

LESSING, GOTTFRIED VON

Gottfried von Lessing. Gottfried von Lessing (1729-1781) was the exemplary Enlightenment figure of the German 18th century: a dramatist, public art critic, an art theorist, and a public figure in the new urban art world. As we step into his world, we leave the world of Grimmelshausen (d. 1676) and Silesius (d. 1677), for example, far behind—where ‘behind’ means fifty years closer to the intense world of very early modern Europe, to which still clings much of the late Mediaeval—even the worlds of the Meistersingers or Meister Eckhart. Those two or three generations of difference were of great importance for the cultural environments of all western European societies, and perhaps of greatest importance for Germany, which—as the documentation in this Encyclopedia suggests—barely had a Renaissance, through which the mediaeval could be mediated, and might be said to have substituted a Reformation for a Renaissance. How does this play out in Lessing’s life?

Lessing’s career and thought. Gottfried was born in a small village in Saxony. His father was a clergyman at the local Latin School, and Lessing himself was well educated in classical languages, before going on to study theology and medicine at the University of Leipzig. (Noteworthy that among the intelligentsia, of early modern Europe, advanced study of medicine and theology were often coupled; twin skills in understanding personhood, corporeal and spiritual.) Between 1748-1760 Lessing was employed by various opinion journals and art critical papers, which played important roles in the, growing cultural life of major cities like Hamburg. He wrote reviews of plays, art exhibits, and social events, starting to gather the texts which would be part of his *Hamburgische Dramaturgie*. While carrying out that urban critic work—a byproduct of the new cultural sophistication of the city, in which bourgeois middle class values, and a new level of expendable income, were changing the landscape—Lessing had been working as a dramaturgical adviser to the Hamburg National Theater. It was during this time that he was also writing, producing, and directing his own path breaking dramas, comedies (like *Minna von Barnhelm*) that opened out the inner ironies of domestic life), bourgeois tragedies (like *Emilia Galotti*), or idea plays—a fresh phenomenon on the German stage (like *Nathan the Wise*, which is one of Lessing’s many eloquent appeals for respect among members of different religions.)

Lessing’s critical mind. It was in the course of this active professional and dramaturgical life that Lessing wrote a number of his most remarkable critical works, like *Laokoon* (1766), in which he analyzes a famous piece of sculpture, based on a scene from Virgil’s Aeneid, in order to discriminate between the skills (narrative and depictive, respectively) proper to poetry and sculpture. From such a text we see what an immensely sharp aesthetic perception Lessing brought to his work. This prominence of the aesthetic, in his thinking, is one more indicator of the new cultural world we move into with the German Enlightenment. We have seen powerful artistic skills, like those of the earliest German poetry, epic and love song, but we have not seen critical thinking about the arts.

Lessing and the Enlightenment. Lessing was a major voice for toleration and human understanding, one might say a Christian humanism with some resemblance to a much earlier thinker like Erasmus. But there is a difference, and it points to the Enlightenment. Lessing is a friend to humanity and its dignity, and for him the Christian input (which he takes for granted as essential) is a broad civilizing spirit rather than a powerful set of arguments.

Reading

Primary source reading

Lessing, Gottfried, *Laocoon: An Essay on the Limits of Painting and Poetry*, trans. McCormick, 1984.

Secondary source reading

Harpham, Geoffrey Galt, 'So...What is Enlightenment?, An inquisition into modernity,' *Critical Inquiry* 20 (Spring, 1994), 524-556.

Further reading

Luckhurst, Mary, *Dramaturgy: A revolution in Theater*, 2006.

Original language reading

Bahr, E., ed., *Was ist Aufklaerung? Thesen und Definitiionen*, 1974.

Suggested paper topics

The Enlightenment of course opens attention onto the role of women in literature and the arts, as well as in society. What kind of understanding of women does Lessing show in dramas like *Emilia Galotti* or *Minna von Barnhelm*? Compare his view of women with that of earlier German writers we have met. Or, if you can, with Goethe's treatment of Gretchen in *Faust*. From the strictly aesthetic standpoint, does Lessing put women to good artistic use?

Please reevaluate the argument of *Laocoon* for our own time. What are the issues of lasting interest here? Are we still interested in the difference between the narrative work of language arts like poetry, and the 'static' pictorial quality of works like sculpture? Do those issues go to the heart of the nature of the arts?

EXCERPT Laocoon Introduction

[www.archive.org/.../aocoongott00lessuoft/aocoongott00lessuoft_djvu.t..http://www.archive.org/stream/aocoongott00lessuoft/aocoongott00lessuoft_djvutxt](http://www.archive.org/stream/aocoongott00lessuoft/aocoongott00lessuoft_djvu.t..http://www.archive.org/stream/aocoongott00lessuoft/aocoongott00lessuoft_djvutxt) The first person who compared Painting and Poetry with each other was a man of fine feeling, who perceived that both these arts produced upon him a similar effect. Both, he felt, placed before us things absent as present, appearance as reality. Both deceived, and the deceit of both was pleasing. A second person sought to penetrate into the inner nature of this pleasure, and discovered that in both it flowed from one and the same source. The beautiful, the notion of which we first derive from corporeal objects, has general rules applicable to various things; to actions, to thoughts, as well as to forms. A third person, who reflected upon the value and upon the distribution of these general rules, remarked that some of them had prevailed more in Painting and others more in Poetry, and that with respect to the latter rules, Poetry could be aided by the illustrations and examples supplied by Painting; with respect to the former rules, Painting could be aided by the illustrations and examples supplied by Poetry. The first was an amateur; the second was a philosopher; the third was a critic. It was not easy for the two first to make a wrong use either of their feeling or of their reasoning. On the other hand, the principal force of the remarks of the critic depends upon the correctness of their application to the particular case, and it would be astonishing, inasmuch as for one really acute, you will find fifty merely witty critics, if this application had always been made with all the caution requisite to hold the scales equal between the two Arts. Apelles and Protogenes, in their lost writings upon Painting confirmed and illustrated the rules relating to it by the rules of Poetry, which had been already established; so that we may be assured that in them the same moderation and accuracy prevailed, which at the present day we see in the works of Aristotle, Cicero, Horace, and Quintilian, when they apply the principles and experience of Painting to Eloquence and to Poetry. It is the privilege of the Ancients in no one thing to do too much or too little. But we moderns have often believed that in many of our works we have surpassed them, because we have changed their little byways of pleasure into highways, even at the risk of being led by these shorter and safer highways into paths which end in a wilderness.