

**NATHAN THE WISE: A DRAMATIC POEM,
IN FIVE ACTS. TRANSLATED FROM THE
GERMAN, A BIOGRAPHY
OF LESSING, AND A CRITICAL SURVEY
OF HIS POSITION, WRITINGS, ETC., BY
DR. ADOLPHUS REICH**

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GOTTHOLD EPHRAIM LESSING

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Introite, nam et hie Dii sunt |

APUD GELLIVM.



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Introduction, Biography of Lessing,

AND

Critical Survey of his Position, Writings, &c.

HUMAN history is a chain, the links of which are human generations, and sometimes—individuals.

It is not the part of mankind to shoot the arrows of inquiry beyond the limits of supposition and conclusion, to re-trace this chain further back than to the borders of nebulous Mythology, nor to anticipate its further extent or final issue,—for its beginning is Eternity, and its end is Infiniteness, and both ends meet in what we believe but cannot fathom.

But it is certainly the duty of mankind to learn to know the History of the Race, as far as resources and expedients render it feasible; to ascertain *whereto* that chain of human existences is extending and pointing,—to certify of what ore it is forged,—to affirm the construction and connexion of its links. For the nature of things is indicative of their purpose, and “Purpose” is the great aim of all our studies and exertions.

“The history of the world is the doom of the world,” says Schiller. To learn to know the dooms of men and nations, we must learn their History. To understand their History, we must understand their own selves. But how is that to be accomplished?

There is a motto in the shape of a Gallic adage:

“ *Le style c'est l'homme.*” Now the style of a man is his mode of expressing his thoughts—but *the Style of Nations is their Literature.* Therefore, a man of thought will always consider it imperative to make knowledge of Literatures the basis of his study of Universal History. This principle being a most sound and practical one, it has naturally been resorted to by England especially.

It has always been and is England's glory, to appreciate and adopt the valuable and eminent productions of human Intellect and Genius, from whatever quarter of the Globe they may proceed, by whatever nation offered, and in whatever form presented. This principle has at all times been employed with particular predilection and eagerness with regard to Foreign Literatures; and the British People, not too proud to learn, but only too proud to learn, have added the literary treasures of all nations to their own store, and thus not only enhanced their intelligence and exalted their views of the world, but also most brilliantly manifested and propagated the principal symptom and privilege of Freedom, namely Universal Spiritual Unity.

Of all Foreign Literatures, the German Literature in particular could not fail constantly to attract the attention, and strongly to excite the intellectual activity, of educated Englishmen. And with good reason. For,—even setting aside the above-mentioned great general motives of study,—to devote an assiduous and earnest study to a tongue which is the mother of their mother-tongue, and to a Literature the excellency and profoundness of which is indisputable, is only to do justice to the German Language and Literature, and at the same time to meet a great want of Spiritual England.

Still these exertions have not been altogether persevering, eager, and systematic enough—at least as far as lasting transplantation by way of Translation into English is concerned—to satisfy the general desire of the intelligent

English circles, and to render German Literature intelligible and accessible to those who are not German Scholars; and while all British Standard Authors, and even the inferior ones, are common property with the German Nation, we are ashamed to confess that the excellent German Literature has remained a monopoly of that comparatively small number of Englishmen who are able to read the originals; the rest is confined to scarce, and in most cases, defective translations.

So much more we rejoice and hail the palpable desire now breaking forth, and the obvious earnest efforts lately made from many sides, to have German Literature at last introduced into English life *in optima forma*; and in procuring for the English public a correct and faithful Translation of one of the most eminent master-pieces of German Literature, we trust we offer to the English reader a boon, most instructive and interesting, and we hope, most welcome.

"Nathan the Wise" is a work which, ever since it was first published, has maintained its place on the summit of the German Parnassus and of Universal Fame, which it well deserves, through its being the most elaborate, elegant, refined, and accomplished, as to the form, and the most learned, ingenious, instructive and edifying, as to the object and its treatment, which ever came from a German pen.

The mere name of its Author, indeed, would suffice to recommend it, for who has not heard or read some subtle, striking, philosophical thought, some acute logical argument, some learned theological essay, some sagacious critical animadversion on various branches of science and art, some philological research, or some poetical production, of Gotthold Ephraim Lessing? Who has not heard of the man, of whom Moses Mendelssohn said: "*He anticipated his Century by more than a Generation,*" and of

whom Madame de Staël wrote : “ *Sa critique est un traité sur le cœur humain, autant qu’une poétique littéraire* ” ? Who has not heard of him, who on the field of German Literature commenced and completed a revolution, and through it paved the road on which the Spirit of future ages advances ? Of the man to whom History has attributed the epithet of “ the Luther of German National Literature ” ?

But we anticipate.

Still it devolves upon us as a highly important duty, to offer beforehand one remark, which, though evoked only by a single expression of apprehension, nevertheless has become necessary for the purpose of meeting that apprehension, and in it, similar imputations, which might possibly be brought to bear upon this Translation. We mean the opinions, doubts, and apprehensions, which may be entertained by some readers regarding the Religious views and tendencies of Lessing, and more particularly the way in which he has manifested them in his writings.

It will suffice if we say, that this point is by no means the only or the paramount scope of this publication ; that in presenting Lessing to the English Public, we present Lessing the great German Literatus and Literary Reformer, who, being a genius and a man of most refined sentiments, necessarily grappled with many and manifold questions bearing upon the development and refinement of the human mind. Lessing was not a fanatical Iconoclast ; there is no theological hair-splitting in his writings, though an abundance of religious ideas and philanthropic sentiments. The present book, avowedly containing the essence of Lessing’s religious views and human feelings, teaches Truth, — that is, devotedness to God, and love and tolerance for his fellow-men. We introduce it to the English reader as a most eminent specimen of German Literature, as a most distinguished production of human

Genius, and as a work with a moral tendency. It is neither intended for the propagation of certain religious views, nor for the refutation of others.

Reverting to our topic, which in the first place ought to be a Biography, or at least a biographical sketch, of Lessing, we cannot help observing, that a brief review of the state of German Literature during the period prior to Lessing's appearance on the literary field, would prove a most useful assistance to the reader's better understanding of Lessing's activity and position.

Taking a general retrospect, our attention is necessarily fixed on the prominent figure of Martin Luther, and the fact presses itself upon our notice, that, rigorously considered, that great Religious Reformer was at the same time also the man from whom the first impulses, as well as the first actions, towards a Literary Reformation originated. To quote the words of an English author: Luther translated the entire Bible into vulgar German, and thus submitted the criterion of Faith to the verdict of universal suffrage. Luther's translation of the Bible is a truly revolutionary epoch in the history of German Literature and Poetry. It introduced a new dialect, that of Saxony, to national preference. All the Protestants adopted this Bible, and their itinerant preachers and proselytizers commented on it in the language in which it was composed; indeed they were chiefly Wittenberg Students, educated under Luther. Thus the provincialism of Saxony became prevalent in all the Protestant circles. The Catholic Theologians again were almost obliged to reply to controversial writings in the same speech in which they were written, else the impression could not be efficaciously counteracted; and by degrees, the books which had a preference of circulation and attention were mostly drawn up in Saxon. Into Saxon also Luther made his rhymed version of the Psalms, and every village schoolboy among