<sup>3</sup> could not be expected to appoint to such an important position a man of whom he had received unfavorable accounts from Voltaire and his "most devoted servant" Lange, and to which, perhaps, had been added the voice of Gottsched, whom Lessing had called a "most stupid poet." Thus, he was refused the coveted post and once more thrown upon his own resources, with the added realization that he had lost his last chance of ever securing in Berlin anything of permanent value.

But in the meantime he had published his important work "Laokoon." In this work Lessing was associated with one of the master-minds of the eighteenth century, Johann Joachim Winckelmann, whose monumental "History of Art" laid the foundations on which the whole modern study of art has been built up. In an earlier booklet, Winckelmann had expressed the opinion that the characteristic of Greek masterpieces was "a noble simplicity and a calm grandeur, both in posture and expression," and this thought gradually brought order into a train of ideas which had long occupied Lessing's mind. He discovered the logical weakness in Winckelmann's unfavorable comparison of the agonizing cries in Virgil's description of Laokoon and his sons with the silent suffering of the plastic figures, and pointed out that the aim of Virgil, as of the unknown sculptor of Laokoon, was "beauty," the difference between their manner of expressing pain being the inevitable consequence of the nature of their art. In a word, the medium of the sculptor was space; that of the poet, time. The importance of Lessing's treatise is that it swept away the confused ideas that existed as to the proper province of poetry, which, in the descriptions of nature so popular at that time, was encroaching on the province of the painter. By this work Lessing counteracted the growing fondness for descriptive writing and removed many obstacles which were impeding the advance of German poetry.

<sup>3</sup>"There were never two men more created for each other than Lessing and Frederick the Great, and Frederick could not have found anywhere a subject who could have served him with greater faithfulness and a more worthy aim, or a writer who would have so fully compensated him for the loss of what attracted him in his beloved French. But the unproved and unjust accusation made years before by a Frenchman, whom the king despised as much as he hated him, was sufficient reason for striking out the name of this German poet and scholar for ever from the list of those who might serve him." (Scherer: A History of German Literature).

And though many of his ideas have lost their potency because of the more catholic aesthetics of Romanticism, yet, by defining the boundaries of the various arts, he introduced a new principle into aesthetics that was destined to influence the latter development of the science.

In 1767, at a time when his pecuniary difficulties were most vexing, he received the offer of critic and literary adviser to the National Theatre in Hamburg, which a group of wealthy Hamburg citizens had resolved to establish. But from the very beginning the theatre proved a failure, and a variety of causes finally led it to close its doors after some eighteen months of existence. Yet the experiment occupies an honourable place in the history of the German drama as the first attempt to nationalize the theatre. Moreover, by Lessing's connection with it we have his "Hamburg Dramaturgy" in which he continued what he had begun in his earlier dramatic periodicals. As in earlier years in conflict with Gottsched he advanced the classic movement which Gottsched had inaugurated, he now, in like opposition to Voltaire, completed what Voltaire had begun. In a word, the "Hamburg Dramaturgy" contains the ripest opinions of eighteenth-century classicism on the subject of the drama; in it Lessing not only denies the merits of French classic tragedy but turns to Sophocles and Shakespeare whose greatness he measures by the theories of Aristotle, for to him the drama of all time either stood or fell on the laws of the Greek critic. In fact, Lessing grasped, as no one before him had done, the true meaning of Aristotle's *Poetics*, and, accordingly, a large part of the "Dramaturgy" is devoted to an elucidation of the great philosopher.

Lessing spent three years in Hamburg—three years of struggle and disappointment. He had utterly failed in improving his material circumstances, indeed, they had become worse; and added to the depressing events which accompanied the failure of the theatre was his misfortune to become engaged in a conflict with a professor of the University of Halle, C. A. Klotz, who was reputed an authority on antiquarian questions, but who rather had imposed his shallow pretensions and critical knowledge on the literary world, where for a time he seemed to have attained a certain distinction. By having criticized some of his trifles, Lessing had offended the professor, who immediately began a re-

lentless war on him in a journal which he maintained as a sort of literary bludgeon. Lessing took up his pen and "openly declared war on Klotz," who, at first, had almost the entire public on his side, for, as Lessing said, "he had scolded many and coaxed more" to submit to his dictation. Klotz was brought completely to the ground by the crushing weight of Lessing's blows and his withering contempt. "I should be sorry," he said, "to have this investigation of mine estimated by its origin. For what called it forth is so contemptible that only my manner of using it is my excuse for using it at all." His work, which is contained in his "Antiquarian Letters" was thorough, and the unhappy professor stood convicted before all men, not only of ignorance and superficiality but of dishonesty as well. In fact, so terrible was Lessing's victory that Klotz died a few years later as a result; and on his death Lessing's friend, Eva König, wrote to him: "I was glad to think that you may have contributed greatly to his salvation, since you probably brought him to comprehend himself."

But Lessing's contempt for Klotz was equalled only by his indignation for those who had "permitted him to carp and criticize unhissed." He had to carry on the battle single-handed "fighting a nest of hornets," as Herder said. And here as always he was better fitted to crush than to convert. In Goethe's words: "he was the highest intellect, and only the highest could learn from him. He was dangerous to half intelligence."

Such in brief was the hopeless result of his stay in Hamburg. However, he had made the acquaintance of Eva König, the wife of a Hamburg merchant, between whom a friendship developed that was undoubtedly the only bright spot in his ill-starred life. As an intimate friend of the family, he was often in her house and had every opportunity to observe her rare charms and excellent qualities. Indeed, his admiration imperceptibly developed into a deep attachment; and some two years after the death of her husband, convinced that his affection was returned, he proposed marriage, which she refused as she feared to load new cares on his shoulders by her unsettled circumstances, caused by the confused affairs of her husband which had not as yet been straightened out. And with this disappointment there still remained the everlasting doubts concerning his future. A call to Vienna as teacher of dramatic art had failed to appeal to him, and he was in the greatest



despair when the Duke of Brunswick offered him the position of librarian in Wolfenbüttel, which he accepted, entering into his new duties in April of the year 1770.

In Wolfenbüttel, Lessing was destined to spend many long years of suffering, brightened only by the short period of his married life, for it is hardly conceivable that the kindness of the ducal home could be a compensation for the gloomy solitude boring him in "dear, lonely Wolfenbüttel"; nor that after a life of constant change he could appreciate the pleasant contrast of leisure which permitted him to pursue his studies without interruption. Moreover, his many liabilities, and importunate relatives, were not calculated to make things any easier for him. His correspondence with his mother, brothers, and sisters at this time is painful reading; and when his father died his family circumstances became, naturally, worse than ever: only the thought of Eva gave him courage to live. In a letter to her, dated September 8, 1770, he writes in part as follows: "I am now sadder than ever. My old father has died. . . . Since receiving this news, six days ago, I am unfit for anything. Added to this I am sitting here alone, forsaken by all human beings, and am involved in some work that is nothing less than pleasant. Truly, I am playing a sad role in my own eyes. And yet I am convinced everything around me will and must brighten up again. I will always look forwards and as little as possible backwards. Do the same, my dearest friend, and do not lose your great firmness and courage, which you usually possess in all your doings."

The strain caused by his father's death and his added worry over his mother's situation again made him fall ill, while his constant low spirits became more and more morbid; and thus he wrote to his brother, May 26th, 1771: "I am no longer ill, to be sure, but if I said that I was as I would wish to be I would have to tell a lie. Among all wretched people I believe the most wretched is he who is obliged to work with his head when he is unconscious of having a head." Similarly he wrote to Gleim, June 6th: "Book-dust affects my nerves more and more, and soon they will be incapable of certain delicate vibrations." Four weeks later, July 4th, he uttered the same complaints to his brother concerning this complete inability for intellectual work: "Even this letter I am writing in a half dream-like state. For a long time now I have been absolutely unable to fix my thoughts upon the same subject, and every

line, even when it is not to be printed, forces, cold sweat from me as is really true of these lines I am now writing." Yet, strange as it may seem, his literary activity was most extraordinary. Thus, he completed his "Emilia Galotti,"<sup>4</sup> which he had begun in Hamburg, a drama that unquestionably exerted the greatest influence upon the subsequent development of dramatic art, being to a large extent a forerunner of the "Sturm und Drang"; published his "Miscellaneous Writings"; and began his contributions "On History and Literature" among which was the theological work destined to give rise to the controversy that was to be so fateful for him.

Still, his material circumstances never seemed to improve; and in a letter to Eva we cannot fail to see how deep-rooted his morbid condition had become, nourished by his many difficulties and cares and ever-repeating disappointments: "All life is now often so disgusting to me—so disgusting. I dream away my days rather than live in them. Continual work which wearies me without giving me pleasure, a life here which, by its absolute lack of all society, is becoming unsupportable, a prospect of this precious sameness forever,—all these things which have such a bad influence on my body that I do not know whether I am ill or well."

Two years later he tried to escape this gloomy condition by visiting Berlin, Dresden, Prague, and Vienna where he saw Eva, who had in the meantime put her affairs in order. And at last it seemed that his long-cherished dream of union with his beloved friend might become a reality. But the irony of fate still pursued him: he was no longer the free man, the free "sparrow on the housetop" of which he loved to speak but an appurtenance of Wolfenbüttel. For, as he was arranging for his marriage, the duke's son requested him to follow him to Italy. "Small comfort to him that he had been feted and applauded in Vienna as no German author had been. Small comfort to him, bitter irony rather, that the Italy he had so longed to see should be granted to him at last—at the one moment of his life when it was an unwelcome boon.

And now while his bride is waiting for him, as he had waited so long for her, he must wander aimlessly over the land he would have studied, must see his fruitless stay prolonged for weeks and

<sup>4</sup>Of Emilia Galotti, Goethe said: "It rose in Grecian majesty like the sacred isle of Delos, out of the deluge of Gottsched, Weisse, and Gellert, that it might mercifully receive the goddess in her travail."

months, must suffer agony from lost letters, till his puzzled mind is shaken, and all the while he must smile on courtiers and pay his court to princes."

But, at last, after six years of almost hopeless waiting he saw his greatest wish fulfilled: on October the 8th, 1776, he celebrated his marriage to "the only woman with whom he would trust himself to live." He now took on a new lease of life, and Wolfenbüttel became a beloved home, for his Eva ruled in his "enchanted castle." And, we are told, those who were permitted to observe his happiness could not but feel inspired by a humanity which reached its noblest expression in that quiet household.

But alas! this great happiness was not destined to last: in a little more than a year his wife died after confinement. And with what bitterness he writes to a friend: "My wife is dead, and now I have gone through this experience also. I am glad that there cannot be many more experiences of this sort I shall have to pass through and am quite resigned."

When Lessing assumed his post at Wolfenbüttel, he said that he "would not have the name of librarian for nothing," and, in fact, on his very first day discovered a long lost work of medieval theology—the defence of Berengar of Tours from an accusation of heresy on the Eucharist by Lanfranc, the famous Archbishop of Canterbury. To Lessing this document was of great importance as it cleared a sympathetic character from the accusation of paltering with the truth, an act that was always most distasteful to him; and in this connection he uttered his memorable words: "The man who is faithless to truth in threatening danger may yet love her much, and truth will forgive his infidelity because he loves her. But whoever thinks to prostitute truth under masks and rouge, he may be her pimp, he has never been her lover."

This document of Berengar's naturally annoyed the Roman Catholics and pleased the Lutherans. But by his next discovery he also antagonized them, thus sowing the seeds of discord that were eventually to lead to the great controversy with Lutheran orthodoxy destined to define the closing years of his life.

The immediate cause of this controversy was his publication of a posthumous series of fragments by H. S. Reimarus, a free-thinker of Hamburg and a friend of his. Reimarus could perceive in the origin of Christianity nothing but the worldly aims of its Founder,

and the false pretensions of his disciples; and as his "Fragments" called in question the historical basis of Christianity, the German theological world, led by J. M. Goeze the chief pastor of Hamburg, instantly rose to vindicate the cause of orthodoxy against the free-thinking playwright, for they held Lessing responsible for the views set forth. Yet it did not necessarily follow that Lessing was a free-thinker or disposed to agree with his dead friend. But he did believe in freedom of discussion; and in his own words we find the issue thus stated: "The worth of a man lies not in the truth that he possesses or believes that he possesses, but in the honest endeavour that he puts forth to secure the truth; for not in the possession of, but by the search for, truth are a man's powers enlarged and it is in this alone that his ever-growing perfection consists. Possession fosters content, indolence, pride. If God had in his right hand all truth, and in his left only the ever-acting impulse after truth, though with the condition of constant erring, I would honestly turn to the left hand and say: Father give me this. Pure truth is for thee alone."

Evidently, between such a position and that of the self-constituted pope of Hamburg no truce was possible; and the controversy raged thick and fast throughout Germany. Lessing's share in this fierce conflict was, in many ways, the most remarkable achievement of his whole life, for he had to fight single-handed, rationalist and theologian alike being embittered against him. Nor have his writings called forth by this controversy—"Eine Duplik," "Eine Parabel," "Axiomata," and the "Anti-Goeze"—ever been surpassed in the literature of theological disputation.

But suddenly the war came to a close. Goeze had challenged Lessing to tell him what he meant by "Christian religion." And Lessing had replied in his "Necessary Answer to a very Unnecessary Question" that to him the Christian religion is contained in the creeds of the first four centuries, which he continued to show would form a true basis of union for all Christians, and so the wisest platform for the German state church. Such an unexpected reply confounded his opponents and they were silent. "Nowhere a sound," said Lessing. "Even every frog in the swamp is dumb."

His controversy with Goeze was, however, merely the prelude to the real battle that was to come for Lessing had formed for himself conceptions of God, the world, and the human soul in

accordance with those of Leibniz, and not altogether unlike the views held by Spinoza. As a result he produced the noble "Ernst und Falk," "Freemason Dialogues," and "The Education of the Human Race," a treatise which not only shows his attitude towards the fundamental questions of religion, but is, as well, an admirable and characteristic expression of the spirit in which he dealt with matters which had then, as so often before, been degraded by the virulence of controversy.

Then silence was suddenly imposed upon him and the right of free publication withdrawn. He had to lay down the weapons of theological warfare and resort once more to his old poetical weapons. And never had he wielded them in a nobler cause than he did now, for the question was not the triumph of one opinion over another but the victory of tolerance over intolerance. So out of the bitterness of the conflict came "Nathan the Wise," a work not only crowning his life but fittingly closing it as well. As one writer says, such a poem "could only have been produced by a man who, himself, a soldier in the Liberation War of humanity, had been chastened by suffering and had learned the bitter lessons of life." And it is strange to think that Lessing had to borrow money from a noble-minded Jew so he could live until it could be offered for sale.

After the death of his wife a change gradually took place in him; and his letters of this period bear the indelible stamp of illness and weakness. Indeed, in the summer of 1779 he was often in bed; and of this condition he complained to his brother in February of the following year, when it had become worse: "This winter is very sad for me. I have one fit of indisposition after another, not any of which is really fatal but which, nevertheless, cripples the use of my intellectual activity very much. The last attack I have just escaped was dangerous enough to be sure for it was a sore throat which developed into a quinsy sore throat; and they say I was fortunate to get through as I did. Well, yes, so be it, call it luck to be able to vegetate again." In his letters of the last period of his life there is much discouragement and indifference. It seems that he had given up all hope, nor did he possess the same courage which had helped him so often before to conquer difficulties, only idle lassitude to suffer without complaining. He died on February the 15th, 1781, the year which saw the

publication of the crowning achievement of the movement of enlightenment—a movement with which he himself had been intimately associated—Kant's "Kritik der reinen Vernunft."

The irreparable loss was great. Goethe wrote: "Less than a quarter of an hour before I heard of his death I had made a plan to visit him. We lose much in Lessing, more than we realize." So he said at thirty-two. At seventy-six, he said to Eckermann (Oct. 15, 1825): "We need a man like Lessing. For he is great by his character and tenacity of will. Clever and cultured men there are in plenty, but where is such a character?" In his funeral verses, the venerable Gleim was even more emphatic: "God said, Let there be light, and Leibniz came. God said, Let darkness be, and Lessing died."

In the history of German literature Lessing occupies a most significant position. In the first place, he was the incarnation of the best spirit of the eighteenth century and reflected as no man did the tempo of his age: he was a rationalist in the best sense of the word. In the second place, we find in him the fullest expression of the revolt against the artificial classicism of the later Renaissance and the ripest judgments of the century. He restored the drama to Germany and gave her true canons of aesthetic and dramatic criticism, and, by destroying the yoke of the intellectual tyranny which had lain on her, he prepared the way for the founder of modern thought, Immanuel Kant. And in the third place, he freed her from a petrified orthodoxy, giving her in its place a more tolerant and loftier Christianity; and by all this opened to her social and political life vistas of republican liberty. In a word, "he did more than any other of his contemporaries to solve the problems of literary and artistic reform, of social progress, of religious emancipation, which are still agitating the world; and that whatever there is of positive, constructive liberalism in German life of today has sprung more directly from him than any other man of his age."