THE
LESSING
LEGEND
CRITICS GROUP PAMPHLETS

1 CERVANTES
   By PAVEL I. NOVITSKY

2 SHAKESPEARE
   By A. A. SMIRNOV

3 ART AND SOCIETY
   By GEORGE V. PLEKHANOV

4 PUSHKIN
   By GORKY, LUNACHARSKY, VINOGRAKOV, ZEITLIN

5 BALZAC
   By V. GRIB

6 IBSEN
   By ENGELS, MEHRING, PLEKHANOV, LUNACHARSKY

7 THE PHILOSOPHY OF ART OF KARL MARX
   By MIKHAIL LIFSHITZ

8 PAINTING OF THE FRENCH REVOLUTION
   By MILTON W. BROWN

9 LITERATURE AND MARXISM
   A CONTROVERSY

10 MUSIC AND SOCIETY
   By ELIE SIEGMEISTER

11 THE LESSING LEGEND
   By FRANZ MEHRING

* Special Number

A SPECTRE IS HAUNTING EUROPE
Poems of Revolutionary Spain
By RAFAEL ALBERTI
FRANZ MEHRING WAS BORN FEBRUARY 27, 1846, IN POMERANIA, THE most backward, most undeveloped region of Germany, where Prussia is most Prussian. He was the son of a very respectable semi-feudal family, his paternal grandmother being descended from one of the most aristocratic of Pomerania’s noble families. Mehring received the education suited to a young man of his class and studied history and philosophy at the Universities of Berlin and Leipzig, from the latter of which he received a Ph.D. degree.

But like so many of Germany’s best sons at that time, he refused to accept Bismarckism and with it a career as a Prussian bureaucrat. In the early seventies, when he was completing his studies, he entered politics under the democratic banner of Johann Jacoby and Guido Weiss. With their group, and on the basis of international humanitarianism and liberal democracy, he fought first against the Franco-Prussian War and then against Bismarck’s annexationist policy in Alsace and Lorraine. From this political fight he never withdrew until he fell a martyr to the struggle against the World War, this time on the basis of international socialism and proletarian democracy.

Germany after the Franco-Prussian War was very much like America after the Civil War, a bee-hive humming with industrial expansion, speculation, financial and political corruption. Mehring was well aware of this, and for him to be aware of a wrong meant to fight against it. He therefore became a socialist, but because he was still burdened with bourgeois idealism, from elements of which he was never to become entirely free, and because he was, despite his anti-Bismarck position, a nationalist—at that time there were still elements of liberalism in German nationalism—he became a Lasallean socialist. It is this that explains his apparent inconsistency during the next decade, and not, as some of his Revisionist, Menshevik and Trotskyite opponents within and without the pre-war and
The post-war Second International have asserted, that he was a mercenary and a "turncoat par excellence."

In 1875 Mehring made his first public appearance as a socialist by publishing the devastating *Herr von Treitschke der Sozialistentöteter und die Endziele des Liberalismus. Eine sozialistische Replik.* [Mr. von Treitschke, the Killer of Socialists, and the Goals of Liberalism. A Socialist Reply.] In this he thoroughly demolished the absurd anti-socialist arguments of the great German nationalist historian. But Mehring's socialism was of the Lassallean brand, and in 1877, when the then Marxist social-democratic party was at its strongest, he began his journalistic campaign against Marxist socialism. However, when Bismarck's anti-socialist legislation went into effect and drove the party underground, Mehring came to its defense, fought the anti-socialist laws, and although he was not himself a Marxian, supplied the Marxist party with a voice in the liberal and democratic papers with which he was connected. This in itself is enough to refute the charge that he was a mercenary and a turncoat, especially since Mehring was then so far from being a Marxist socialist that he tried, during the eighties, to found an effective democratic party in Germany. He soon learned, however, that to be effective a democratic party would have to be a social-democratic party. Mehring therefore took the logical step and in his forties joined the Social-Democratic Party of Germany, which was then still a Marxist party.

But in the meantime Mehring had become involved in a furious journalistic tempest in a teapot. As editor of the democratic *Berliner Volkszeitung*, his attacks on Bismarck and his defense of the socialists had earned him the hostility of the government, the better classes and the stockholders of his paper. Bismarck threatened to suppress the paper unless Mehring was removed. So when, at the end of the eighties, he defended in the columns of his paper an actress whom he had never met but whom he believed to be mistreated, a furious scandal was created around the affair as an excuse for getting rid of him. The democratic shareholders fired the socialist editor at the demand of the monarchist Junker. Soon thereafter, in 1891, Mehring became co-editor of *Die Neue Zeit*, the theoretical organ of German social-democracy, to which he had contrib-
uated since 1888 and which became, under his leadership, one of the most brilliant periodicals of the time.

From the time he entered the party to the day of his death Franz Mehring, together with Rosa Luxemburg, Karl Liebknecht and Klara Zetkin, was the center of the revolutionary nucleus within the Second International. "They belonged," wrote Karl Schmückle, "to the left wing of the Second International before the war. Their names represent—together with those of Lenin and the Bolsheviks—an entire epoch of struggle within the pre-war International. Soon after the death of Engels they had already begun the struggle against opportunism, i.e., against the distortion and corruption of Marxism in the spirit of bourgeois liberalism and in the interest of the modern imperialist bourgeoisie, and they never faltered in this struggle against the agents of the bourgeoisie within the camp of the working class itself."

In 1914, when the social-chauvinists forgot and betrayed the finely phrased resolutions and promises they had made at Stuttgart in 1907 and Basel in 1912, Franz Mehring, almost seventy years old, was among the first to go against the current and denounce the war. "He was a real man," wrote Klara Zetkin after his death, "who in his old age still added to his other imperishable services to the cause of the struggling proletariat the further immortal service that without hesitation and without fear he held high the banner of international socialism when the majority of socialists in Germany lowered it before the black-red-gold flag of the imperialists, greedy for power, and when the opposing minority did not yet dare to raise it again among the masses."

Mehring fought against the war on every front. With Rosa Luxemburg he issued on April 15, 1915 the first and only number of Die Internationale, which was immediately suppressed by the government. He was among the first to greet and support the October Revolution, and he was a founder of the Spartacist League and the Communist Party of Germany.

Franz Mehring was one of the greatest scholars of nineteenth and twentieth century Germany, a country which until recently has always
been proud of the honors it heaped upon scholarship. But the only academic honor Mehring ever received was his election to the Moscow Academy of Sciences by the government of the Soviet Union. From the government of his own country he received an honor of another sort. Because of his opposition to the war the old man spent many months in prison under "protective arrest." His imprisonment could not break his spirit, however. As soon as he was released he wrote his prison memoirs for Die Rote Fahne, the last periodical to which he contributed.

What prison could break was his health. On January 29, 1919, after a long illness brought on by imprisonment, he died. His death was no doubt hastened by the news, brought to him shortly before, that his old friends Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht had been murdered by that maniacal, sadistic crew which now calls itself the German people. "Except for his personal friends," writes Eduard Fuchs, Mehring's literary executor, "his coffin was followed to the grave only by a group of revolutionary workers. From the bourgeois world came only his closest relatives. Not a single official representative of German literature stood at his grave to speak of Mehring's great services as a writer."

In the Soviet Union the flags flew at half-mast.

Important as Mehring's political activity was, his major importance for us here is his work as a historian and critic of culture. In this field the finest tribute to Franz Mehring is the letter written to him on his seventieth birthday by Rosa Luxemburg whom, with Klara Zetkin, he used to call "the only real men in the social-democratic movement." On February 27, 1916 she wrote to him:

"Very dear friend:

"You must allow me to repeat here the few words in which I attempted to tell you why your personality and your work are and will be always especially dear to me. For decades you have been occupying among us a unique position which none but you could fill, you are the representative of true intellect and culture in all their glory and splendor. If, according to Marx and Engels, the German proletariat is the historic heir of classic German philosophy, then you have been the executor of the estate. You have saved from the
camp of the bourgeoisie and brought to us, into the camp of the socially disinherited, whatever was still left to the bourgeoisie of the golden treasure of its former intellect and culture. Through your books, as through your articles, you have inseparably united the German proletariat not only with classic German philosophy, but with classic literature as well, not only with Kant and Hegel, but with Lessing, Schiller and Goethe. You taught our workers, by every line from your splendid pen, that socialism is not a mere knife-and-fork problem, but a cultural movement, a great and proud attitude toward life. And to defend it, to guard it, has been your duty for more than a generation. Now, to be sure, the heirs of classic philosophy—since the horrible débâcle in the World War—look like miserable beggars being devoured by vermin. But the iron laws of historical dialectics which you so masterfully interpreted for the proletariat day after day will bring it to pass that the beggars, the gueux of today, will again stand up straight and will tomorrow be proud and rugged fighters. And as soon as the spirit of socialism once more takes its place in the ranks of the German proletariat, their first gesture will be to reach for your writings, for the fruits of your life's work, the value of which is imperishable and from which there always rises the same fragrance of a noble and strong attitude towards life. Today, when intellectuals of bourgeois origin betray us in hordes in order to return to the fleshpots of the rulers, we can smile in contempt as we watch them go. We have taken from the German bourgeoisie the last and best that was still left to it of intellect, talent and character—Franz Mehring. I remain always most cordially your R. Luxemburg.

This is only one of the tributes paid to Mehring for a generation of work as theoretician and critic. August Bebel, speaking before the Dresden convention of the socialist party in 1903, said of Mehring's articles in Die Neue Zeit that "many of them belong among the gems of German journalism." Mehring's work is remarkable not only for its consistently high quality, but for its volume. Besides the Lessing-Legende he wrote the classic Marx biography, a German history, a three-volume history of German social-democracy, and a book-length Schiller biography. He edited not only periodicals, but the works and letters of Marx, Engels, Lassalle and other
socialists. In addition to all this he wrote hundreds of criticisms, reviews and articles on literature, history, socialism, philosophy, military science and politics. A collected edition of the most important of these articles has been begun and so far six large volumes have appeared, one on the history of philosophy, one on German history, two on Prussian history and two on literature. These last two contain a list of more than a hundred articles not reprinted in the two volumes. One of these is the Lessing-Legende, which was omitted because of its great length and because it was still in print.

Valuable as was his work in all these fields, in most of them Mehring was only a continuer of what others had begun. In literature, however, his work has a peculiar importance, for in this he was a pioneer. Marx and Engels had discussed the application of the historical materialist method to the history and criticism of culture and had even planned such an application in practice in the book on Balzac which Marx intended to write. But neither made this application, and they left only scattered and fragmentary, although numerous, references. It was Mehring who first cultivated intensively the field of historical materialist research in literature and art.

Mehring wrote mostly for the periodical press, sometimes hastily, for "occasions," and therefore his work, seen as a whole, is marked by signs of the necessities under which it was written, by repetition, fragmentariness and incompleteness. But despite these shortcomings, his articles are always worth reading for the new and stimulating light they cast upon the material he discusses. Hence while from the point of view of systematization it is to be regretted that he was never able to carry out his plan to write a history of German literature, what he did write comes close to being a complete history. There is almost no important writer or movement in German literature from the beginning of the classical period in the middle of the eighteenth century to the end of naturalism in the twentieth century that Mehring hasn't treated with more or less completeness, although it was only rarely, to be sure, that he was able to treat any one movement or writer as a unified whole.

The most important problem which Mehring had to solve as the originator of historical materialist criticism was the problem of developing a Marxist æsthetics. This the conditions of the time and
his own background made it impossible for him to do. Mehring came to socialism in his forties, with the mature equipment of a bourgeois revolutionist strongly influenced by German classical philosophy and literature. His aesthetic theory was derived from Kant, whose idealist conception made literature a pure art, free of all interest or purpose, something that approaches perfection to the extent that it approaches a timeless ideal and a pure form. The implications of this theory are, of course, that art and propaganda are two mutually exclusive categories, that the two are in conflict, and that in this conflict aesthetics must take the side of art against propaganda.

As a socialist whose weapon was the pen, Mehring could not accept completely Kant’s formulation and its implications. He felt that since propaganda can serve the interests of the working class, it was a legitimate element in art. But instead of examining the premise which led to a conclusion he could not accept, Mehring granted that Kant was correct, and at the same time insisted that content, or propaganda, had a place in art equal to that held by form. In this Mehring was paralleling the progressive bourgeois critics of the nineteenth century who were also compelled to defend the validity of propaganda in art.

The application of this undialectic aesthetic dualism forced Mehring into a number of strange positions. This was necessarily so, for if one accepts Kant’s pure art, which is a contradiction and negation of propaganda, and at the same time tries to defend the validity of propaganda in that same pure art, one finds oneself in the unpleasant position of trying to introduce foreign matter into something that must by definition remain pure. And if art is to be considered as existing in and for itself, without purpose other than to be art, it is no solution of the problem to say that propaganda should be introduced artistically. From the Kantian point of view artistic propaganda is a contradiction in terms.

How irreconcilable are pure art and propaganda, and how inconsistent an eclecticism which attempts to accept both, is apparent from what Mehring wrote of naturalism. “The rebirth of German drama,” he wrote, “does not depend on the revision of dramatic form, or at most only to the extent that this revision serves as a means to an end.” (My emphasis.) Here we have a Kantian, who accepts the
statement that art is pure and purposeless form, taking the position that form is of no importance unless it serves an external purpose.

This error of Mehring's was not an individual shortcoming, but a reflection in literary criticism of an error in Marxist methodology as a whole at a certain stage of its development. Indeed, it is only recently that the dilemma of art vs. propaganda has been solved through the recognition that art, a description of nature in action, is possible only when the artist truly and objectively, dialectically, describes the conflicts and fluxes of reality. Pure, ideal art is rejected because art must describe reality. Propaganda is rejected because the artist should make no external demands that his material itself does not make. He should come to no conclusions which are not inherent in that material. But this does not mean that the artist remains an impartial Kantian. "Correct dialectical portrayal and literary re-creation of reality," says Lukacs, "presupposes partisanship on the writer's part... partisanship on the side of the class that is the instrument of historical progress in our time—the proletariat.

"This partisanship differs from 'propaganda' and 'tendentious' portrayal in that it is not inconsistent with objectivity in reproducing and re-creating reality. Quite the contrary, it is the necessary prerequisite for true—dialectical—objectivity. Contrary to 'propaganda' (in which support of something means its idealist glorification, while opposition to it involves its distortion) and to 'impartiality' (whose motto—never practiced—is: 'to understand all means to forgive all,' which involves taking an unconscious and hence almost always hypocritical stand), this sort of partisanship achieves the standpoint that makes possible the cognition and creative portrayal of the entire process as the summed-up totality of its real motive forces, as the perpetual, ever-higher reproduction of its underlying dialectical contradictions. This objectivity is based upon the correct—dialectical—determination of the relationship between subjectivity and objectivity, of the subjective factor to objective development. It is founded upon the dialectical unity of theory and practice.

"Partisanship in this sense, therefore, is not a new term for an old idea. It is not a matter of substituting the word 'partisanship' for 'tendency' ['propaganda'] and leaving everything else unchanged. For terminology is never fortuitous. Our adoption of the
term ‘tendency’ from the literary theory and practice of the oppositional bourgeoisie (and not even from the epic period of its revolutionary history) signified, as we have shown, that we took over a not inconsiderable ideological aggregate together with the word.”

Mehring, of course, had not reached this conclusion. On the basis of his Kantian aesthetics, and despite his acceptance of propaganda, he was compelled to take the position that as long as the proletariat uses art as a weapon in its struggle for power, the proletariat would not be able to create a great art. At the same time, however, the bourgeoisie, which is also using art as a weapon—against the proletariat—or which produces an art divorced from reality, is equally unable to create great art. “If the declining bourgeoisie class can no longer create a great art,” wrote Mehring, “the rising working class can not yet create a great art, regardless of the passionate longing for art that burns in the depths of its soul.” To be sure, “it is certain that the victory of the proletariat will introduce a new epoch in art, greater, more noble, more splendid than the human eye has ever seen,” but meanwhile the hunger of the proletariat for art must be satisfied with the finest art available. That art, Mehring believed, was the art of Germany’s classical period. For that reason he so often and so thoroughly interpreted Germany’s classic authors for the German workers. One such interpretation is Die Lessing-Legende.

With this translation of excerpts from the Lessing-Legende Mehring’s major work in literary criticism is made available to the English reader for the first time. Previously only the Marx biography (Covici, Friede, 1935), an essay on Ibsen (Critics Group, 1937) and “A Note on Taste” (Critics Group Dialectics, No. 4, 1937) have been published in English translation. Material about Mehring in English is even less available. There is a short biographical sketch prefaced to the Marx biography, and an analysis of Mehring’s aesthetics in Lukacs’ essay, “Propaganda or Partisanshipt?” (Partisan Review, Vol. I, No. 2, April-May, 1934).

Die Lessing-Legende first appeared in serial form in Die Neue Zeit for 1892. The following year it was published as a book, and a number of editions have since appeared. This study is Mehring’s masterpiece, the work which won him his position as a recognized
master of Marxist criticism, and his best piece of work. "It opened a new epoch," writes Jan Romein in the introduction to the Dutch edition of the Marx biography, "both in the life of the almost fifty-year-old Mehring and in the writing of history. In the life of Mehring because it was his first important work in the service of the movement, in the writing of history because it applies the Marxist method for the first time both in the field of biography and in the field of literature." While the essay was appearing in Die Neue Zeit Engels wrote to Kautsky, then the editor, that each installment made him impatient to receive the next issue of the magazine. Plekhanov wrote of the Lessing-Legende that Mehring had translated Lessing from the language of literature into the language of society and so had interpreted the social spirit that inspired Lessing's individual art. And the book is important not only as literary criticism, which it was intended to be, it is equally good as history. It is "the only history of Prussia during the Frederickian age that can be taken seriously," says Fuchs in his preface to Mehring's collected works.

The Lessing-Legende, like so many Marxist classics, was written as a polemic. The immediate occasion is said to have been a particularly crude misinterpretation of Lessing on the part of the bourgeois critic Erich Schmidt. Actually, however, the book is directed against the entire patriotic school of German literary historians who tried to prove, and still try to prove, that the renaissance of German literature in the eighteenth century was due to the rise of Prussia as a European power, and that there was a close connection between the despotism of the Prussian king Frederick II and the birth of classical German literature. Mehring made the falsity of these contentions obvious to all those interested in the truth about Lessing and the classics of German literature, but the acknowledged authorities of the academy who find it to their advantage to preserve the Lessing legend in order to preserve the to them more important Frederick legend, have deliberately ignored Mehring's work. Thus we find in the introduction to a popular edition of Lessing's works the following account of Lessing's refusal to accept a professorship of eloquence offered him by the University of Königsberg: "It is said that Lessing is supposed to have refused it because the position would have obligated him to deliver an annual lecture in praise of the king. It is
more probable that his refusal was dictated by his dislike for ‘professing’ which he once expressed in a letter to his brother Karl.” When we remember Lessing’s perennial poverty (to a young lady who wrote complaining of his small handwriting he replied that if he wrote larger the receipts from his writing would not pay for the paper and ink), the poverty that engulfed all independent writers in this period of patronage, and when we remember that he accepted a position as librarian in a provincial capital, it seems very probable that his dislike for “professing” was largely a dislike for the annual lecture.

But this was the “Lessing legend” which the bourgeoisie and its critics had developed, and Mehring points out that the germ of it is already to be found in Goethe, who wrote: “The fact that Frederick the Great wanted no part of them grieved the Germans, and they did their best to show him that they did amount to something.” To this Mehring replied: “According to which, our classical literature is nothing but the resentment of the limited intelligence of his subjects to bad treatment on the part of the king of Prussia.”

Amazing as this interpretation seems, it is by no means rare. Friche, whose treatment of Mehring is on the whole unsatisfactory, is, however, correct when he points out that the destruction of legends was one of Mehring’s most important tasks as a Marxist critic. These legends take two forms. One accepts a writer but perverts the ideas for which he stood. An example of this is Lessing who, Friche writes, “was not a Prussian patriot,* * * but, since after its compromise with Prussianism in 1866 the bourgeoisie found it necessary to belic its past, ‘Lessing was sacrificed to the ideological requirements of the bourgeoisie.’ He, who was anything but a lackey of Frederick, was portrayed as one by the bourgeois critics. But Lessing’s writings were revolutionary in character, and it was therefore necessary to make of him not only a patriot, but also a liberal. After these

* How little an orthodox Prussian patriot Lessing was he himself made clear in two letters he wrote to Gleim. In 1758 he wrote: “The reputation for zealous patriotism is, in my opinion, the very last thing for which I am ambitious; the sort of patriotism, that is, that requires me to forget that I should be a citizen of the world.” And several months later: “In general, I have no conception of the love of fatherland, and it seems to me at best a heroic weakness which I am very happy to do without.”
bourgeois interpretations of Lessing in the thirties . . . Lessing appears as a ‘reformer’ and a ‘liberal,’ even as a ‘destroyer of socialists.’ . . . Lessing became in German literature the symbol of the historical mission of the Hohenzollerns.”

This is the type of legend which the bourgeoisie weaves around the authors it needs. “ Entirely different,” Friche continues, “are the legends the bourgeoisie weaves around the writers it does not need. It puts on a hypocritical mask of moral indignation and insists that while these writers may have had talent, they had no character. Heine, with his frank opposition to the Prussian rulers, with his internationalism, with his occasional vacillating inclination to communism, was naturally condemned by the bourgeoisie. After his death all sorts of rumors about him were spread, and he was cast out of the ‘pantheon of truly German’ writers and thinkers as a man without a country, immoral, devoid of character and sincerity.” The fact is, of course, that they did not wait for his death. The very irrelevant criticism that he had “talent, but no character” was frequently made while Heine was alive, and he took occasion to reply to it in his satire on the “true” German philistine who boasted that he had “character, but no talent.”

In the first edition of the Lessing-Legende the book was called a “Rettung,” which means both a rescue and a vindication. And the book is both. It rescues Lessing’s work for the proletariat from the fog of bourgeois misinterpretation, and at the same time it vindicates Lessing and reestablishes him as the progressive fighter for truth and justice that he was.

It is peculiarly appropriate that Mehring’s first and finest Marxist work, a pioneer achievement in dialectical materialist literary criticism, should have been concerned with the legends that have been built around Lessing and Frederick. In the introduction to a late edition of the Lessing-Legende Mehring explains that these two were his childhood heroes. Having been educated in Prussian schools Mehring was, of course, stuffed full of the patriotic Frederick legend. His admiration for Lessing was no doubt due in part to the Lessing legend, but it must also have been due in part to the similarity between them. Both were ardent defenders of the truth as they saw it, and both came close to seeing the truth as it was. Both could be
depended upon to defend the underdog even when they did not entirely agree with what he represented. Even Mehring’s *Rettung* of Lessing was modeled on *Rettungen* of other authors which Lessing had written.

Romein writes of Mehring that “defending was his passion. He defended whatever he saw oppressed, whomever he believed unjustly treated, regardless of the opponent, whom he preferred to kill rather than to wound. He spares the rod not even for his friends. He defended the poet Platen against Heine, Lassalle and Bakunin against Marx and Engels, Schweitzer against Bebel, and the man Bernstein against Liebknecht. Innumerable are the ‘vindications of honor’ in his works. . . .” The same was true of Lessing. Himself often in a feeble minority, he never refrained from defending even more feeble minorities, even when he recognized that they had faults with which he disagreed. Mehring knew this, and when Lessing was accused of not having seen the faults of the Jews whom he constantly defended, Mehring replied that “to be sure he had seen them, but with the political tact of a real fighter he knew that one does not criticize the oppressed as long as one must fight the oppressors.”

Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, the first critic of his time, the pioneer of the German literary renaissance of the eighteenth century, a constant fighter for freedom and against prejudice, and one of the greatest representatives of revolutionary middle class ideology, was born in Kamenz, Saxony, January 22, 1729, the descendant of a long line of educated, liberal pastors. In 1669, one hundred and ten years before Lessing wrote *Nathan der Weise*, his grandfather had won his degree at the University of Leipzig by defending the thesis *De religionum tolerantia*.

Little is known of Lessing’s childhood except his love of books. The first picture that we have of him is with his younger brother Theophilus. Theophilus is playing with a lamb, but Gotthold Ephraim is surrounded by books, and the six-year-old is said to have chosen this attribute himself.

From 1746 to 1748 he was a student in the theological faculty at Leipzig. At first he was an industrious bookworm, but soon he decided that men are more important than books and that education
includes an interest in society. As his guide in society Lessing chose his cousin, Christlob Mylius. Mylius was seven years older than Lessing, a journalist and student of science, and was nicknamed "The Atheist." When Lessing's family learned that the young theologian was associated not only with Mylius, but also with actors and, even worse, actresses, they were horrified. Besides, he was getting into debt. The last straw came at Christmas, 1747, when Lessing shared the Christmas Stollen that his mother had sent him with his friends in the theatre. When his family heard of this, Lessing's father wrote the first letter to Lessing that we have. "As soon as you receive this," he wrote, "get into a stagecoach and come to us. Your mother is deathly ill and wishes to speak to you once more before she dies." Lessing, of course, followed orders, and since the weather was particularly severe that winter, he arrived home thoroughly frozen—only to find his mother quite well. The motive for his father's letter is obvious from his rebuke for Lessing's "despicable association with comedians and godless friendship with the atheist Mylius," as well as from his mother's penitent remark when she saw him on his return that "it would have been better to let him continue associating with atheists and comedians rather than have him freeze to death in the stagecoach."

Lessing spent several months at home, convinced his family that he had not wasted his time, and returned to Leipzig. There he found his friends gone. Mylius was in Berlin. The theatre had gone bankrupt and the actors had scattered. Since Lessing was responsible for the debts of some of the players, he found it advisable to leave town secretly on his way to Berlin to join Mylius. In Wittenburg he fell ill and thereupon promptly enrolled as a student in the medical faculty of the local university. But after a few months he left and finally reached Berlin where he lived from 1748 to 1760 as a free lance writer.

In 1755, at the age of 26, he wrote his first important play, Miss Sara Sampson, in which he created the character of Arabella, the most awkward, most unrealistic and most impossible figure in world literature. Nevertheless, this play was Germany's first middle class tragedy, and as such it had a profound influence in Germany and German literature. Miss Sara Sampson represents the victory of the
contemporary and the usual, the triumph of the burgher over the aristocrat, not only in literature but in life. That the bourgeoisie did not carry on what Lessing had started was not his fault.

In 1760 Lessing went to Breslau where he served as secretary to a general in the Prussian army. Here he wrote *Minna von Barnhelm* (1763) and his book on aesthetics, *Laokoon, or the Limits of Painting and Poetry* (1766).

In 1766 he was called to Hamburg to be play-reader, dramatist and critic for the newly founded German National Theatre there. From 1767 to 1769 he wrote and published *Die Hamburgische Dramaturgie*, a collection of dramatic criticism of vital importance for the German theatre. The theatre soon failed and in 1770 Lessing went to Wolfenbüttel to take a job as librarian to a petty princeling. Here he lived, ill and unhappy, until his death in 1781, and in this period he wrote *Emilia Galotti* (1772), *Nathan der Weise* (1779) a poetic drama pleading for tolerance, and a number of other works on tolerance, religion and education.

The writing of *Nathan* was almost an accident. Lessing was a friend of the Reimarus family in Leipzig, and after the death of the rationalist scholar H. S. Reimarus, he was asked to publish some papers Reimarus had left defending rationalist religion and attacking revealed religion and the inspiration of the Bible. While Lessing did not agree with Reimarus' arguments and conclusions, he thought the fragments should be published. In 1774 he began to publish them in magazines, and finally published a book of Reimarus' writings under the title *Von dem Zwecke Jesu und seiner Jünger* (*On the Purpose of Jesus and His Disciples*), explaining that he was publishing these papers in order to bring life into the study of theology and thus further the cause of truth.

The entire community of the pious, however, rose in defense of their own particular brand of orthodoxy, the pastor Johann Melchior Goeze being the most zealous. Lessing's replies to these attacks were moderate and rational. He pointed out that it does not matter whether the scriptures are inspired in fact. If they are true and inspire the men who believe in them, then they are divine whether written by God or by men. The important element in religion is to love your neighbor, said Lessing, and in *Das Testament Johannis* (1777) he
told how John reduced his sermons to the words, "Children, love one another." Those to whom he preached complained: "But, master, why do you always keep saying the same thing?... John answered: "Because the Lord commanded it. Because this alone, this alone, if it happens, is enough, is quite enough." Twenty years earlier he had expressed the same idea when he wrote in a letter to his father that only he who forgives his enemies is a Christian.

The controversy continued until Lessing thoroughly destroyed Goeze and his supporters. Thereupon, the orthodox became frightened and saw to it that Lessing's freedom from censorship was revoked and that his princely patron and employer forbade him to continue the controversy. Lessing therefore determined to have the last word on the stage. To Elise Reimarus he wrote: "I must see whether they will still allow me at least to preach undisturbed from my old pulpit, the stage." The result was Nathan der Weise, his last great attack against intolerance. In this play he did not intend to satirize his opponents, he wanted only to express his ideas in an atmosphere free of the storms of controversy. The theme, the story of the three rings, he took from the Decameron, but he changed it so that it emphasized "Children, love one another." "It is action, not dogma, that counts. The best religion is the one that best knows how to produce good people." About the play he wrote to his brother Karl that "the theologians of all the revealed religions will probably swear at it in secret, but they won't dare to come out against it in public."

There can be no better conclusion to a discussion of either Lessing or Mehring than the following passage from Lessing, which might stand as an epitaph over both: "Not the truth that a man knows or thinks he knows, but rather the honest effort he makes to reach the truth is what determines the worth of a man."

JOSEPH KRESH
I. LESSING'S ORIGINS:
THE ORIGINS OF GERMAN MIDDLE CLASS CULTURE

THE IDEA THAT LESSING WAS A SECOND LUTHER MUST BE AVOIDED. Traces of this idea can be found even in Heine and Lassalle; and even Lessing himself in his theological discussions once referred to the authority of Luther. Unless he did so for tactical reasons, he demonstrated in a curious way that even the clearest minds may not be clear as to the motives that determine their actions. As a matter of fact, from the beginning to the end of his career Lessing directed his hardest blows against Luther and Lutheranism. Luther fought for the class of the princes, while Lessing fought for the middle classes; the two constitute the most direct opposites known to German history from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century. Lessing was by no means a Luther on a higher scale. The parson Goeze, Luther’s genuine successor, called Lessing the Anti-Luther, and rightly so. In Lassalle’s excellent words: “The great fault of the Goezes past and present consists in—being right.”

Yet the fact that Luther and Lessing came from the same state is not unimportant. In that part of Germany which shook off the domination of the Hapsburgs and the Pope, Saxony was by far the most developed economically, and consequently the most civilized. The returns from her mines gave the Saxon princes a great advantage in the beginning of capitalist development. In the first decades of the sixteenth century, there was no more powerful German territorial prince than the Saxon Elector Friedrich. The production of commodities advanced rapidly in Saxony; the great trade route from the South to the North of Europe passed through Erfurt. The Lutheran movement was born of the struggle for this important commercial centre, which at the same time possessed the most important German university and was the main centre of German humanism. The city of Erfurt, which itself strove for independence from any princely power, had for long been an object of contention be-
tween Mayence and Saxony. When the Hohenzollern Albrecht was elected Archbishop of Mayence, the quarrel began again. Under these circumstances it could not be expected that the Saxon Elector Friedrich should allow “indulgences” to be sold in his state by a commissar of Albrecht; half of the revenues of the sale were intended to pay the 25,000 ducats which Albrecht owed to Rome for his election.

The Elector Friedrich was a peace-loving gentleman. And more, he was an extremely bigoted Catholic, a believer to the same degree that his adversary Albrecht was an unbeliever. His highest ambition was to receive the Golden Rose from the Pope; he undertook a pilgrimage to Jerusalem and bought for the Wittenberg Palace Church five thousand questionable bones of saints from all over the world. This was the same church on whose doors Luther had nailed his theses against the indulgences—and here these relics were exhibited on a certain day every year for the people to adore. When Luther, just before publishing his theses, had preached against indulgences, he lost the favor of the Elector, who feared that such preaching might lessen the attractions of his relics. However his most peace-loving attitude disappeared when money was at stake. For a long time the Elector had observed to his annoyance that the Roman vendors of indulgences gathered like a swarm of bees in his state, and for very good reasons. However much money he might have spent on the bones of dead saints, he was not inclined to use the money of his state to present the Roman Church with a new living saint in the person of Archbishop Albrecht, who intended to rob him of the rich city of Erfurt. Therefore he allowed Luther to continue, not as a “man of God” but as a tool of his financial policy. Nothing is more unfounded than to see a “world historical action” in Luther’s theses against indulgences and to date the beginning of the Reformation from them. The Anti-Roman movement had been in existence for decades in all classes of the German nation, and the fight against the abuses of the church had already found literary expression, for instance in the writings of the humanists. They were much more scathing than the rather tame theses of Luther, who did not even blame the indulgences themselves, but only their “abuses.” It is equally wrong to say that Luther dealt with the questions in a
straightforward, vigorous, popular manner, while the culture of the humanists was beyond the reach of the people. Luther's theses, too, were drafted in Latin, and written in the peculiar mysterious style of scholastic theology, which was absolutely incomprehensible to the masses. Luther himself often expressed his surprise at the tremendous consequences of his step. What he did not grasp, and what the bourgeois historians can explain only by some fantastic ideological assumption, is very simply explained by the economic situation of Luther's time. Of the intellectual leaders of the Reformation, Luther, the narrowest mind among them, survived, while the more important intellects, Hutten, Münzer, Wendel Hipler perished. Behind Luther stood the power which was economically the most important—the princes. Behind the others stood the barons, the proletariat, the peasants and the burghers—classes which were either economically declining or just beginning to rise. Because their economic interests were mutually opposed, they could not unite in a common action against the princes. After the rebellion of the barons and especially after the Peasants' War, Luther understood his rôle very well, as this glorious sentence alone demonstrates: "That two and five equal seven, you can understand with your reason; but if your rulers say two and five are eight, you must believe it, against your own knowledge and instinct."

With regard to his really fine achievement—that he, as a poor and unknown monk, recognized and fought the vices of the exploiting Roman Church—Luther neither stood alone among the proletarian part of the clergy of his time, nor in the front rank. Many of those priests honorably bore witness to their hatred of Rome and their faithfulness to their class by dying on the battlefield or on the scaffold. But as a "peasant's son risen high," a "leader of the nation," Luther was the Great Man of usual stamp: the exponent of historical evolution tried to master and to check it. Luther could organize the new church according to the needs of German petty despotism; he could make the very worldly territorial princes bishops of their states, and could attribute to them the right of disposing of the church and monastery demesne. But he could do all this only as a fanatical servant of the princes, as an intellectual champion of the irresistible decay which befell Germany, and at
the price of making his name the symbol of the narrowest reaction as early as the middle of the sixteenth century.

The high economic development of Saxony was the most important factor in Luther's rise, yet it imposed certain limits on the omnipotence of the princes which Luther advocated. In a still half-barbarian state like Brandenburg—where, as a learned priest said, an educated man was as rare as a white raven—the Elector Joachim could half change over to the cause of the Reformation, in order to spend the revenue of the whole church demesne on his pleasures. In a civilized country like Saxony such a summary method was impossible. Here a more or less important part of the loot had to be devoted to the cultural tasks which the Roman Church had fulfilled, as well as it could up to that time. So the Saxon schools were founded, in Innaberg and Freiberg, in Dresden and Leipzig, in Naumberg and Merseburg, all of them famous in their way, but the most famous of them were the so-called "princes" schools of Grimma, Meissen and Pforta, which had grown out of monasteries.

In Saxony a school system was born that might be called classical, for German conditions. It did not maintain this standard, however, but shared the fate of Saxony's economic prosperity that had brought about these institutions. Through Germany's exclusion from the world market, through the discoveries of inexhaustible supplies of gold and silver in the New World, through the Thirty Years War, and so on, the middle classes in Saxony, as in the whole of Germany, declined economically and grew appallingly servile. The further this decline continued, the more fanatically the Saxon schools—and above all the universities of Leipzig and Wittenberg—defended the ideological reflection of their wretched condition, that rigid and fossilized Lutheranism in whose shadow free scientific research could not possibly flourish. Nevertheless Saxony still remained superior to the rest of Germany in education and economic wealth. Dull mirrors as the Saxon schools had become, they were able to receive the first rays of a new culture which was reflected on Germany from abroad.

Lassalle has sharply repudiated Julian Schmidt's assertion that Germany was temporarily struck off the register of European civilization by the Thirty Years War; and he has enumerated the sur-
prisingly large number of outstanding men which Germany nevertheless produced during and after that war. This argument against a remark inspired by shallow ignorance is quite justified, but it must not be extended to the statement that in the seventeenth century Germany was on the same level as other civilized European nations. A great, if not the greatest, part of those important intellects had to go abroad, permanently or at least for a time, in order to have the necessary scope for their talents; those remaining at home were intellectually dependent on foreign influence, obedient disciples of greater masters, as Thomasius, one of the most important of them, candidly said. This fact is again explained by Germany’s economic decay. The great advance in mathematics and the natural sciences which mark the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was the result of an international traffic which conquered more and more the whole earth.

This advance could have its real roots only in those nations which had an important part in this traffic, above all England and the Netherlands. The fundamental condition of this progress was a high development of the middle classes, and its consequence was the awakening of a political self-consciousness in these classes. But in Germany there was no middle class as an independent force, since the trade routes had moved from the Mediterranean to the Atlantic Ocean; the ruling classes in Germany were the princes, and they certainly could not produce a national scientific life.

If one is to believe the patriotic Milites Gloriosi who set the fashion in Germany today, the German worship of foreign culture so predominant in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries is something which a real patriot can remember only with horror. But the scientific conception which sees in the intellectual life of nations the reflection of class struggles, must distinguish between two quite different aspects of the question. Certainly the imitation of foreign manners by the German princes and aristocracy was a brutal denial of the extremely modest national consciousness; it will always remain a stain on German history. It meant aping the foreigners, and was born of the vilest interests of petty despotism. But this shameless aping of foreigners did not have to wait for the patriots of today to condemn it, it was denounced already by serious contemporaries,
to mention only Klopstock and Lessing. Logau wrote in the seventeenth century:

Servants wear their masters' livery.
France as master, Germany as servant shall it be?
Free Germany, be ashamed of this vile slavery!

The worship of foreign culture by German scholars calls for quite another and really a contrary judgment. It was the first attempt of intelligent middle class elements to drag their class out of a bottomless swamp. There was no other way to accomplish this aim; the fruit borne by the native plant of orthodox Lutheranism was indigestible. But it is a difficult and ungrateful task to attempt to revive a dead stem, one that no longer receives any nourishment from its roots, by grafting on it branches from foreign trees. Only when the old stem itself returned to life, only when the German middle classes began to recover a little economically, that is, after the middle of the eighteenth century, did the foreign branches grow on the native tree. Until then, no other course was open to German scholars save to seek their intellectual nourishment and even their motherland abroad. The more so as the princes who ruled Germany were either hostile or indifferent to German culture, or else regarded it with a very questionable interest, namely, to make it serve their petty despotism. The princes either allowed German scholars to starve or forced them to go abroad, or attached them to their courts. It is difficult to say which of the three was more disastrous to those concerned. Therefore it is easy to understand why the German scholars who stayed in Germany became rather peculiar characters, and why German enlightenment had such a half-hearted and ambiguous character, so repulsive to a man like Lessing. English and French philosophy were rooted in the middle classes of the English and French nations; this origin was at once their fetter and their protection. German enlightenment had no such roots and floated in the air; nothing prevented it from going as far as the "light of reason" shone, but nothing protected it either, when a ray of this light fell too revealingly on the cesspool of despotism; hence the hypocritical mixture of smiling condescension and pious horror with which the German exponents of enlightenment thought to ridicule
the English and French "materialists and naturalists, atheists and
Spinozists." But they made only themselves ridiculous. Bourgeois
science has never wholly recovered from this ugly disease, because
the German middle classes never dared to stand on their own feet.
And since the German bourgeoisie has taken refuge behind Prussian
bayonets, this illness has returned, and in an even worse form than
ever.

Under such circumstances Saxony had to become the principal
country for the intellectual awakening of the German middle classes.
The Saxon schools were the only institutions or, at least, the most
suitable ones for acquiring the middle class culture of foreign coun­
tries. They had fallen very far from their old level through orthodox
Lutheranism. The ancient languages were taught only to enable
the pupils to discuss endlessly every letter in the Bible. For all this,
these languages were no less the keys to the treasury of European
science, and from the end of the 17th century until far into the 18th,
most exponents of German culture were Saxons, or came from Saxon
schools, from Leibnitz, Pufendorf and Thomasius to Gellert, Klop­
stock, Lessing. Even more: with the entrance of Goethe and Schiller
into Saxon culture a new period began in the lives of these Southern
Germans. Weimar did not belong to the sphere of military Prussia
but to the cultural sphere of Saxony, and Karl August, the duke of
Weimar, was not a Hohenzollern, but came of the Wettin dynasty.

But this is already beyond the frame of this essay. Yet part of our
task is to indicate briefly the social progress represented by these
two groups of names. Leibnitz, Pufendorf, Thomasius stood already
on bourgeois ground. It was in the interest of the middle classes
that they tried to liberate science from the chains of theology.
Leibnitz's philosophical optimism, much as can be said against it,
weakened the influence of the orthodox concept of the world as a
vale of tears. Pufendorf and Thomasius taught the doctrine that
all society was derived from a contract and that the individual had
the right to resist against obvious injustice. They denied the divine
origin of monarchical power and applauded the pamphlets pub­
lished in the Netherlands against the despotism of King James II.
And it was Thomasius who brought the German language back to
the lecture hall of the universities. But the work of these men found
no support nor echo in the middle classes. Leibnitz in his lasting achievements was more of a European than a German scholar; Pufendorf and Thomasius themselves confessed to having taken their ideas from Hugo Grotius and Thomas Hobbes. All of them were still dependent on the courts. During his lifetime Leibnitz already became famous for being able to prove anything that princes wanted to have proved. Pufendorf ended his life as a Brandenburgian and Swedish court historian; Thomasius made the most incredible concessions to monarchical despotism in his later years, when he was a Prussian professor in Halle.

But about the middle of the eighteenth century, Gellert, Klopstock and Lessing not only stood on bourgeois ground, but were already rooted in it. Gellert was a very small figure compared with the other two, but his *Fables* gave the middle classes their first literary banner, and humble and loyal as Gellert was personally, the first faint sound of middle class opposition can be discovered in his harmless rhymes. Much prouder and more outspoken is this class-consciousness in Klopstock who, later on, was to be the bard of the French Revolution, and above all in Lessing, who disdained the fetters of an office in the service of any court or state, and tried to live for his literary calling in social liberty. It was an enormously bold venture in Germany, and its tragic outcome taught the lesson that the middle classes were not ripe for the boldness of their representative, and this self-confidence, half nonchalant, half defiant, showed the whole Lessing. It was the same whether he wrote as a twenty-year-old youth: "What do I care if I live in wealth or not, as long as I do live!" or as a fifty-year-old man: "I am too proud to think myself unhappy, and gnash my teeth and let the boat drive, as wind and water will; let it suffice that I myself don’t want to overturn it!" It formed the strongest contrast to the anxious and greedy philistine worry about a "good life," so obviously displayed in the correspondence of the contemporaries, and something of this frank and free attitude was probably given to Lessing by his school.
The historians who represent King Frederick as being related in mind and spirit to the bourgeois classics, and particularly to Lessing, usually adduce some of his utterances such as the following: "The sovereign is the first servant of his state"; "I will be a king of the poor;" "There should be no restriction on the Press;" "In my state each can find salvation after his own fashion."

However, as these principles stand in more or less glaring contrast to Frederick's whole reign, one is tempted to take them as a product of the noted liberalism of crown princes. The more so if it is borne in mind that these nice phrases were uttered shortly before or immediately after his accession to the throne—that is, at a time when the dreadful pressure under which his father had held him from infancy was released. As a matter of fact Carlyle takes them as such, and in spite of all his hero worship he remains a practical Englishman, saying: "This beautiful language aroused in the world of that time an admiration which is not immediately intelligible to us, since we have long been accustomed to it and know its usual outcome." Obviously it did not occur to Carlyle then, in the fifties, that this unintelligible admiration would in the nineties be made the proper duty of every patriotic German!

Even Carlyle's conception is still too favorable to the bourgeois Prussian historians, and far too unfavorable to Frederick himself. It is scarcely necessary to state that scientific historical research has as little to do with the anti-Prussian mythologists as with the pro-Prussian ones. To see in Frederick the source of all evil is the opposite pole of the same folly, namely, to see in his person the source of all good.

Whoever studies the history of this sovereign according to scientific principles will discover as his outstanding talent, as the main cause of his successes, a quality which should be especially appreciated by adherents of the materialist conception of history. Freder-
ick was fully aware that he could not advance even one step more than the economic conditions under which he lived and reigned allowed. Not that his judgments surpassed his time; rather they lagged far behind it, and were anything but inspired. Not that he never was deceived regarding economic conditions; he was, often enough, and always paid the price for it.

During the Seven Years War he wrote to his always despondent brother Henry that he will win who has the last thaler in his pocket; he called the finances the "nerves" of the state, and in his description of the Prussian state put them above everything else, even above the army. So we see that from the very first day to the last of his reign he adhered to this fundamental conception. It is difficult to say when this was most evident: on the day of his accession, when as a man not yet thirty he changed within a moment from an oppressed slave to an absolute despot, or on the last day, when after all his successes and fifty years of despotic reign he remained undeceived as to the limits set by the conditions of his time.

When he said that "the sovereign is the first servant of his state," he did not mean to submit himself to this ideal, nor did he intend thereby to gain a cheap popularity. He was merely concerned with the free disposal of the country's economic means of power. For this expression—uttered first by the emperor Tiberius—does not imply a limitation but an extension of absolutism, and although this might be a deep secret to the narrow vulgar minds of today, Frederick's contemporaries were well aware of it. So writes Heinse in his Ardinghello: "How can he be a servant whom nobody commands, who does not recognize a master above him, who makes laws as he likes, issues them and does not accept any, who punishes arbitrarily without law?" In effect, when Louis XIV said "I am the State," a moral responsibility towards the state on the part of the sovereign was still recognized, and this was yet to be shown by the execution of Louis XVI. But if the sovereign makes himself only a servant, but the first servant of the state, this means, in an absolutist state, that he renounces such responsibility. For one cannot make oneself the slave of one's own property, and how far Frederick considered the "state" as his property can be seen from his testament, in which he bequeaths to his nephew not only his "gold and silver vessels, library,
picture gallery," etc., but also "the Kingdom of Prussia," as if it were an ordinary farm.

In asserting that he was the first servant of the state, Frederick pursued very practical aims. He made this remark about six times, first when he was crown prince, when he opened his Anti-Machiavell with the statement that there are two kinds of sovereigns: those that see all with their own eyes, and govern their states themselves, and those that rely on the honesty of their ministers and are ruled by whoever gets power over their minds. The first kind are absolute masters, as if they were the souls of their states, they are the first keepers of justice, the high commanders of the fighting army, the directors of the financial administration, in short, the first servants of the state. These Frederick will emulate. The others refer obviously to his father, who in the tragedy of young Frederick had been the blindly raging tool of the Austrian partisans Grumbkow and Seckendorf. And, in general, however strange a tyrant Frederick William I * might have been, he created and favored the civil service class, allowing them a more or less important part in the government. Frederick detested the civil servants, considering them an obstacle to his enlightened despotism, and was always trying to remove them.

We shall later deal with the question whether he really succeeded in this or whether his father did not prove the more enlightened despot. Here it only matters to know what Frederick intended. It was his desire that all civil servants blindly execute his despotic will, and the phrase that the sovereign is the first servant of the state was his guide to action. In this he always remained faithful to himself. Forty years after the Anti-Machiavell he writes that although the sovereign is a "human being" like "the lowest of his subjects," yet he is at the same time "the first judge, the first financier, the first minister of society," and has the same interest as the people. This, Frederick argued, would not be the case with an aristocracy of generals and ministers, if he were to surrender to them. Frederick governed without the civil servant class altogether; he saw the ministers officially only once a year at the so-called "Review of Ministers" in June; he disposed of all government acts himself.

* Frederick II's father.
using three so-called Chamber Secretaries, whom he chose almost
without exception from subaltern clerks, condemning them to a life
of monk-like solitude, or even, as a foreign diplomat said, holding
them under guard like state prisoners.

It is somewhat different with “the king of the poor,” for a docu­
mentary attestation of this sentence does not exist at all. Treitschke,
too, is not quite right when he says: “The most human of the royal
duties, the protection of the poor and oppressed, was for the
Hohenzollerns a commandment of self-preservation; proudly they
carried the name ‘kings of beggars,’ bestowed by French scorn.”
This “most human of the royal duties” had no meaning for Frederick.
The wealthy and oppressing class, the large landowners and Junkers,
were subsidized by the exchequer and were granted licentious privi­
leges. And as for “French scorn,” it really has nothing what­
soever to do with the subject. It rather refers to a remark which
Frederick made some months before his accession to the throne at a
dinner of the Duke of Brunswick in Berlin: “If once I mount the
throne, I shall be a real king of beggars.” By this he sought either
to pave his way with good intentions, or—what is more likely—to
hit back at his father’s financial art in fleecing the people. It was in
this sense that his father himself interpreted the remark; when
informed of it, it brought on his last fit of fury against his son. In
any case, this utterance had no practical consequences: financial
methods under Frederick remained where Frederick William had left
them, and after the Seven Years War they were made infinitely more
oppressive.

We come now to the “gazettes,” which “must not be em­
arrassed,”* and here we shall witness a little interlude of foreign
policy. Through his attitude towards the press Frederick wished to
secure for himself another weapon against the European powers.
That this is so is apparent from the fact that the historical source of
this saying is a letter written by the cabinet minister Count Podewil
on the 5th of June 1740, the sixth day of Frederick’s reign. It runs
as follows: “His Royal Majesty, after rising from the table, ordered
me most graciously to make known in His High name to the ministers
of State and War, that an unlimited liberty shall be granted to the

* Frederick’s literal words.
Berlin journalists, to write in their articles on the events here, whatever they like, without being censured; for this pleases His Highness, and then foreign ministers would not be able to complain if they encountered occasionally in the local press passages that might displease them. I took the liberty to suggest that the Austrian court would be very 'particular' on this subject; but His Majesty replied that gazettes, to be interesting, must not be embarrassed." This glorious "liberty of the press" was nothing but an old and yet eternally new diplomatic trick, making it possible to say all sorts of unpleasant things to foreign powers and yet disclaim responsibility. Besides, the strict press law, repeatedly insisted upon by Frederick, remained, and stipulated "that in public nothing may be printed without higher permission," and any criticism of the government or administration, even "any discussion of public conditions," was considered "absolutely impermissible." In the political sections of the Berlin journals of that time one finds only news of fires, earthquakes, monsters, etc.

On principle, Frederick always professed to be opposed to liberty of the press, even in his literary correspondence with French writers, to whom he was wont to display his liberalism; as, for example, in his letter to d'Alembert dated April 7th 1772: "One has to suppress everything in books which endangers the general security and the welfare of society." Even at the close of his life, in a cabinet order issued October 14th 1780, the king rendered homage to liberty of the press in his own peculiar way, by inflicting military service as punishment for "unauthorized journalism that stirred up the subjects and caused insolent vexations."

Actually there is no more classical witness against the press system of Frederick than Lessing himself, who in the bitterest poverty of his early years was averse to editing a political paper in Berlin under a censorship which suppressed every independent expression; and who in his mature years characterized with bitter words "the Prussian liberty to think and to write" as being "only and exclusively the liberty to make as many gibes against religion as one likes. The honest man should be ashamed to use this liberty."

Here we come to the religious policy of Frederick and to the most famous of his winged words. In the phrase: "All religions
must be tolerated, and each one must find salvation after his own
fashion,” Stahr sees the “fundamental idea of Nathan,” and who
knows how many have credulously repeated his wisdom. One might
wonder why Stahr and his followers did not prefer to quote an­
other cabinet order issued at the same time on the same question, an
order that might even remind one of the parable of the three rings,
namely his reply to the request of a Catholic for citizenship in
Frankfort: “All religions are equally good, if only the people that
profess them are honest people, and if Turks and heathens would
come and populate the country, then we would build mosques
and churches for them as well.” This indeed would be something
like the “three rings,” but—the despairing phrase “and would popu­
late the country” prevented this cabinet order from being developed
into another patriotic fable. Frederick wanted to “populate” his
poor and sparsely-settled country in order to get recruits for his
army and taxes for his exchequer; and for this purpose Christians,
Turks, heathens and—for financial purposes at least—even Jews
were highly welcomed, and were granted immediate recognition of
their service and protection of religious liberty. As a matter of fact,
he never dreamed of granting equal civil rights to all religious
bodies; nothing was ever further from his thought than to consider
the Jew, the Turk, the Mohammedan as being equal to the Protestant.
Such equality was demanded by Locke in his book on tolerance, and
after him by the whole school of bourgeois rationalism.

The Protestant clergy considered Frederick’s accession to the
throne to be a convenient opportunity to get rid of the Roman
Catholic schools established for soldiers’ children by Frederick
William I. They asked the king to suppress these schools, referring
to a report of the chancellor of the exchequer accusing their clerical
teachers of subversive propaganda; but Frederick wrote on the mar­
gin of this petition: “The religions must all be tolerated, and the
only thing the chancellor has to keep in mind is that no religion
prejudices the other, for in this country each one must find salvation
after his own fashion.” The so-called “fundamental idea of Nathan”
consists thus in nothing more than the maintenance of an institution
already established by his father, a sovereign of the most limited
church-faith, who did not even recoil from ill treatment of his oldest
son, the later king Frederick, for having a different view of some subtle Calvinist dogma than he should have had according to the paternal will. Nevertheless Frederick William I established Roman Catholic schools for soldiers’ children, and also maintained in the town of Brandenburg a Russian pope for the Russian soldiers in his army; he even allowed them, no matter where they were stationed, to journey to Brandenburg for the satisfaction of their religious needs, thus incurring the risk of desertion, which he feared like the pest. It actually happened once that twenty costly-gained Russians took advantage of this to desert from their regiment, which was garrisoned at Halle under the “old Dessauer.”

What Stahr and his blind followers took for “the fundamental idea of Nathan” was nothing other than the first commandment of the Prussian military state. The foreign recruiting, in itself already difficult, would have become altogether impossible if the resistance of the governments and the people had been backed by the churches. This was especially true in the case of Prussia, whose chief fields of recruiting were the clerical states of Southern and Western Germany. The Roman Catholic clergy considered Prussia the most heretical state not so much on account of the pronounced “Protestant convictions of the Hohenzollerns,” as represented by the obliging historians, but rather because the kingdom of Prussia proper—the province of East Prussia of to-day—had been expropriated from the Catholic church. The military state of Prussia had every reason to treat the Catholic church delicately, for its very existence depended upon it; and Frederick, who saw this quite clearly, protected the Catholic soldiers’ school from Protestant persecutions and prohibited any attack on Catholicism by Protestant chaplains. He decreed that every regiment should have regular services for the Catholic soldiers and ordered that in all field hospitals a Catholic priest should be present to give religious comfort to his adherents. In 1751 he made known to the “Holy Father” that the Catholics were not only tolerated in his states, but even preferred.

There was another very important military consideration. In spite of every vigilance, and the bloodiest of articles of war, desertion

* Leopold of Dessau, Prussian general.
continued rife among his hired troops, and against so obstinate an evil even religious means were not to be despised. The military regulations decreed that “the boys should fear God,” that on Sundays they were to be led to church twice, and they “should always silently and with reverence listen to God’s word.” To make the military oath effective, its “holiness” had to be pumped into “the boys” by a clergyman of their own faith. It is characteristic that Frederick held the Jesuits, with their strict discipline, in highest esteem; and he cruelly punished a priest of this order who dared to doubt the “holiness” of the military oath. After the abolition of the Jesuit order Frederick sent word to Pope Clemens XIV through his Roman chargé d’affaires: “I never found better priests than the Jesuits, in any respect.” He maintained the Jesuits without frock as “priests of the royal schools” in his country. Perhaps the liberal Jesuit-haters and culture-mongers of to-day call this “Frederickian tradition”! But when a certain recaptured deserter declared that the Jesuit father Faulhaber had explained to him in Glatz at confession that although desertion was a great sin still it was a sin that could be forgiven, then Frederick without trial, even without confession, ordered that this priest be hanged next to a deserter who had already been rotting for half a year.

Frederick treated the Protestant clergy more contemptuously. He used them also for his military and educational purposes, to keep the army and the people in humility, obedience and ignorance; but he had a much lower estimate of their efficiency, and whenever these poorly-paid people asked for a small increase in salary or any other improvement of their situation, he used to fob them off by pointing to the apostles who had preached for nothing—in short with remarks that Lessing might rightly call “gibes at religion.”

To the superficial observer Frederick’s religious policy presents a contradictory picture, but in fact it is linked up logically with the possibilities of existence of the Prussian state of that time.

The development of the Prussian state brought Frederick into the strongest opposition to the Catholic church, and accordingly, Frederick took care that those admitted to the important administrative posts of the state and municipalities were Protestants; but the maintenance of this state forced upon him a military and population
policy the first condition of which was the toleration of all religious
faiths, and even to a certain degree the favoring of the Catholic
church. And as supports of his despotism he preferred the Jesuits
to all other priests.

In all this there is not to be found the least shred of Frederick’s
personal liberalism.

But what has this to do with Nathan, what has Frederick to do
with Lessing? About as much as, or even less than the emperor
William II had to do with Lassalle and Marx. In a narrow sense
parallels can be found between Frederick and the young William
II: “The sovereign is the first servant of his state”—William dis­
misses Bismarck; “King of the beggars”—February decrees; “Free­
dom of the press”—abolition of the anti-socialist laws; “Each one
must find salvation after his own fashion”—Prussian draft of law for
primary schools. In each case there was a peaceful separation of the
faiths, but every faith in its realm had to hold spiritual domination
over the masses.

However, nowadays one who called the emperor William II a
“collaborator and fellow-combatant of his great contemporaries”
Lassalle and Marx would be entrusted to the care of a lunatic
asylum, provided he did not find himself within prison walls for
lèse-majesté.

It is still more absurd to paint Frederick and Lessing as being
akin in mind and spirit. They had nothing in common; being the
most gifted representatives of their respective classes, they embodied
the most acute differences of their time in the most acute way.
Frederick deeply despised the “roture,” whose advocate Lessing
was, and with his own hands expelled every bourgeois element from
the ranks of his officers. Lessing, in absolute agreement with his
spiritual kinsmen Herder and Winckelmann, loathed Frederick’s state
as “the most servile country in Europe.”
EARLIER THAN ANY FRENCHMAN, LESSING SO TO SPEAK DISCOVERED the English bourgeois tragedy. Lessing, however, merely remained subject to its immediate influence. In the meantime Diderot had further developed and popularized this tendency in France. He was the first to show that the serious conflicts of honorable characters arising from the circumstances of bourgeois life—even if they are not tragic—provide a new and rich source for dramatic subjects. Lessing was further stimulated by the practice as well as the theory of Diderot. Already in 1760 he had translated in two volumes the *Theatre of Monsieur Diderot*, containing *Le Fils Naturel, Le Père de Famille* and the essay on dramatic poetry. While *Minna* leans aesthetically on a French model, and her “plagiarisms” are generally believed to be borrowed from English comedies, nevertheless it is an out-and-out German play. What could be more German than that the classical bourgeois comedy should deal with military life?

This is not only meant satirically, it touches the very essence of *Minna*. One should not be mystified by the bourgeois critics of literature who allege that *Minna* glorifies king Frederick or the Seven Years War. Even Goethe in a weak moment succumbed to this absurd idea; but the same Goethe later said:

> When people compare the pieces of Lessing with those of the ancients, and call them paltry and miserable, what do they mean? Let them rather pity the extraordinary man who lived in a time too poor to afford him better materials; pity him because he found nothing better to do than to meddle with Saxon and Prussian transactions in his *Minna.*

Again Lessing is too badly judged. Lessing was really capable of

finding better subject matter than the quarrels between Saxons and Prussians, or even the glorification of Frederick. But in order to portray serious conflicts of honorable characters he was forced by the meanness of German affairs to deal with army life; yet he saw the social aspect of this life, and here too waged the struggle against social oppression. Lessing's comedy is so little a glorification of Frederick that it scourged his despotism precisely where it was most mortal.

It is in the very nature of despotism to take revenge upon every insurmountable resistance to its tyranny by inflicting malicious vexations upon the individual resister. Thus Frederick, unable to shake the economic basis of the Prussian army, and forced to exalt an officer caste, tormented and tortured the individual officer. The length to which he would go in this respect is almost incredible, as can be seen from his cabinet-orders, to quote only one example. If he was obliged to grant leave to an officer because of serious illness, he would least satisfy his despotic temper to the extent of ordering a different cure or a different bath than that ordered by the doctor. Or, he just drove him out of the service. Frederick in a bad mood would use the least occasion to dismiss an officer. At every inspection the individual officer had to fear immediate dismissal, and once dismissed it was rarely possible for him to enter the army again. It was one of the inviolable principles of Frederickian despotism that the king could never be wrong, and Frederick clung to this principle even in those cases where he himself was afterwards forced to recognize his injustice. "My army is no brothel!" was his standing answer to all petitions of dismissed officers for re-entry into the army, and his refusals increased in scorn the more the personal feelings of honor and justice of the individual officers had been the cause of dismissal, as in the case of Blücher and of Yorck.

The king never tortured his Prussian officers more subtly than before and after the peace of Hubertusburg. It was at this time that Lessing lived with the army. The king kept his winter-quarters during 1761-62 in Breslau, in monk-like solitude, in gloomy despair, for the last ray of hope seemed to have vanished; but suddenly, in January 1762, the death of the Czarina Elizabeth brought redemp-
tion. However, Frederick's feeling of relief was mingled with shame that chance rather than his own might had been his saviour, by bringing a fool to the Russian throne. It is easy to understand that in reaction to this he behaved more than ever like a despot and conqueror, as far as his power reached. By holding superfluous parades he spoiled the recreation of the harassed troops at winter-quarters. He deprived the officers of the so-called douceur-money, which in reality was no present, but rather an indispensable aid towards equipping them for the new campaign. He demanded such enormous contributions from the town of Leipzig, already drained of the last penny, that the major and adjutant von Dyherrn, charged with enforcement, felt impelled to make serious objections; these objections being unavailing, the major awaited only the peace to throw his sword before the king's feet. When in February 1763 peace was made, Frederick inflicted another judgment on the army: he turned away all the troops he could no longer use during peacetime and pitilessly threw all the bourgeois officers on the street, although their courage and loyalty had just saved him his crown. In their place he put foreign adventurers of noble extraction—their nobility being often as dubious as that of Riccaut de la Marlinière.

It was under these conditions that Lessing lived, and out of them arose his Minna von Barnhelm. Here he glorifies a spirit by no means military, but very bourgeois; a spirit that even in the face of royal despotism clings inflexibly to its sense of justice. It is in this spirit that Tellheim thinks and acts. For Tellheim, "the service of the great is dangerous, does not repay the trouble, the restraint, the humiliation which it costs." He does for the great little by inclination, not much more by duty, but all for his own honor's sake; and at best he cannot regret having become a soldier. "I became a soldier for party-feeling—I do not myself know on what political principles—and from the whim that it is good for every honorable man to try the profession of arms for a time, to make himself familiar with danger, and to learn coolness and determination. Extreme necessity alone could have compelled me to make this trial

* Character of Lessing's play Minna von Barnhelm.
a fixed mode of life, this temporary occupation a profession." (V, 9, Vol. II, p. 404.) To go soldiering for its own sake, "is only travelling about like a butcher's apprentice, nothing more." Certainly in Tellheim the Frederickian officer is much idealized, and a good portion of Lessing is contained in him. Yet no other German has been able to present on the stage such a finished and solid personality. What does it matter then if Lessing for the theme of his comedy did borrow this or that small feature from foreign models?

Have the bourgeois historians of literature at all understood the story of Minna? On the basis of shadowy analogies they look for its origin in Shakespeare, in the Spanish plays of cape and sword and even in Plautus; yet in fact the truth was near at hand for these patriots! The story of Minna is nothing else but a sharp satire on the regime of Frederick. Tellheim, the major, has been discharged after the peace, and subjected to a painful inquiry. He had been required to enforce with the utmost severity a contribution in cash from some Thuringian estates; but as they could not pay, he had advanced the sum from his own pocket. When peace was signed he intended to have this bill entered "amongst the debts to be rectified": but it is alleged that he was bribed by the estates to accept the lowest possible contribution. Frederick learns from his brother that Tellheim is "more than innocent" of bribery, and informs him that the court's treasury has ordered that the bill in question be tendered and the money refunded to Tellheim. Tellheim is asked to re-enter the service.

Lessing could not have satirized more grimly the real practice of Frederick's regime than by this innocent idyll. The reference to "the debts to be rectified" is pure irony; for out of Saxony alone Frederick had squeezed during the Seven Years War more than 50 million thalers, of which, of course, not one penny was "rectified." Far from making "advances" from the court's treasury, Frederick in reality refused every petition for compensation of war damages with the notorious stereotype remark: "Perhaps next the petitioner would like to have his damages from the Great Flood refunded as well." No less ironical is the king's spontaneous invitation to a discharged officer to re-enter the army!
Friedrich Schlegel has already referred to the fact that the characters in *Minna* speak rather "Lessingish." This is just as true of *Emilia* and *Nathan*. Lessing as a dramatist was all reason; he lacked the poetical imagination from which image after image arises independent of its creator. The heroine of his comedy, too, is infused with his spirit, and, as Goethe says, the "subalterns" make the poet; and as Lessing made classical a petty despot in *Emilia* and an orthodox zealot in *Nathan*, so in *Minna* he immortalized two despicable types of Frederickian despotism: the shallow foreign-aristocrat adventurer, for whose sake bourgeois blood is ill-treated by the sovereign, and the spying innkeeper. The innkeepers and the managers and proprietors of the restaurants in the big towns were Frederick's informers. He paid all or half their rent, in return for which they had daily to report to the police all conversations and meetings held in their rooms, and to deliver "as reliable as possible a protocol-summary" of the "papers carried" by suspicious personalities.

Lessing's contemporaries of course understood the comedy differently from the bourgeois critics of today. Nicolai complained, "as a Prussian subject," of "the many pricks against the Prussian government"; but when Döbbelin put *Minna* on the stage in Berlin in 1768 it received loud applause and was played ten times in succession. In Hamburg the Prussian Consul General Hecht at first objected to the production, and Herr Erich Schmidt therefore called him "a narrow man." Frederick fortunately was still narrower, for if he had read the play, or even understood its implications, he would have bestowed upon it the same "simple eloquence" which he bestowed upon Voltaire's *Akakia,* and it would have been burned by the executioner on the Gendarmen-Market!†

* *Doctor Akakia*, a satire by Voltaire on Frederick II and his protegé Maupertuis.
† Square in Berlin.
IT IS IMPOSSIBLE TO UNDERSTAND LESSING'S "DRAMATURGIE" * UNLESS ITS SOCIAL ASPECTS ARE CONSIDERED. IT IS NO THEORY OF THE DRAMA VALID FOR ALL TIME. APPLIED BY THE HANDS OF AESTHETIC DULLARDS, THIS FINE AND ELASTIC WEAPON HAS DONE MUCH HARM. HOW OFTEN HAS POOR LESSING HIMSELF BEEN ATTACKED WITH IT, SOMETIMES OUT OF INTENTIONAL MALICE, SOMETIMES—WHICH WAS STILL MORE DANGEROUS—OUT OF WELL-MEANING STUPIDITY. HE TO WHOM NOTHING WAS MORE FOREIGN THAN SENSELESS CHAUVINISM IS SUPPOSED TO HAVE HOISTED THE BANNER OF GERMAN AGAINST THAT OF FRENCH ART, TO HAVE CRITICALLY DESTROYED THE FRENCH DRAMA IN ORDER TO LEAD GERMAN DRAMA "TOWARDS A BETTER GLORY," "IN THE STEPS OF THE GREEKS AND THE BRITISH."

SCHILLER'S MEANING IN THE FOLLOWING EPIGRAM IS QUITE SENSIBLE, ALTHOUGH HE EXPRESSED THESE IDEAS MUCH MORE STRONGLY THAN LESSING EVER DID:

The French must never become a model for us,
No live spirit speaks from their art.

TO BE SURE, LESSING'S DRAMATURGIE WAS THE GREATEST NATIONAL MANIFESTATION GERMANY HAD SEEN SINCE HUTTEN'S BROADSIDES. BUT THE NATIONAL POINT OF VIEW IS ALWAYS DETERMINED BY THE SOCIAL INTERESTS OF THE CLASSES REPRESENTING IT, IN HUTTEN'S CASE THE GERMAN ARISTOCRACY, IN LESSING'S THE GERMAN MIDDLE CLASS. IT NEVER OCCURRED TO LESSING TO ATTACK MOLIÈRE AND DESTOUCHES IN THE SAME STRAIN AS HE ATTACKED CORNEILLE AND RACINE, OR TO THROW VOLTAIRE THE WRITER OF MIDDLE-CLASS COMEDIES OVERBOARD WITH VOLTAIRE THE AUTHOR OF COURT TRAGEDIES. LIKE ALL IDEOLOGY, AESTHETIC AND LITERARY CRITICISM IS IN THE LAST ANALYSIS DETERMINED BY THE ECONOMIC STRUCTURE OF SOCIETY. UNDER FUNDAMENTALLY CHANGED ECONOMIC CONDITIONS, WE

* A BOOK OF DRAMATIC CRITICISM WRITTEN BY LESSING WHEN HE WAS DRAMA TIST TO THE GERMAN NATIONAL THEATRE IN HAMBURG.
have now arrived at aesthetic and literary views different from Lessing's. His *Dramaturgie* is neither an infallible revelation nor a faulty stylistic exercise: it must be judged from the social aspect to which it belongs historically. Regarded from this point of view, it is most delightful to read this work, and everywhere one feels the manly and courageous spirit of Lessing, to whom dramatic art was not an idle game but, like all art, a lever of human culture.

The wretched conditions in Germany forced any "National Theatre" to live mainly on foreign plays. With a few mediocre or bad German plays no attractive program could possibly be created; with Lessing's *Sara* and *Minna* at least not a varied one. Among foreign plays the French stood in the front rank, through Gottsched's endeavors and through the great number of translations as well. In this state of affairs only Lessing's *Dramaturgie* caused a certain change. In the main, it still had to settle account with French dramatic art. Thus Lessing wrote his famous condemnation of the French court tragedy, which would have been like poison to the middle class if transplanted to Germany. Lessing overlooked that Corneille and Racine must somehow have been rooted in the national soil in order to become the classical authors of a great nation; he overlooked that their tragedies were rich in theatrical effects and full of powerful tension for their contemporaries. He made fun of the "monsters" of women that Corneille liked to show, and yet Corneille's contemporaries had seen these "monsters" in reality—the princesses of the Fronde. In an even more biased manner than against Corneille, Lessing proceeded against Voltaire as a writer of tragedies—often not without some malice, due to his experiences in Berlin. Lessing's prejudice seems the greater for the very reason that in his tragedies Voltaire had begun a certain reaction against Corneille and Racine. Nevertheless essentially Lessing was right in fighting against French tragedy. Whatever roots it might have had in a certain historical soil, for all that as a model it was disastrous to middle class art in Germany. And Lessing speaks as an advocate of this art, not as a critic, enthroned above the clouds, above all times and all nations—none such has ever existed anyway.
It might seem, though, as if in the *Dramaturgie* itself Lessing had presented Aristotle as such an eternally infallible judge. But here again one must know how to make distinctions. Corneille founded the court tragedy on Aristotle's rules; it was the last echo of the appalling treatment that had made the ancient Greek the canonical philosopher of the middle ages. Lessing swept away all this; he opposed to the wrongly understood Aristotle the correctly understood Aristotle. Indeed, he contrasted the Greek tragedy with the French, and never tired of repeating that rules do not create the genius, but genius makes the rules, and that any rule can at any time be brushed aside by a genius. In the triumphant progress of his victorious polemics, he remarks insolently that the aesthetics of Aristotle are as infallible as mathematical truths, and that he could improve any play of the great Corneille according to Aristotle's rules. But he adds at once that for all that he would be no Corneille, and would not have created a masterpiece.

Already in the *Letters on Literature* Lessing had pointed out that according to Greek standards Shakespeare was a much greater tragic writer than Corneille, that he always achieved the aim of the tragedy, while Corneille never did so, even though he followed the path marked out by the ancient Greeks.

Thus Lessing understood that all aesthetics are historically conditioned, and if he did not grasp this fact theoretically, it is implicit in all his writings.

It is quite true to say that in Germany Lessing was the first to point out Shakespeare's greatness; in the *Dramaturgie* especially he praises Shakespeare in many marvellous comparisons. But he always contrasts Shakespeare's historical tragedies solely with the historical tragedies of the French, and it is quite incorrect to trace the German "Shakespearomania" to Lessing.

Not the historical tragedy but the middle class drama is the ideal of this aesthete. Diderot is his man, not Shakespeare. Nobody who has really read the *Dramaturgie* can doubt this, and Lessing prefers the French comedy to the English as decidedly as he prefers the English tragedy to the French. It is clear then how hopeless it is to regard aesthetics as a purely intellectual matter. Of course Lessing knew that from an aesthetic point of view it was ridiculous.
to mention Diderot and Shakespeare in one breath. He refuted such an equalization, at least indirectly; he did not think of giving Diderot the honor which he attributed so generously to Shakespeare.

But if aesthetics, too, belongs to the superstructure of the class struggle, the connection is quite clear. Shakespeare was no court author, but still much less a middle class writer. He occasionally paid homage to the court in *Henry VIII*, but whenever he lets the Lord Mayor of London appear, he invariably portrays him in a manner either ridiculous or contemptible. This is understandable considering that the Puritans hated the theatre bitterly while the court granted it a certain protection. The theatre found its real support in the aristocratic youth, which was vigorous and manly, and—all its limitations granted—still the leading class of a great nation in a period of powerful advance when new horizons were appearing.* In Shakespeare’s tragedies the surge of the sea is heard, while in Corneille’s the fountains of Versailles murmur. But how could Shakespeare be a model to Germany, whose aristocracy was as decadent physically as mentally? Lessing therefore unswervingly pointed to the English and French middle class plays as models for German tragedy and drama. The French comedy, however, was much superior to the English: the middle class opposition in England had long had its Parliament and its periodical press, while in France it still had to concentrate its whole intellectual vigor in the comedy. Because of Shakespeare’s hostile attitude to the middle class of his time, his comedies moved in a world of fairies and fairy tales, adventures and romanticism, with one exception: the *Merry Wives of Windsor*.

Though second-rate as comedy, historically this is a highly important satire. Shakespeare portrayed the aristocrat who has come down in the world and is ridiculed even by the women of the middle class. But what sort of model could this be to the German middle classes, the great majority of whose women did not as yet

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*The question—For whom did Shakespeare write? is excellently treated by Rümelin, *Shakespeare-Studien*, pp. 34 ff. Among bourgeois historians of literature Rümelin is by far the most advanced in recognizing that poets do not write in heaven and wander in the clouds, but that like other people they live and create in the class struggles of their times.—F.M.*
know a greater honor than to be ridiculed by decadent despots? *

Probably Shakespeare did not intend *Merry Wives of Windsor* to be a historical satire; it would be the only occasion on which he scorned the aristocracy to the greater glory of the middle classes! According to an old account, his only middle class comedy is supposed to have been written for a very harmless reason: to grant the wish of Queen Elizabeth to see the brave Sir John as a lover for once.

When in 1757 Lessing conceived the first plan for his middle class *Virginia, Emilia Galotti*, he did not imagine what a searing satire on German conditions posterity would see in the catastrophe of his dramatic masterpiece.

Emilia implores her own father to kill her, as she cannot rely on her senses and her blood in the struggle against the amorous advances of the despot who had ordered her fiancée to be murdered just before their wedding . ... Emilia does not love the prince. But the fact that she and her father know no way to escape the despot’s power other than the murder of the daughter has a ghastly

* It would require a separate treatise to show in detail how German bourgeois aesthetics since Lessing’s time has been continually built in the shape of bourgeois class interests. But we cannot refrain from introducing an illuminating example. Gustav Freytag, the classic man of bourgeois literature at the time when the German bourgeoisie was going from its idealistic to its mammonistic epoch, wrote in his *Technik des Dramas*, p. 57: “If a poet wanted to dishonor art so completely as to use the social perversion of real life, the tyranny of the rich, the tormented plight of the oppressed, the position of the poor who get from society almost nothing but suffering, in a polemic and propagandistic manner as the plot of a drama, he would probably arouse the vivid interest of his audience, but at the end of the play this interest would disappear in a tormented depression of spirits. The depiction of the spiritual processes of a common criminal belong in the court room, care for the improvement of the poor and oppressed classes should be an important part of our practical interest in life, the muse of art is no merciful nun.” In this passage Freytag takes the same position toward the working class as Gottsched took toward the bourgeoisie. One sees, too, in these sentences, Freytag in the process of casting off the shell of the idealistic period of the bourgeoisie for the shell of the mammonistic period. He is still honest enough to admit that the poor get from society almost nothing but suffering, but he is not ashamed of the unpretty act of seeing in the lives of the working class nothing but a subject for the attention of the overseers of the poor and the sick. That was a generation ago, and how things have changed since then! The mammonism of the bourgeoisie has completely defeated its idealism, and the most famous piece of literature of our day, the touching novel of economical Agnes, pictures the raptures of joy and delight which the poor get from present-day society, while the “revolutionary” poets and writers of the bourgeoisie empty into “art” all sorts of “social perversions,” brothels, bar-rooms and jails.—F.M.
effe ct on th e s pe cta tor . It can cause neither fear nor pity. It cannot have any tragic effect, even if it can be traced to real history. Lessing himself has convincingly demonstrated this in Chapter 79 of the *Dramaturgie*.

From the point of view of tragic art the end of the play is indefensible, the reason being that it can be defended only too well from the point of view of history.

In Livy's famous story, the young Lessing saw first the most revolting and striking accompaniment of social oppression: the attack on virginal honor which was as topical in the eighteenth century as it had been two thousand years before, as it still is to-day and will be as long as social oppression exists.

Lessing revealed his dramatic instinct in recognizing the general historical import of this tragic problem as far more important than the single case which had been the cause of a political revolution. He wished to write a middle class *Virginia*, since "the fate of a daughter who is killed by her father, to whom her virtue is worth more than her life, is tragic enough and has sufficient power to impress the whole soul, even if no political revolution follows it."

Compared with the original story, Lessing's treatment of the subject is not shallower, as Dühring asserts, but deeper.

In eighteenth century Germany a middle-class author who wished to write a middle class *Virginia* with a really tragic ending would have faced an impossible task. A short time before *Emilia Galotti* was published, in Lessing's Saxon state, an aristocratic family had solemnly celebrated the "wedding" of their daughter whom the ruling despot had chosen as one of his mistresses. On German soil neither an *Emilia* nor an *Odoardo* could be imagined; here one of the most tragic motives of world history challenged the pen of an Aristophanes rather than a Sophocles.

But Lessing would not have been the champion of the middle classes if he had been scornful of this shame rather than incensed by it. In order that his play might be psychologically true, he had to move the scene of action from the half boring, half libertine world of the philistines of his country to the country of the more passionate nation from which the Roman *Virginia* sprang. Still, if circumstances are otherwise equal, the social forms of life never
depend on frontiers; in disunited Italy petty despotism ruled no less than in disunited Germany, though thanks to the ancient culture of the country, in finer and more polished forms.

But essentially petty despotism remained everywhere what it was and was bound to be. There was no punishment for its grotesque and ghastly crimes, and if it is doubtful whether *Emilia Galotti* is a real tragedy, nevertheless the play is rooted in the economic structure of the society in which Lessing's figures lived. And the author could not go beyond those barriers. . . .

Outstanding contemporaries understood the social meaning of the tragedy at once. Herder called the author "a real man" and proposed to him to give the tragedy the motto: "Discite moniti." Goethe saw in it "the deciding step towards a morally inspired opposition against tyrannical autocracy," and even in later years he praised it as an excellent work, a piece full of intelligence, of wisdom, of deep understanding of the world, the expression of an admirable culture "compared with which we are already barbarous again," and one that would appear new in any epoch.
THE INSTINCT OF BOURGEOIS CLASS INTEREST DETERMINED LESSING'S thoughts and actions; and from this point of view his philosophical struggles appear as one undivided whole.*

Lessing, a cheerful child of this world, did not possess any theological streak at all. When only twenty he already began "to doubt wisely," striving to come to a conviction in religious questions, but he never arrived at a positive conviction. Indeed we are informed that in the last year of his life he became an ... ist, that is, a Spinozist. But even then all he said, according to Jacobi's report, was: "If I must follow someone, I know nobody else whom I could follow other than Spinoza ... the orthodox notions of divinity convey nothing to me, I cannot stand them." Not long before, Lessing had written in the preface to Nathan: "Nathan's opinions against all positive religion have always been mine,"† and this was absolutely correct. Already a generation earlier the young Lessing had called "all positive and revealed religion equally true and wrong," and stated that for his part "man is created to act and not to subtilize."

It was bourgeois class instinct that led Lessing to adopt an attitude which proletarian class consciousness formulated in the words "religion must be a private affair."

* The essential blame for the one-sided, distorted conception of Lessing's theological controversies is due to the intellectual flatness of the German bourgeoisie. Individual writers are scarcely to be made responsible for it, but the conception finds an especially glaring expression, as one might expect, in Protestant theology, as in Karl Schwarz, Lessing als Theologe. Then Röpe turned the tables in his work on Goeze; he is followed by Redlich in the article on Lessing in the Allgemeine deutsche Biographie, XIX, pp. 756 ff., and by Christian Gross in Lessing's Werke, XV, pp. 9 ff. Gross makes the glorious discovery of Lessing's "unclear, yes, in the deepest sense, untrue position"; he also attacks in an unworthy fashion Johann Jacoby's excellent essay on Lessing as a philosopher. The most penetrating and thorough work in this direction was done by Hebler in his Lessing-Studien and by Zeller in his essay on Lessing as a theologian in the Historische Zeitschrift, XXIII, pp. 343 ff.—F.M.

† Italics are Lessing's in both cases. Translation by E. K. Corbett, ed.: Lessing's Nathan the Wise, p. xix, London, 1883.
He troubled nobody with his religion, and did not interfere with the religion of others. Although he always fought orthodoxy, he fought it only as implying social oppression, as restraining scientific research, and as an ideological symptom of royal despotism. Rationalism meant for Lessing that the bourgeois classes came to understand their life interests. Everyone may believe what he likes, but no belief entitles anyone to persecute and oppress others because they hold different beliefs. This is directed principally against orthodoxy as a despotic means of power, but in practice even orthodoxy as religious doctrine benefited by it. Lessing never participated in dogmatic quarrels; as a religious system dogmatism was as good as any other, and he always detested cheap jokes against religion. He would have assisted a persecuted orthodoxy as readily as he opposed a persecuting one, and he denounced as unjust the prohibition of the Jesuit order by the pope. Religion was for him simply a private affair, and should not interfere with bourgeois legal conditions. His tolerance was very distant from the "tolerance" of Frederick, representing bourgeois as against despotic tolerance.

As might be expected, Lessing dealt his chief blow against shallow rationalism, which spoiled religion as well as philosophy, and which impeded alike liberty of thought and of belief. In a very different and more profound sense than Frederick he wanted everyone to find salvation after his own fashion, but he fought every religion as soon as it began to restrain liberty of scientific research and as soon as it degenerated into an instrument of Frederickian or any other despotism. For him every religion was right as far as it constituted a step forward in the mental development of humanity, every religion was wrong as far as it wanted to fetter the further mental development of humanity. Lessing conceived religions not as logical but as historical categories, to use a modern expression; they were not imperishable but indispensable steps in the evolution of the human mind.

He saw during his own lifetime how the orthodoxy of despotism gradually entered into the philosophy of the bourgeoisie; and he knew well that a historical process cannot be hastened by external
... Lessing calls his *Nathan the Wise* a son of his old age, born of controversy; and of the verse of this dramatic poem he says that it would be much worse if it were much better. One should be contented with this criticism of the great critic. *Nathan* is a play most characteristic of Lessing, an enduring possession of our literature, a precious vessel into which he poured the still magnificent though vanishing power of his heroic spirit; but it has the traces of age and polemic. Unfortunately Jacob Grimm is not quite wrong in saying that it compares with *Emilia* as *Don Carlos* compares with *Fiesco.* *Nathan* is rich in beautiful and profound words, though sometimes one would prefer to have them in the classical prose of Lessing rather than his awkward verse. Some secondary characters, like the dervish, the friar and the patriarch, representing classically orthodox fanaticism, have become classical figures, not to forget the scene between Nathan and Recha, written with the whole warmth of his heart; but the absolutely unhistorical assumptions and the comfortable manner of the discussion on tolerance between the Jew, the sultan and the Knight Templar brought upon *Nathan* the worst fate that could have befallen a play of Lessing; it became the banner of the garrulous and bumptious rationalist, the very type whom Lessing always challenged.

* Plays by Schiller.
One must be careful not to judge the value of this dramatic poem by its present followers. It remains the solemn accord in which Lessing's greatest struggle ended. Lessing wrote to his brother: "It will be anything but a satirical play, ending in ironical laughter. It will be the most touching play I ever wrote." He says, too: "My play has nothing to do with our present black frocks . . . though the theologians of all revealed religions will always abuse it, they will know better than to declare themselves publicly against it." Lessing wrote Nathan under the most difficult conditions, the deadly disease already in his lungs, paralyzed in his literary activity by police persecution, broken by the death of his beloved wife, tormented by worries over his daily bread. Regarding the royalties from his poem, he wrote that maybe "the horse will have died of hunger before the oats have ripened."

From all this misery his high spirit rose to the serene naiveté which Goethe had already praised in Nathan. On the best of his contemporaries the play acted like an overwhelming revelation. "For a long, long time," wrote Elise Reimarus, "no drop of water, drunk in a dry desert, could have been more refreshing than the Nathan was to us. . . . What a Jew, what a sultan, what a Recha, Sittah, what men! If there were to be many such as these, who would not like to live on earth as much as in heaven?" In spite of the defects claimed by famous and non-famous critics, the shortest and best criticism remains Herder's words to Lessing: "I do not say a word of praise; the work praises the master, and this is a man's work."

Nobody, not even the cleverest man, can surpass the possibilities of his time; what we know today on the basis of modern science, namely that historical religions only reflect different economic levels in the development of human society, Lessing could only feel intuitively. He viewed religious quarrels from a bourgeois idealistic standpoint as the causes rather than the results of social struggles. He remarked: "I do not know any place in Germany where this play could yet be performed, but good luck to him who first performs it." Well, two years after his death Nathan was performed.
in Berlin, but this did not signify very much. Frederick remained the enlightened despot, using the positive religions as means of power. The Jewish usurer continued to enjoy "the liberty of a Christian banker," but the Jewish philosopher Moses Mendelssohn was merely tolerated, and after his death his daughter Recha did not even know where to put her head. Lessing could not see to the very bottom of things, his understanding being limited by the conditions of his time. Nonetheless admirable is the clarity with which he expressed a point of view which the best men of our time have failed to surpass: the view that religious belief is the private affair of each individual; and therefore all religions whatever their designation which restrain scientific research and are used for social oppression must be relentlessly fought. The young Lessing considered all revealed religions equally right and wrong, the aging man gave expression to the same trend of thought in the parable of the three rings, already known in world literature since the days of the Crusades: No ring is the true one, the true ring possibly was lost, but he who believes his ring to be the true one should reveal its power by hearty tolerance and by good deeds.
In the year of Lessing's death there appeared three sharply contrasting publications.

Frederick the Great's pamphlet on German literature made clear to all what an insurmountable barrier lay between German intellectual life and Prussian despotism. . . . Frederick's ignorance serves to excuse him, to a certain extent—he had not the slightest conception of the development of the middle class; nor is it possible to deny that his "omniscient despotism" thereby demonstrated its impotence. But it is equally undeniable that in a mood of despotic megalomania his intention was to pour abuse on German literature. In all dutiful humility, but still candidly enough, the minister Hertzberg had pointed out to the king the most serious errors of the pamphlet, but he had answered "ungraciously" enough: "I shall make no such trifling alterations." It is no wonder that the champions of the middle class regarded the pamphlet as a deliberate insult. Herder spoke contemptuously of a "ghost that walks in broad day-light," and Klopstock attacked the despot in angry odes. Goethe's answer to the king's insult was, unfortunately, influenced by considerations regarding his position at court. We know nothing about Lessing's opinion of the pamphlet except that a few days before his death he read the shallow reply of the abbot Jerusalem. The king, about whose despotism Lessing had no illusions left, could no longer take him by surprise; he found it quite in order that the Muse of Germany went unhonored and defenceless from Frederick's throne, as Schiller later wrote. It was largely due to Lessing that German literature acquired its worth by its own efforts. In vain are attempts to draw the loyal conclusion from a rather apocryphal remark made by Frederick to Mirabeau some five years later to the effect that the king had decided to leave German literature to itself so that it might develop more vigorously.

* De la Littérature Allemande, 1780.
The conclusion of this pamphlet can have no other meaning but that literature can reach its highest development only through the patronage of the court. "Give us Medicis and we shall see geniuses flourishing. An Augustus will produce a Virgil." And a despot like Frederick could hardly think otherwise.

One must not be deceived on this point by the byzantinism with which present-day literary historians try to cast a better light upon it. Scherer calls it "indescribably touching," and Suphan curtsies like a debutante: "Against the stubbornness of the king nothing could be done. It belonged to his greatness." The lack of intelligence that stares out of every page of the pamphlet may belong to the greatness of despotism! Yet no one can deny that there was an irreconcilable contradiction between despotism and our classical literature, and that Frederick’s booklet destroys the Lessing legend. One has to be more of an idiot than a patriot to be touched to tears by Frederick’s sentimental talk on the future flourishing of German literature.

In the year of Lessing’s death Schiller’s Bandits was also published. With his first work—and it was a work of genius—Schiller took up Lessing’s life work: the struggle against tyrants. Soon Fiesco and Luise Millerin* followed, inspired by Lessing’s spirit and borne on the wings of a much more powerful talent. But the middle class had no ear for this voice that spoke of such great things; after a short but brilliant beginning Schiller had to exchange the “narrow circle” of middle class life for a so-called “higher plane” which was in reality a much lower one.†

The reconciliation with German philistinism was fatal to German literature. Its decline was slow, but steady. The sword of a foreign conqueror achieved what the middle class could not: the domination of Napoleon swept away the worst feudal débris from German soil. But this foreign ruler was himself an intolerable burden for all classes of the nation. And Romanticism mirrored this curiously ambiguous situation. The national and social interests of the German middle class found themselves in opposition to each other, in

* The earliest title of the play later known as Kabale und Liebe.
† Schiller turned from writing middle class plays to writing historical tragedies.
irreconcilable antagonism. This class could not throw off the foreign yoke without submitting again to the heavy yoke of native despotism. In vain did the leaders of Romanticism try to bridge the abyss by artificial imitation of the ways of genius, and by their famous "romantic irony"; in vain did they search the literature of all nations and all times for ground in which to gain a footing. Romanticism had to seek this ground in the "magic night"* of the middle ages; only in this tradition were national ideals to be found for Germany. But the middle ages had been the epoch of the most blatant class-domination by the Junkers and priests. There was no escape from this antagonism between national and social interests. The most gifted writer of Romanticism, Heinrich von Kleist, perished in madness and suicide.

Thanks to the immaturity of the middle class in Central Europe, feudal legitimacy won in the struggle against the modern era which began to dawn over Europe in 1789. There were good reasons for Byron's burning hatred of the victors of Waterloo, for Heine's enthusiastic cult of Napoleon, and Platen's biting question: "Wars of liberation, indeed! Was Miltiades allied to the barbarian Tartars when he defeated the Persians?"

The greatest sacrifices had proved fruitless; the bitterest struggles had won neither political freedom nor national unity; a dull, stupid, petty reaction, that would have liked to set a bailiff on the track of every thought, oppressed men's minds. Romanticism lost itself in a ridiculous cul de sac. It was in the struggle against these unbearable conditions that Platen learned to use his shining weapons; in his Romantic OEdipus he made fun of "the last of the romantic whining we have been hearing for decades." But Heine sang "this last free song of Romanticism" in "the fanciful dreamy manner of that romantic school in which I whiled away my happiest years of youth, and then wound up by thrashing the schoolmaster."†

German literature received new impetus when the middle class stirred again after its deepest wounds had healed. But the confusion that still reigned is apparent from the ugly quarrel between

* Quotation from a play by one of the leaders of German Romanticism, Ludwig Tieck (1773-1853).
Heine and Platen, who failed to understand each other—not to mention the mass of middle class philistines who did not understand either of them. Heine was buried in Paris and Platen in Syracuse; and the brilliant men who followed them in the Thirties and Forties had to go into exile. In the end the German philistine proved incorrigible, and so he was defeated in 1848 after all.

After that he no longer thought of fighting for the advancement of his class by means of thought or literature or the sword, but only by means of the winged angels of Prussian banknotes. He devoted himself completely to his material interests. Middle class literature ceased to be the intellectual leader of the nation; instead it became the obedient servant of the bourgeoisie. . . .

In his most famous novel, *Debit and Credit*, Gustav Freytag showed the self-satisfied and solvent morality of the German philistine in glittering contrast to bankrupt Polish aristocrats and unscrupulous Jewish usurers. The respectable youth, sitting for countless years in his office chair, writing letters and invoices in quiet servility, became the ideal embodiment of the German "worker." The fiery songs of Platen, Lenau and Herwegh addressed to the Poles were forgotten; instead the middle class novelist calculated how many bales of merchandise might be lost in the useless disturbances of the Polish rebellions. In Freytag's novel Mr. Anton Wohlfahrt, clerk to the firm, demonstrated how amidst the desperate death struggle of a nation the German as "worker," hero and patriot knew no higher task than to recover outstanding debts to the last cent.

The same spirit inspired the drama. Otto Ludwig's *Forester* comes to his tragic end because he does not understand that being an employee he may be thrown out into the street by his employer at any moment. But dirty scoundrels express the ideology of the bourgeois revolution in the words:

Now men know that those who are in prisons are martyrs worthy of veneration, and that the noblemen are rascals, be they ever so honest. And the industrious people are rascals, for it is

their fault that honest people who do not like to work are poor.*

In 1866 and 1870 the possessing classes and especially the German bourgeoisie found their refuge in the protection of Prussian bayonets. In all corners of the German Reich it was said that the political advance could now be followed by an unparalleled literary advance. As if great thinkers and writers could have been produced by a class which was proud of having for a backbone the sabre of the Prussian officer! Instead of the expected giants there appeared an inane mob the like of which has never dishonored and corrupted the literature of a great nation. Capitalist business enterprise brought under its rule all branches of literature, and the theatre was not the last. The proscenium of Lessing and Voltaire became a speculative investment, if it did not fall to the level of a brothel.

Only the rapidly rising star of the working class movement threw light on bourgeois literature. Such bourgeois writers as had some talent began to revolt against all this unspeakable meretriciousness and falsity. They wanted to get back to nature and truth, but since in bourgeois society nothing but sham is to be found, the new naturalist movement fell a victim to hopeless pessimism. Everywhere they seek for decadence and rottenness; a younger writer, Kurt Eisner, who himself approaches the naturalist school, has rightly jeered at the "disciples of decadence and pirates of decay, sniffing for rottenness and boasting of syphilis to prove their virility." Apart from the skilled literary artisans who follow naturalism because it is fashionable and piquant, the few naturalists who are better and more vigorous only know how to describe things that are dying down, and never those that are rising. Their future depends on whether they are able to cross the broad moat between the capitalist and the proletarian world. Bourgeois society cannot and will not produce a new hey-day of literature.

Also in the year of Lessing's death, Kant's epochmaking magnum opus, the Critique of Pure Reason was published. With this book "there begins in Germany an intellectual revolution which offers the most striking analogies to the material revolution in
France. . . . It developed itself in the same phases, and between both revolutions there exists the most remarkable parallelism."*  
Strangely enough, all the great German philosophical revolutionaries, Kant, Fichte, Hegel, have done their work in that same Prussian state which the classical authors of the German middle class loathed so intensely. The Prussian state persecuted Kant "for distorting and disparaging some of the fundamental teachings of the Holy Scripture and of Christianity," it categorically ordered him "not to publish any more such writings and teachings," and was pleased by the wise man's wise answer: "Disavowal and renunciation of one's convictions is despicable, but silence is the duty of the subject in a case like the present. Everything one says must be true, yet duty does not force us to speak every truth in public." Classical philosophy did not speak the truth so publicly that the Prussian officer's sabre would have understood it. When it culminated in Hegel's philosophy it even became the official Prussian religion, with which, for example, candidates for the teaching profession had to be thoroughly acquainted, while the Ministry of Education warned them expressly against other "shallow systems of philosophy." Whatever was real, was reasonable†; and since the Prussian state with its fortresses and dungeons was real, it was reasonable as well; whoever doubted this was converted to reason and reality by the methods applied against "demagogues."

But what Hegel had said of the French Revolution was also true of his own philosophy: it turned everything upside down. It had to be turned back again, to show its core of reason and revolution under its husk of reaction and realism. Out of the Prussian state philosophy was born revolutionary socialism. Marx concluded the epoch of classical philosophy with the hopeful struggle of the working class, while Lessing had begun this epoch after the hopeless struggle of the bourgeois class. Engels says rightly that the German working-class movement is the heir of classical philosophy. With the publication of the Communist Manifesto in 1848, German middle class philosophy was dead. Its representatives as the universities continued dishing up eclectic soups that became more and

† Hegel's Philosophy of Right.
more indigestible from decade to decade. The philosophical needs of the bourgeoisie were supplied by a succession of fashionable philosophers who came one after another according to the changing development of capitalism.

From the beginning of the Fifties to the middle of the Sixties, the man of the day was Schopenhauer, the philosopher of the frightened philistine, the furious hater of Hegel, the man who denied any historical development, a writer not without paradoxical wit and not without his share in the splendor of classical literature. But in his sneaking, egoistic and slandering manner he was the true intellectual representative of the middle class, which, frightened by the clash of weapons, had withdrawn trembling to its private income and passionately disavowed the ideals of its greatest period.

From the middle of the Sixties to the beginning of the Eighties, his place was taken by Eduard von Hartmann, who taught that liberal ideas were but a nineteenth century rash. He discovered that the boom of industrial enterprise—and financial swindling—following 1871 paved the way to higher forms of economic life and constituted a step towards the solution of the social question. He praised Bismarck’s anti-socialist laws as an excellent way of educating the working class. Finally he declared that he “followed in the footsteps of those three philosophers whose greatness had inspired the historic world mission of Prussianism: Kant, Fichte and Hegel.”

But at the beginning of the Eighties Hartmann was superseded by Nietzsche, the philosopher of the grande bourgeoisie. “The historic world mission of Prussianism” had done its duty. In its essence this bourgeois slogan expressed the satisfaction felt by the German bourgeoisie on the elimination of bonds which had hampered the expansion of capitalism, namely the small German states with their outdated institutions. But in the course of a development proceeding with unparalleled speed and vigor, the “national idea” became a fetter which the expanding power of capitalism sought to shake off. In the age of cartels and trusts on the one hand and class movements on the other, the national colors on the national boundary posts grew paler. Capital bred a new caste ruling Europe, and this caste is the same in London as in Rome, in Madrid as in
Moscow. Nietzsche became the German philosopher of this caste. He saw in the "historic world mission of Prussianism" nothing but "entr'acte policy." He scorned the so-called "greatness" of statesmen, who made the spirit of a nation "narrow" and its taste "national." He made fun of the politicians "of short sight" and "rash hand" who set the barrier of "nationalist madness" between nations. But he did not care for the people, for "the herd creatures of Europe" who pretended to be the "only legitimate kind of human being," who praised as virtues their own attributes: "social sense, benevolence, consideration, industry, moderation, modesty, indulgence." He praised the lonely minds, the supermen, the free spirits, the noble souls to whom the "exploiter nature" belongs as the organic functions belong to life. They live "beyond good and evil," they consider it "pure justice" if others must be sacrificed for them. It is corruption if an aristocracy sacrifices its privileges out of an extravagance of moral feelings. The "essential thing in a good and healthy aristocracy is this: with good conscience they receive the sacrifices of an immense number of people who for their sake have to be degraded to stunted creatures, to slaves, to tools." And so on. Nietzsche was not only the herald but the victim of capitalism. A fine and rich mind like his felt horror and loathing for the immense misery created by capitalism. But grown up in wealth, spoiled by women, he was unable to discover the hope for tomorrow in the misery of to-day. Therefore he searched feverishly for the inherent reason of capitalist society. It only caused him to lose his own reason, in the saddest sense of the word. But the mad talk of this pitiable man is praised as final wisdom by the hacks of the same bourgeoisie which could once call Lessing its first representative.

The work of Lessing's life does not belong to the bourgeoisie, but to the proletariat. In the middle class of the eighteenth century both classes were still united. But the nature and the aim of Lessing's struggle have been relinquished by the bourgeoisie and taken up by the proletariat; the bourgeois class struggle for which Lessing found the refuge of philosophy was taken out of this sphere by Marx and became the proletarian class struggle. As the bourgeoisie rejected the intellectual work of its representatives, this
precious inheritance had to become the arsenal from which the working class took their first keen and shining weapons. This world is not so devoid of all sense that the Lessings fight and suffer only for the amusement of the philistines. Lessing belongs among the intellectual patrons of the proletariat, his life and work has gone over into the flesh and blood of the fighting and suffering workers, little as they may know of Lessing's work—thanks to our "magnificent" popular education.

But all this will change. When Cervinus wanted to stir the political consciousness of the bourgeoisie, he concluded his work with the words: "The contest of art is finished; now we must set ourselves another target, never yet hit in our country. We must see whether Apollo will grant in this sphere the glory he did not refuse us in another." * The target to which Cervinus alluded has not yet been hit and the glory which Apollo granted "in another sphere" has also waned. In the rough and difficult days of conflict the Muses are silent, but for all that their wreaths will not be denied. Those will be the gifts for their day to come, and then Lessing, too, will be vindicated of every sin committed by his contemporaries and posterity against this noble fighter for the freedom of humanity.

* Allusion to the necessity of a democratic revolution in Germany.
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