# LAOCOÖN NATHAN THE WISE MINNA VON BARNHELM



**LESSING** 

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### INTRODUCTION

A feature in the story of German literature which all its critics have remarked is the rapidity of its development in the course of the eighteenth century, and the astonishing contrast between the opening and the closing decades of the period. The second half of the century witnessed the outburst of splendour in Goethe and Schiller and Kant, and showed Germany keeping step with England and France. The fertilising influences of the Renaissance had reached Germany late, for in England the Elizabethan age had come, and flourished in full luxuriance, and Milton had followed his greater predecessor, whilst in Germany poetry, drama and literature generally still remained a poverty-stricken and almost negligible product.

There were special reasons for this retardation. Early in the seventeenth century the curse of war had brooded heavily over Europe, with particular darkness over Germany—for thirty years the cock-pit where was fought out the fateful struggle between the Catholic South and the Protestant North. On both sides the armies were mercenaries, and their marches to and fro were marches of military locusts, devouring and destroying everywhere. Nor was it merely material desolation that resulted; the springs of intellectual and spiritual activity also were choked in the universal debacle. The war was over by 1648, but a prolonged period was required for complete

recovery.

Another hindrance to the advance of German letters was the absence of national unity, the want of an acknowledged centre of the national life. Berlin, Leipzig, Hamburg, all contended for the central place, at least in the production of books and in theatrical enterprise; and thus an advantage was lost which England and France enjoyed by their great capitals. It is also worth remarking that whatever furtherance for intellectual activities can be looked for from men in the high

places of society was conspicuously wanting. The King himself, the great Frederick, besides being almost exclusively absorbed by the interests of his army, was cold not only to German literature but even to the German language. He liked to speak French and to have Frenchmen about him. There is nothing blameworthy in Frederick's preference. Who is there that does not prefer lightness, clarity and grace to heaviness and clumsiness? If we criticise the mistaken notions of French dramatists of those days, their bondage to ancient rules and examples, let us at the same time freely acknowledge their merits. Lessing himself confesses that he owed much to them, acknowledging a particular obligation to Diderot, as "the man who has taken so great a share in forming his taste. Be this what it may." he writes. "I know that without Diderot's example and doctrines it would have taken a quite different direction." Frederick's preference for French writers, then, can be easily understood, yet the natural consequence of his attitude was undoubtedly to chill and discourage German authors and to undermine their efforts. Frederick's real service was in a different field: he brought to Germany a national self-consciousness and self-confidence which it had hitherto lacked.

When, moreover, German literature began once more to show signs of vitality and renewal, the leaders who undertook its superintendence were unfortunately unequal to the task. They wanted the natural genius which the great business demanded, and they followed mistaken paths. For some time before Lessing's birth in 1729, the outstanding literary figure was Gottsched, dictator for a generation in German letters. implicitly obeyed by all who wrote. The praise cannot be withheld from him of labouring indefatigably to stir up amongst aspiring men the ambition to write well; but by all accounts we have of him his place was distinctly in the second class, a man pedantical and essentially prosaic, without the gift of critical discernment. This was characteristically shown in the book he issued for the guidance of poets-Kritische Dichtkunst für die Deutschen, a volume of precepts and rules from which none must deviate. Lessing quietly laughs Gottsched's classification of a collection of poems he published—Ist class, poems addressed to Royal personages; 2nd, those addressed to counts, noble people, and such-like: 3rd.

friendly lyrics! It was idle to look for inspiration to Gottsched: rules and precepts may furnish useful warnings against grave blunders, but they also can easily become bonds and fetters. The worst of his counsel was that he directed his disciples to wrong models and false ideals; they were instructed to imitate the French in their artificial and pseudo-classic drama, in short, to imitate what was itself an imitation. There could be only one result—originality and independence were discountenanced, and the denial of freedom led to lifeless and uninspired performances. To rely on a code of rules, or even on patterns drawn from Greek perfection, was a mistake. A wiser counsel by far is embodied in the old poet's words—"Look in thy heart, and write!"

No wonder, then, that under tuition like Gottsched's the field of German poetry and drama took on the aspect of Ezekiel's vision, a valley of dry bones. It had, however, now not long to wait for an inspiring breath to restore it to life and vigour, to bring flesh again on the dry bones, and set it on its feet, standing up boldly in freedom and selfreliance. After a faint dawn of day in Klopstock's poem Der Messias, a rather ineffectual echo of Milton's Paradise Lost, the full sunlight broke on the desolate scene from the genius of Lessing. His was the life-giving spirit. No qualifications were lacking to him for the task. From his early boyhood he was a student and lover of books, and he speedily acquired a knowledge of Greek and Roman literature that was extraordinarily wide and exact, as a thousand passages in Laocoon bear witness. His faultless taste was early formed, and his native gifts, a keen analytic intellect and instinctive justness of judgment, made him the perfect critic. No better plan of education could have been framed for him than to be permitted to browse in the library at home, and to be taught the rudiments of learning by his father, who did this work so thoroughly that young Lessing, entering at the age of twelve the "Prince's School" in Meissen, immediately took a foremost place among his fellows. "Tasks which others find too hard," wrote the rector to the father, "are child's play to him."

The design of Lessing's parents was that he should follow his father's profession. This was entirely contrary to his own inclinations. It was only after years of painful struggle, in which he had to endure much misunderstanding and censure of the bitterest kind, that he could enter upon his chosen career as a dramatist and journalist. His father and mother were puritans of the straitest sect, with a fanatical fear and hatred of the stage, an attitude which even now is not unknown amongst ourselves, especially in provincial places. Indirectly, no doubt, the narrow-mindedness and persecution of which he was so intimate a witness were a stimulus to Lessing in the frequent controversies of his career, in which he was always a champion of freedom and tolerance. With his characteristic

tenacity he held to his own choice. Parenthetically, it may be remarked how great a part of Lessing's energy was expended in controversy: not only on dramatic or purely literary questions, though these drew volume after volume from him, but on theology and philosophy, which largely engaged his pen for years together. It was labour he delighted in, for he was a born controversialist. keen wit, his stores of exact and many-sided knowledge, gave him a peculiar advantage in these contests, and he enjoyed the still greater advantage that he contended only for truth, when his opponents were more concerned for orthodoxy. The enemies he chiefly loved to assail were bigotry, narrow-mindedness and pretension. When Lessing began in earnest his efforts to raise German literature and drama to a higher level, he followed his favourite method of controversy and chose for an object of attack, Gottsched, the literary dictator, as the embodiment of the principles and practice that were hindering the advance.

"Our tragedies were full of nonsense, bombast, filth, and the wit of the mob. Our comedies consisted of disguises and enchantments, and blows were their wittiest ideas. To see this corruption itwas not necessary to be the finest and greatest spirit. And Herr Gottsched was not the first who saw it; he was only the first who had confidence in his own power to remove it. And how did he set to work? He understood a little French, and began to translate; everyone who could rhyme and understand 'Oui, monsieur,' he encouraged also to translate. . . . If the masterpieces of Shakespeare, with some modest changes, had been translated, I am convinced that better consequences would have followed than could follow from acquaintance with Corneille and Racine. . . .

For genius can only be kindled by genius; and most easily by a genius which seems to have to thank nature for everything and does not frighten us away by the tedious perfections of art." 1

We have here one out of many proofs of Lessing's acquaintance with and sympathetic appreciation of the English dramatic writers. The drama is, of course, his chief interest, but his knowledge of other departments of our literature extended beyond it. In an article contributed to a quarterly magazine projected in Berlin he has the following on an effort by some of his friends to imitate the essays of the English Spectator:—
"You know who were the first authors in this kind of literature—men wanting neither in wit, thought, scholarship nor knowledge of the world—Englishmen who, in the greatest calm, and in easy circumstances, could study with attention whatever influences the spirit and manners of the nation. But who are their imitators among us? For the most part, young witlings, who had scarce mastered the German language." <sup>2</sup>

The first really notable dramatic work of Lessing was a prose tragedy. Miss Sara Sampson, in which the influence of English models was immediately traced, and which was forthwith pronounced a novel type—a "bürgerliches Trauerspiel" it was styled, or "tragedy of common life." This piece had, therefore, an importance in the history of the German theatre beyond its intrinsic literary or theatrical value; it marked the beginning of an epoch, and became the favourite type on the German stage. From the day of its production the regard of German playwrights was turned not to France but to England. Lessing had written successful comedies when scarcely out of his boyhood, but Miss Sara Sampson made him known to the nation and to foreign critics. It also confirmed Lessing in the choice of dramatic writing as his proper sphere. More triumphant successes were soon to follow. It was in the three well-known dramas-Emilia Galotti, Minna von Barnhelm and Nathan der Weise-that Lessing reached his highest level.

It is perhaps the last-named that is best known, but each of the three is worthy of his genius. *Emilia Galotti* is a tragedy on the lines of the story of Roman Virginia, most poignantly

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup>Sime's Lessing, Vol. I. p. 181.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 127.

affecting, well-constructed for stage purposes (eminently bühnen-fähig as the Germans say), but almost too painful for popular acceptance. Minna von Barnhelm is the best of German comedies, all critics agree; it is a story of military life in the Frederician time, full of humour and good-humour, touched here and there, but only slightly, with the German weakness of over-sentimentality, and having the great merit of being as enjoyable to-day as when it was first produced. This in itself is a testimony to the human quality of it. The characterisation is superbly worked out, every figure an unmistakable personality. It is still frequently staged. Nathan der Weise is more properly a dramatic poem than a stage play, an eloquent plea for tolerance, and embodying much of the earnest thought of Lessing upon subjects lying nearest to his heart. These two plays, along with the famous essay in literary criticism, Laocoon, are the fragments of Lessing's immense production presented in this little volume of translations. The Laocoon is too large and too multifarious for any attempt at detailed description in this brief preface. In its own department of literary criticism it is authoritative, and one of the acknowledged classics of the world.

Before closing these introductory words something should be said of the personal fortunes of Lessing. He was born in 1729 in Kamenz, a small town in the kingdom of Saxony. where his father was Pastor Primarius, or chief pastor, of the place. His short life of fifty-two years, ending in 1781 in Brunswick, was a record of incessant and ill-rewarded labour, vexed perpetually by care and poverty. He quickly gained his wide reputation as a critic and dramatist, and his work. especially his excellent dramatic pieces, ought to have brought him at least the means of comfortable living, if not a fortune. So far from this was his experience that, at the close, what he possessed did not suffice to cover the expenses of his funeral. One secret of his troubles was the constant demands upon him for help made by the poor pastor's large family at home. whose members thought that a man so distinguished as their famous brother must have an income corresponding, whereas he was frequently himself in the most desperate straits. Until 1776, when he was forty-seven, he was not in a position to marry. His wife, Eva König, to whom he had been greatly attached for many years, was the widow of a manufacturer in

Vienna. It was the happiest of unions, but even here ill-luck pursued him, for his wife lived only one year after marriage,

dying in childbirth.

Lessing's days were few and full of trouble; they were full also of most fruitful labour. After two centuries his fame continues, based firmly on his dramatic poems, and even more securely on his critical writings, which the world will not willingly let die.

W. A. S.

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(1729-1781)

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## CONTENTS

		PAGE
Laocoon (Translated by W. A. Steel)		I
NATHAN THE WISE (Translated by W. A. Steel)		III
MINNA VON BARNHELM (Translated by Anthony	Dent)	221

# LAOCOÖN

OR

## THE LIMITS OF PAINTING AND POETRY:

WITH INCIDENTAL ILLUSTRATIONS ON VARIOUS POINTS IN THE HISTORY OF ANCIENT ART

"Υλη καὶ τρόποις μιμήσεως διαφέρουσι (Πλουτ. ποτ. Αθ. κατὰ Π. ἢ κατὰ Σ. ἐνδ.)



LAOCOÖN

### PREFACE

THE first who likened painting and poetry to each other must have been a man of delicate perception, who found that both arts affected him in a similar manner. Both, he realised, present to us appearance as reality, absent things as present; both deceive, and the deceit of either is pleasing.

A second sought to penetrate to the essence of the pleasure, and discovered that in both it flows from one source. Beauty, the conception of which we at first derive from bodily objects, has general rules which can be applied to various things: to

actions, to thoughts, as well as to forms.

A third, who reflected on the value and the application of these general rules, observed that some of them were predominant rather in painting, others rather in poetry; that, therefore, in the latter poetry could help out painting, in the former painting help out poetry, with illustrations and examples.

The first was the amateur; the second the philosopher; the

third the critic.

The two former could not easily make a false use either of their feeling or of their conclusions. But in the remarks of the critic, on the other hand, almost everything depends on the justice of their application to the individual case; and, where there have been fifty witty to one clear-eyed critic, it would have been a miracle if this application had at all times been made with the circumspection needful to hold the balance true between the two arts.

Supposing that Apelles and Protogenes in their lost treatises upon painting confirmed and illustrated the rules of the same by the already settled rules of poetry, then one can certainly believe it must have been done with the moderation and exactitude with which we still find Aristotle, Cicero, Horace, Quintilian, in their writings, applying the principles and practice of painting to eloquence and poetry. It is the prerogative of the ancients, in everything to do neither too much nor too little.

But we moderns in several things have considered ourselves

their betters, when we transformed their pleasant little byeways to highroads, even if the shorter and safer highroads shrink again to footpaths as they lead us through the wilds.

The startling antithesis of the Greek Voltaire, that painting is a dumb poetry, and poetry a vocal painting, certainly was not to be found in any manual. It was a sudden inspiration, such as Simonides had more than once; the true element in it is so illuminating that we are inclined to ignore what in it is false or doubtful.

Nevertheless, the ancients did not ignore it. Rather, whilst they confined the claim of Simonides solely to the effect of the two arts, they did not omit to point out that, notwithstanding the complete similarity of this effect, they were yet distinct, both in their subjects and in the manner of their imitation

(ύλη καὶ τρόποις μιμήσεως).

But entirely as if no such difference existed, many of our most recent critics have drawn from that correspondence between painting and poetry the crudest conclusions in the world. Now they force poetry into the narrower bounds of painting; and again, they propose to painting to fill the whole wide sphere of poetry. Everything that is right for the one is to be granted to the other also; everything which in the one pleases or displeases is necessarily to please or displease in the other; and, obsessed by this notion, they utter in the most confident tone the shallowest judgments; and we see them, in dealing with the works of poets and painters beyond reproach, making it a fault if they deviate from one another, and casting blame now on this side and now on that, according as they themselves have a taste for poetry or for painting.

Indeed, this newer criticism has in part seduced the virtuosos themselves. It has engendered in poetry the rage for description, and in painting the rage for allegorising, in the effort to turn the former into a speaking picture without really knowing what she can and should paint, and to turn the latter into a silent poem without considering in what measure she can express general concepts and not at the same time depart from

her vocation and become a freakish kind of writing.

To counteract this false taste and these ill-founded judgments is the primary object of the pages that follow. They have come together incidentally, according to the order of my reading, instead of being built up by a methodical development of general principles. They are, therefore, rather unordered collectures for a book than themselves a book.

Yet I flatter myself that even as such they are not wholly to be despised. Of systematic books there is no lack amongst us Germans. Out of a few assumed definitions to deduce most logically whatever we will—this we can manage as well as any nation in the world.

Baumgarten confessed that for a great part of the examples in his *Æsthetics* he was indebted to Gesner's Dictionary. If my argument is not as conclusive as Baumgarten's, at all events

my examples will taste more of the original sources.

As I started, as it were, from Laocoön and return to him several times, I have desired to give him a share in the superscription. Some other little digressions concerning various points in the history of ancient art contribute less to my purpose, and they only stand here because I cannot hope ever to find for them a more suitable place.

I would further remind the reader that under the name of Painting I include the plastic arts in general, and am not prepared to maintain that under the name of Poetry I may not have had some regard also to the other arts whose method of

imitation is progressive.

The general distinguishing excellence of the Greek masterpieces in painting and sculpture Herr Winckelmann places in a noble simplicity and quiet greatness, both in arrangement and in expression. "Just as the depths of the sea," he says, "always remain quiet, however the surface may rage, in like manner the expression in the figures of the Greek artists shows

under all passions a great and steadfast soul.

"This soul is depicted in the countenance of the Laocoon, and not in the countenance alone, under the most violent sufferings. The pain which discovers itself in every muscle and sinew of the body, and which, without regarding the face and other parts, one seems almost oneself to feel from the painfully contracted abdomen alone—this pain, I say, yet expresses itself in the countenance and in the entire attitude without passion. He raises no agonising cry, as Virgil sings of his Laocoon; the opening of the mouth does not permit it: much rather is it an oppressed and weary sigh, as Sadolet describes it. The pain of the body and the greatness of the soul are by the whole build of the figure distributed and, as it were, weighed out in equal parts. Laocoon suffers, but he suffers like the Philoctetes of Sophocles: his misery touches us to the soul; but we should like to be able to endure misery as this great man endures it.

"The expression of so great a soul goes far beyond the fashioning which beautiful Nature gives. The artist must have felt in himself the strength of spirit which he impressed upon the marble. Greece had artist and philosopher in one person, and more than one Metrodorus. Wisdom stretched out her hand to Art and breathed more than common souls into

the figures that she wrought," etc., etc.

The remark which is fundamental here—that the pain does not show itself in the countenance of Laocoön with the passion which one would expect from its violence—is perfectly just. This, too, is incontestable, that even in this very point in which a sciolist might judge the artist to have come short of Nature