

Theses

Introductory notes

Our analysis takes a unique place between two interpretative traditions: it abolishes the thesis about Lessing as an *Erzaufklärer* which depicts as the champion of the enlightenment and tolerance him in the frame of eighteenth century optimism. It also rejects the interpretations accusing him with scepticism without boundaries and arrogant eristic. At the same time we intend to keep distance from the zeal often found in the academic literature to find and prove an authentic picture of Lessing by using the distinction between the esoteric and exoteric spheres of his works. The consequential application of his own principles rejects this double structure: the validity of his ideas published in his volumes cannot be measured in the scale of γυμναστικῶς- δογματικῶς, because each shares the consequences of impossibility to possess the absolute truth.

First chapter

The triple structure used in our analysis completes the chronological description and provides a more accurate picture about the position of the *Fragmentenstreit* in the writings of Lessing. It helps prove our thesis which treats the corpus of the debate and his final text, the *Nathan der Weise* as an intentional accomplishment organically connected to his lifetime work. These points of connections are the following: the series of *Rettungen*, which he started writing in his early period, is the continuation of the traditional apologia; the critical attitude which – with some precision of the term – is the most characteristic trait of Lessing; and lastly the writings aiming at the definition of the boundaries of poetical genre.

Second chapter

From the seventies the main question for Lessing was not the discussion itself, but to choose the right moment and the right adversaries. The order of the publications and the tactical remarks concerning Schmidt encourage the unavoidable break out of the debate instead of the defence of Reimarus or Lessing. The reactions hide the real goal of the publication that treats orthodoxy in a better way than neology and the Lutheran orthodoxy becomes the main target instead of neology. With the appearance of the first responses it was obvious that the temporary agreement of opinions could not reduce the essential gaps between Lessing's point of view and the orthodox position.

Third chapter

Lessing's decision to publish the carefully chosen pieces of Reimarus' manuscript in fragments is not only due to the circumstances but it comes together with the tactical advantages and it makes the regulation of the intensity of the debate possible. The publications and Lessing's remarks change the

original intention of the author and the apologia becomes the battlefield of the different interpretations of enlightenment.

Fourth chapter

The point of view represented by Lessing in the debate between Lavater and Mendelssohn proves that even before the *Fragmentenstreit* he urged the creation of a new type of discourse which differs from the traditional structure used in theological disputes. With the first writings of Johann Melchior Goeze - instead of the fragments and the anonymous author - Lessing and his published remarks become the focus of the debate. Before the Prohibition Act, the two reasons why this significant theological debate turns into infertile monologues are: the incompatibility of the discussed ideas and Goeze's determined rejection of Lessing's proposition to move the debate into the field lying out of the absolute demands of truth.

Fifth chapter

Although in the birth of *Nathan der Weise* the most significant reason is undoubtedly the prohibition of further publications, we can restore the theoretical background in Lessing's writings which makes the piece the summary of the theological debate with Goeze. The epigraph of his *Erziehung des Menschengeschlechts* leads us to the problematic questions of the relation between arts and truth in Augustin's *Soliloquia*, and it shows that the use of poetical language and the rejection of absolute truth are connected in Lessing's thoughts. The other argument in choosing the poetical language can be found in his moral-philosophical considerations: the most important virtue of *anschauende Erkenntnis* is the ability that it can influence the will, that is to say, the poetical texts are able to cross the borders of theory and praxis. By analysing his *Laokoon*, we can reconstruct the third argument: the poetical works are the privileged tools of representing actions, and the actions are to fulfil the communicative gap caused by linguistic scepticism.

Excursion

In his late writings Mendelssohn tries to establish a place for Jewish religion in the tension of reason and revelation and intends to legitimate the ceremonial laws and keep the requisiteness of religious cult. In this construction we meet the same linguistic scepticism as Lessing's but the recognition of communicative characteristics of the actions takes an absolutely different role: to the main question of representation he replies with the introduction of the term 'living writing', where the actions are not only the signs of religious beliefs but at the same time also devices for keeping the meaning of the religion that cannot be held in the sphere of rationality.

Chapter six

In his letter about the birth of *Nathan der Weise* Lessing mentions a ‘certain analogy’ which connects the piece to the debate; these points of connections are not only found in the *Decameron* of Boccaccio but we can also meet various motifs for the same theme in the literature of the Middle Age, in fables and lapidariums. The reason of the emergence of Jewish characters is the tolerance and rejection of missionary attempts in the Jewish tradition – however to prove our thesis we need to observe the contrary arguments rooted in the theological writings of Spinoza. The research of Niewöhner and the analysis of Maimonides’ works help us to identify these statements as the result of confusions in the manuscripts.

Chapter seven

The analysis of the characters and the scenes of the piece provides us with new results: the choice of characters in the *Nathan der Weise* marks a strong connection with the European tradition of tolerance. With the person of Saladin he leans onto the topos of tolerant ruler; with Nathan, the figure of cultivated Jew touches the questions of Jewish emancipation already mentioned apropos of *Die Juden*. The appearance and early withdrawal of Al Hafi from the play leads the academic literature into a negative judgement of his role. The consideration of the so far undiscussed elements in our analysis makes him the keyfigure. Reviving the symbolic of chess and Lessing’s remarks about his origins make possible to build up a new horizon of interpretation and with that emerges a new question concerning the genre of the piece: the doubts already known for the contemporary readers treating the piece as a comedy are reborn and open the possibility of double-reading.

Chapter eight

As a response to the total incapability of theory, Lessing proposes a solution in the “ringparable” which becomes reality in the piece – this moment unifies the two parts, often analysed separately. Moreover, we can consider two other elements as new results: the piece itself is a positive proof for the ability of using poetical texts as arguments, and our analysis affirms the cogency of the theses developed in the analysis of the polemical writings published during the debate. Lessing looks for a medium that is able to transmit the personal beliefs which lost the common ground, and finds that in the sphere of actions. The linguistic field necessarily changes with the increasing significance of praxis and in the place of scientific prose, the poetical language -that can follow the new definitions of truth - comes to the foreground.

Chapter nine

The unmentioned moment, that is, on the one hand, out of the frame of *Fragmentenstreit* and, on the other hand, happens after the death of Lessing, serves with some new results in our analysis of upgraded role of actions: in the debate between Jacobi and Mendelssohn concerning Lessing's supposed spinozism Mendelssohn describes the *Nathan der Weise* as a kind of Anti-Candide that is written in the defence of providence. The often occurring Voltaire-remarks in letters written by or to Lessing and the parallels between the two literary works lead us to an interpretation that reaches over the apologetic function of this remark. *Candide* is the incapability of reason to overcome the double impasse between *Weltübel* and *Optimismuswahn* which is manifested in silence; Lessing's piece is an alternative response in order to defend reason where the only way out of this resignation is to acknowledge the weight and role of praxis.