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Lessing's *Nathan the Wise*: from the Enlightenment to the Berliner Ensemble

Lessing's *Nathan the Wise* (1779), exemplary for its enlightenment and humanist ideals, assembles Jews, Christians, and Muslims in dialogue during the medieval crusades in Jerusalem. Their encounters allow them to transcend conflict, to recognize their common humanity, and to resolve their differences through dialectical discourse and group arguments. In this article Eva Urban looks closely at the representation of enlightenment in this play and examines the potential role of plays and theatre practice in developing autonomous citizenship and intercultural understanding. Particular reference is made to the 2013 Berliner Ensemble production of *Nathan the Wise* in relation to aesthetic debates about modern political drama. Eva Urban is a British Academy Postdoctoral Research Fellow at the Faculty of English, University of Cambridge, and an Associate of Clare Hall, Cambridge. She is the author of *Community Politics and the Peace Process in Contemporary Northern Irish Drama* (Peter Lang, 2010) and has published a number of articles on political drama and Irish studies.

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For a' that, and a' that,
It's comin' yet, for a' that,
That man to man the warld o'er
Shall brothers be for a' that.

<div align="right">Robert Burns, 1795</div>

ENLIGHTENMENT philosopher Gotthold Ephraim Lessing wrote *Nathan der Weise* (1779) after he had visited Italy and encountered the contrast between the enlightened, intercultural city of Livorno and the Rome of Pope Pius VI, whose 1775 'Edict concerning the Jews' would later serve as a model for the 1935 Nazi laws against Jewish Germans. Lessing, who had worked for religious tolerance and for the rights of Jewish citizens in Germany, appears to have been partly inspired by this experience to write the play (Kuschel, p. 49–57). In the spirit of enlightenment ideals, *Nathan der Weise* is an attempt to promote reason, humanity and intercultural understanding against irrational hatred.

The director of the Berliner Ensemble, Claus Peymann, renewed Lessing's appeal to reason in the aftermath of reactions to 9/11 with his 2002 production and 2012–14

revival of *Nathan der Weise*. Peymann, who was awarded the Lessing-Preis for criticism in 2012, highlights the fact that in the play we learn that the Jewish protagonist Nathan's entire family had been burned to death by Christian fanatics, and that in spite of this he chose to take on a Christian child as his own, and to spread reason and love to counteract barbarism. He maintains the necessity of postulating a return to reason and humanity in a contemporary world of conflict:

And this Nathan does not take revenge or retaliation, but reason returns. And through reason, forgiveness. And this is the message that this lucid play can communicate in dark times. I think this needs to be postulated nowadays; this needs to be preached, so that all ears can hear it.[1]

In 2013–14 Peymann's ongoing Brechtian production, which emphasizes not only the serious issues addressed in the play and their contemporary relevance but also elements that draw out the comedy of human interactions, is set on a bare, black stage. The stage floor design, which functions on several symbolic levels, resembles an uneven red-

and-white chalk drawing of a chessboard, and is used both for a game of chess and a game of hopscotch.

The performance opens with the stage in darkness, with elements of smoke and light indicating the house fire from which Nathan's adopted daughter Recha has been saved by a Templar knight during his absence. This dark image is counterpointed with Recha's cheerful entrance playing hopscotch. The centre of the chalk pattern consists of red lines in the shape of a giant cross, symbolizing the medieval Christian crusaders in Jerusalem. Nathan's house is represented only by the downstage right exit and the indication of a black front door frame, on which are drawn, with red and white chalk, antisemitic slogans and a Star of David encircling the word 'Jew', clearly evoking the Nazi period. It seems as if these had been written by those who committed the arson attack on Nathan's house. The costumes also are evocative of the 1930s or 1940s. This draws attention to the precarious situation of Nathan, who as a Jew in medieval Jerusalem endures constant persecution.

This emphasis on the dark world Nathan inhabits is shared with Manfred Noa's 1922 Weimar Republic expressionist silent film *Nathan der Weise* starring Max Schreck as Grand Master of the Templars. Prawer mentions that this film was 'greeted with protests, especially in Munich, because it was deemed to be too pro-Jewish' (Prawer, p. 20). The film begins not with Nathan's return to Jerusalem, as in the play text, but instead with a depiction of his earlier sufferings, which in the play we only learn about later through his memories. The film stages the gruesome burning of Nathan's family by Christian fanatics, his emotional breakdown, and his recovery after a baby orphaned in a Saracen attack on the Templar army is entrusted to his care.

Breaking down Cultural Prejudices

Less than two decades before the Holocaust, this portrayal of intercultural hatred and the scapegoating of the Jews by the Christian population is juxtaposed with the alternative of intercultural love: in the Crusader's tent, Sultan's estranged younger brother Assad grieves over the death of his German Christian wife in childbirth and entrusts the child to a monk. The tent is decorated with Muslim, Christian, and Jewish religious symbols, indicating a utopian union of all religions, and suggesting perhaps the legendary fusion of western and eastern mysticism by the Templars. Intercultural love is also expressed in the film's explicit dramatization of Nathan's gratitude for a child to love and nurture after the murder of his own family, and by his renunciation of vengeance.

The threat of death and loss by fire to Nathan continues throughout the play: returned from his travels in the first scene, he learns from Daja that the Templar saved Recha, whom the Templar believed to be Jewish, from the fire. The cause of this fire is not specified, but is most likely another Christian mob attack. Upon discovery of Recha's Christian origins, the Christian patriarch of Jerusalem calls for Nathan to be 'burned' for the transgression of having lovingly brought up a Christian child. This suggests an allusion to Pope Pius VI and his anti-Jewish laws, in which similar punishments were specified for any prohibited interactions between Jews and Christians.

This historical context, and the fact that the play was originally censored, clarifies that there is nothing naively optimistic about its plea for reason, tolerance, and love. Yet, the play's potential to function as a positive model for the role of theatre in breaking down cultural prejudice is not always recognized. Kuschel argues against a common criticism of *Nathan the Wise* as a 'product of the optimism of the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century', which has 'long since been discredited' (Kuschel, p. 29). And of course blind optimism was often criticized by enlightenment thinkers, as in Voltaire's *Candide*.

Kuschel explains that Lessing's play 'does not teach optimism, but *docta spes*, in the sense of Bloch's idea of hope tested through lived experience and way of life' (p. 29–30). I would argue that Bloch's utopian hope is reflected not only in the Berliner Ensemble production but also in recent British pro-

ductions and their reception. In his review of the 2005 Hampstead production of a shortened translation by Edward Kemp, Michael Billington maintained that the play's 'theme speaks urgently and forcefully to us today', and that 'it moves beyond preachiness to show the need for reconciliation and harmony. It cannot fail to move' (Billington).

Educating for Autonomy

If enlightenment cannot be simplistically defined as a grand narrative of optimism, then what is a viable definition? In 'Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?' Kant writes: 'Have courage to make use of your *own* understanding! is thus the motto of enlightenment' (Milne, p. 7). Milne draws out the essential anti-authoritarianism of enlightenment which, by its very foundation on an idea of critique, cannot but be critical of itself in its 'assertion of reason's autonomy' and 'its ability to legislate for itself rather than being beholden to the external authorities of church, party, or state' (p. 5).

In 'Educating for Autonomy' ('Erziehung zur Mündigkeit'), Adorno also refers to Kant's definition of enlightenment in order to

The Berliner Ensemble production of *Nathan the Wise*. Above: Martin Schwab as Nathan on the chessboard stage. Below, from left to right: Anna Graenzer as Anna, Norbert Stöß, and Ursula Höpfner-Tabori watch as Martin Schwab (Nathan) argues with Lucas Prisor (the Templar). Photos: copyright Barbara Braun.

illustrate that the critical autonomy of each citizen is the essential basis for democracy. Adorno criticizes the lack of emphasis on autonomy in pedagogy and education, and argues that a focus on authority 'sabotages the notion of autonomy and not only implicitly but quite openly undermines the necessary conditions for democracy' (p. 136).[2] And in *Reason and Revolution*, Marcuse clarifies that free rational activity inevitably clashes with existing ideological frameworks, social conditions, and power relations, and that in this sense it can be characterized as a 'negative philosophy', which operates by critique of 'the prevailing social reality' (p. vii).

He calls this 'dialectics', which in *Negative Dialectics* Adorno describes as 'the ontology of the wrong state of things', against which the realization of utopian possibility would overcome even the system of dialectics itself: 'The right state of things would be free of it: neither a system nor a contradiction' (p. 11). Geoghegan illuminates how, in contrast to Hegel's pre-determined dialectical system, Bloch's concept of utopia emphasizes the creative dynamics of the not-yet-conscious (Geoghegan, p. 35–7). In *The Principle of Hope* Bloch describes the Not-Yet-Conscious as 'solely the preconscious of what is to come, the psychological birthplace of the New', which 'keeps itself preconscious above all because in fact there is within it a content of consciousness which has not yet become wholly manifest, and is still dawning from the future' (Bloch, p. 116).

According to Bloch's historical account in *Natural Law and Human Dignity*, I argue that the enlightenment and the ideals of the *citoyen* as well as those of natural law and social utopia since the stoics, can be seen as what Geoghegan describes as 'a kind of foreglow of future possibilities' (p. 37). Past consciousness can be retrieved to create a better future: the uncompleted eighteenth-century enlightenment is merely a foreglow of the utopian potential of enlightenment. Adorno defines Kant's notion of autonomy as a similarly non-static, dynamic category:

In Kant's essay, which I took as my starting point, he gave the following answer to the question 'Do we now live in an enlightened age': 'No, but we do live in an age of enlightenment.' Through this statement Kant defined autonomy not as a static but very rigorously as a dynamic category as something becoming, not as something being.

Adorno argues that it is 'questionable' whether enlightenment can still be possible in a sophisticated modern system of domination that prevents autonomy by reaching into all spheres of public and intimate personal life through such tools as the culture industry (p. 143–4).[3] However, he specifically vocalizes the need and hope to effect positive change through an education towards autonomy. To him, the 'only real concretization of autonomy consists in the few people who are this way inclined working with all their energy towards an education that is one of resistance and opposition' (p. 145).[4]

The most recent Berliner Ensemble production of *Nathan der Weise*, attended by school groups from all over Germany, shares this inclination towards enabling autonomous citizenship. It exemplifies the idea of theatre as 'foreglowing' enlightenment by highlighting Lessing's non-static and anti-dogmatic emphasis on continuous thought, dialogue, and communication. The play and performance show characters in the process of developing their potential of becoming autonomous citizens.

Theatre as 'Foreglowing' Enlightenment

In this Brechtian-style production, the actors portray characters in constant movement, as they walk up and down the chalk lines of the chessboard floor and quickly move about the stage while debating religion, culture, and humanism. Whenever two or more characters are engaged in debate they oppose each other in exact diagonals on stage, positioned on specific chalk lines or with lines separating them from each other. The characters are shown to experiment with arguments dialectically as they speak; arguments that have not already been falsely resolved, but that are dynamically explored towards a not-yet-conscious synthesis by underlining the choices faced and made by characters in each given moment of debate.

In this production, it is possible to see them think, decide, and change their mind through the distancing devices employed both in their speech and physical movement. Whenever a rapprochement happens between opposing views of characters in the play, the actors move towards one another, and when agreement is reached, they join each other on the same chalk line or in the same square. The outcome of any given situation appears open to change, and the audience is encouraged to change their own perspective by visually following the protagonists' physical changes of position and attitude on stage.

This production elucidates the play's structure around a number of scenes in which the characters develop their critical autonomy to argue dialectically, and in which their self-awareness grows in direct relationship with their awareness of other people and the objective world they inhabit, leading to positive change. In *Nathan the Wise*, the importance of critical reasoning, a critique of reason, and criticism of 'the prevailing social reality' as essential prerequisites for developing tolerance and humanity are the central representation of enlightenment.

In the Berliner Ensemble production this aspect is underlined by an overdrawn representation of all protagonists as 'thinking persons'. The Templar is played by Lucas Prisor as a rashly passionate but quick-thinking young man, dressed in a Templar costume with red cross, white mantle, and a huge red sword, combined with a white colonial-style suit, helmet, and sunshade. In contrast, the calm and careful Nathan, played by Martin Schwab in 2013–14 (by the late Peter Fitz until 2012), is dressed in a black suit, overcoat, and hat. In a key dialectical dialogue with the Templar, Nathan is impressed by the young man's 'defiant look' and attitude,[5] as it indicates the independent thought of a man who questions authorities.

These qualities convince Nathan that the Templar is open to reasoning and critique. When the Templar rejects Nathan's efforts to thank him for saving Recha's life in the fire, they begin to argue. The Templar, standing beside Nathan on stage, is turned towards the audience, and refuses to look at Nathan,

who directly addresses him, thereby expressing disdain. However, as Nathan continues to reason with him, they slowly approach each other. Despite the cynicism and anti-semitism the Templar displays in his rejection of Daja's, Recha's, and Nathan's efforts to thank him, he shows his true humanist motivations when he maintains that 'it is the duty of the Templar knights to spring to the assistance of all people in distress' (p. 59).

The Templar looks visibly embarrassed when Nathan mentions the girl's devotion to him, and he, for the first time, acknowledges Nathan's humanity by looking at him, by calling him by his name, and by running towards him and shaking his hand: 'But Jew – your name is Nathan? Nathan then, you frame your words with skill, and very pointedly. I am embarrassed – anyway – I would . . . ' (p. 60). He also abandons the sword and helmet, which constitute his Templar uniform, and in this manner he symbolically discards his military role and his prejudices. Nathan concludes that he refrained from approaching Recha out of concern for her reputation. The Templar agrees that such conduct would conform to the ideals of the Templars, but also suggests that such ideals may not always be honoured: 'I see you know the way in which we Templars ought to think' (p. 61).

Differences and Commonalities

By limiting the ideals to Templars, the Templar emphasizes cultural differences between people; Nathan responds by highlighting commonalities. While Nathan argues that 'these differences don't amount to much' (p. 61), both he and the Templar look at each other more and more frequently, thereby acknowledging their common humanity. He criticizes the Templars for obeying orders to follow such ideals. For Nathan, all people can arrive at an independent decision to adopt humane conduct towards their fellow humans by the use of their own judgement. This argument exemplifies Kant's critique of deference to authority, and his call for the courage to 'be wise' and critical:

Why only Templars? And why *ought* to think?
Because it is commanded by the order?
I know how all good people think, and that
Good people are produced in every land.
(p. 61)

In the Berliner Ensemble production the line that refers to the commands of the Templar order is cut. This appears to have been done to avoid a repetition of the meaning of '*ought to think*'; however, I would argue that the reference to Nathan's criticism of those who obey commands offers us an essential insight into his anti-authoritarian position. As critical reasoning leads to the questioning of conditions and power relations presented as natural, and to revolutionary emancipation, it is in the interest of those heading powerful institutions, such as the Patriarch, to prevent such reasoning in order to maintain their hegemony over the population.

The Patriarch – pompously dressed on the Berliner Ensemble stage in a red cape over a black suit, a large golden cross, and white gloves, symbolizing his dominance – constructs an ideological justification for blind obedience. His dogmatic stance and refusal to communicate with others are highlighted in performance by the actor keeping his hands rigidly folded. The Patriarch's anxious efforts to retain control are expressed as he compulsively opens and closes his cape, then refolds his hands, mechanically moving like a machine, signifying a process of mechanization in his thinking as he reduces reason to the merely instrumental. In the same manner as he sees and uses human beings as tools devoid of humanity, reason is to the Patriarch no more than a useful tool, a means to an end. This speech is rendered uncut in Peymann's production:

No one must neglect to use the reason
Given him by God – wherever it
Is fitting – but is reason always fitting?
Not at all! For instance, when God, acting
Through one of his angels – that's to say,
Through any servant of his word – is pleased
To show us a means by which we may
Advance the welfare of all Christendom,
And help the Church's cause in some specific
Way, and strengthen it – who then should dare
To use his reason to examine the
Authority of him who first created

Reason? And to scrutinise the eternal
Law of heaven's majesty, according
To the petty rules of futile honour?   (p. 98)

The play's critique of such authoritarian dogma and instrumental reason is extended to a critique of pure reason as a form of mental enslavement by the Dervish character Al Hafi:

Whoever thinks
About it seeks excuses not to act.
If he can't instantly decide to live
Just for himself, he'll always be a slave
To others.   (p. 68)

Contrary to authoritarianism, mechanization, and mental enslavement, in *Die Erziehung des Menschengeschlechts* (1777–80), Lessing maintains that religious revelations should be understood as a dynamic dialectic of humanity's progressive historical steps towards educating for autonomy.

Performatizing Intersubjectivity

The Berliner Ensemble production of *Nathan der Weise* shows that Lessing shares with Brecht this emphasis on the dialectical nature of social reality and on the changeability of human relations.

Luckhurst illuminates Lessing's dramaturgical influence on Brecht in her analysis of the dialectical relationships dramatized in Brecht's 'experiment in performatizing theory', *The Messingkauf Dialogues* of 1939 to 1955 (Luckhurst, Thomson, and Sacks, p. 193–208, at p. 196). I would argue that Lessing's Lehrstück is an earlier example of an 'experiment in performatizing theory': in rehearsal and performance the dialectical relationships between the characters, between the actors and their parts, between the actors as actors, and between the performance and the audience embody the philosophical arguments of the play. It instructs audiences in the application of critical reason to communication and understanding.

'Reason' in this context specifies independent thought and 'reasonable' conduct towards those who are different, a synthesis of rationality with human empathy and moral feeling rather than an authoritarian form of

instrumental reason. This is close to what Habermas describes as a 'utopian form of intersubjectivity', which 'enables unconstrained understanding between individuals just as it enables the identity of an individual that communicates unconstrainedly with itself – socialization (*Vergesellschaftung*) without repression' (Habermas, 1981, p. 524).[6]

In his rejection of the separation of *Aufklärung* from *Sturm und Drang* Romanticism Lukács explains that Lessing's 'point of departure was precisely that Corneille's conception of tragedy is inhuman, that Corneille disregarded the human soul and man's emotional life, that, being engrossed in the courtly and aristocratic conventions of his time, he offers us lifeless and purely intellectualist constructions. He clarifies that both Lessing and Diderot 'combatted these conventions all along the line, their intellectualist frigidity as well as their irrationality' (Lukács, p. 37). This idea reflects Lessing's reinterpretation of Aristotle's concept of tragedy and his development of the *Bürgerliches Trauerspiel* in his *Hamburger Dramaturgie*.

Lessing critiqued class distinctions and saw the social purpose of tragedy as inspiring empathy with others. Inspired by the more relaxed conventions of Shakespeare's plays, he formulated a pioneering theory of modern drama and created a stepping stone towards the realism later advocated by Lukács. On the other hand the dialectical structure of Lessing's work is closer to Brecht's experimental concept of a politically committed 'realism' of estrangement, as defended by Benjamin and opposed by Lukács. In Barnett's words, 'Realism for Brecht is the accurate, or to put it in Marxist terminology, materialist revelation of society's dialectical mechanisms and is, thus, a philosophical (and not an aesthetic) category that is then translated into performance' (Barnett, p. 335).

Adorno, Brecht – and Beckett

Lessing's focus on a humanism of independent thought merged with empathy would resist both the prescription of socialist realism over other, more experimental forms by Lukács, and Brecht's rejection of the notion of empathy in the theatre. Adorno critiqued both Lukács and Brecht for their political and aesthetic contradictions and he attacked the complicity of art works with ruling systems in their reduction to functionality. While the theatre of Beckett, which Adorno favoured, might be disliked by Lessing for its formalism, its humanism and the empathy unlocked by the universal suffering portrayed it corresponds exactly to the effect Lessing wanted to create in the tragic theatre.

Bailes argues that, for Adorno, 'the art work is always already polemical; it is not of the world but its process, its *being made* evidences the immanent possibility for alteration within the empirical world'. She concludes that this suggests that

the political force of theatre as a representation of reality lies not only in its ability to show the conditions that exist in such a light that we might imagine their alterability (Brecht's earlier insistence), but, as critically, in its potential to organize the world according to a diversified notion of norms, logics, and structural limitations, that enables society to be conceived of differently and in difference. (p. 86)

Adorno's critique does not do justice to the complexity of Brecht's work. Many of his plays, his emphasis on process, and his effective technique of *Verfremdung* demonstrate the changeability of human conditions and relations, subvert the powerful, and empower the powerless by provoking critical thought and the desire for action.

However, Nowak argues for a more nuanced examination of Adorno's critique of Brecht. She unearths his appreciation of aspects of Brecht's work, particularly the structural subversion he achieves through his epic theatre and the *Verfremdungseffekt*, in which she sees a certain relationship with the formal concerns of Beckett's work. She argues that when Adorno writes in 'Commitment' how the people on Brecht's stage 'visibly shrink into those agents of social processes and functions, which they indirectly, unknowingly, are in empirical reality', it surprisingly 'vaguely reminds one of the qualities of Beckett's plays' (Nowak, p. 78).[7]

The Berliner Ensemble production of *Nathan der Weise* achieves a synthesis of

Brechtian commitment and a more Beckettian subversion of structures through the use of the unstructured chalk chessboard pattern on the stage floor, and through dynamic elements of stylization in the movements and positions of the characters. The chessboard floor is used for an actual game of chess in Act Two, Scene One, in the Sultan's palace, where Saladin and his sister Sittah playfully argue while playing chess with red and black chairs. They jump long distances around the space while moving the chairs from one position to another, literally embodying their rapid critical thought processes and argumentative positions.

The Patriarch is the only character who is reduced to his mechanical social function. The other characters, in their autonomy, embody Adorno's notion of the becoming, dynamic, dialectical, and processual. The Templar's rapidly changing thoughts are thus mirrored by Lucas Prisor's fast changes of physical movement, positions, postures, and exaggerated gestures as he walks or runs defiantly, hectically, or insecurely on or beside the chalk lines on the floor. While he begins with a definite gest of stubborn defiance in his anti-semitic rejection of Recha, Daja, and Nathan's gratitude, he is moved to reconsider his own ideological posturing by a debate with Nathan, during which he moves hectically around the stage.

Recha and the Templar

Persuaded by Nathan to get to know Recha, the audience can observe the Templar falling in love with her in a scene of particular beauty when, upon meeting her again, he cannot take his eyes off her, loses all self-assurance in speech and movement, stutters, and runs against the wall on his rapid exit, suddenly decided on in fear of the consequences of his own passion. Standing alone outside Recha's house, he takes off his uniform, rejects his Templar office, wipes the anti-semitic insults from the wall, and excitedly draws a chalk heart around the chalk Star of David.

Recha first walks on barefoot, wearing a black dress, white blouse, and with her hair in two plaits, playing hopscotch. This visual exaggeration of her status as Nathan's child contrasts the grown-up, dignified, and serious demeanour given to her character as a 'thinking person' by actress Anna Graenzer. For a contemporary audience, her costume evokes a gender issue in the play, in which Nathan's attitude to Recha, whom he educated to think critically, is still patriarchal. A deliberately youthful Recha could be conceivable as a choice made to either critique, or to reduce that patriarchal element by emphasizing the dependant status of a young adolescent, irrespective of their gender.

In her encounter with the Templar, Recha's youth is counterbalanced with the Templar's awkward adolescent clumsiness. The play's emphasis is on universal humanity, which, while it includes the patriarchal structures of the medieval period (and of the eighteenth century), does not make gender differences in its stress on independent reasoning. Just as Kant's call for autonomy applied to both men and women, critical reason is exercised by both male and female characters in *Nathan the Wise*. While enlightenment is sometimes portrayed as an exclusively masculinist project on the basis of Rousseau's exclusion of women from public life, historian Carla Hesse in *The Other Enlightenment*: *How French Women became Modern*, shows that women became involved in public debate through the Enlightenment and the French Revolution.

Crucially, the Templar falls in love with Recha's reasoning, not when he first sees her, but after getting to know her through an intensive dialogue. They both incorporate dynamic minds. At the beginning of the play Graenzer expresses naive enthusiasm in Recha's adoration of the Templar whom she sees as an 'angel' in her account to her father of how he saved her from the fire, gestically demonstrating his 'white wings' to the audience as she moves towards them at the front of the stage.

Upon being made aware of the humanity, and the possibility of illness, of her beloved, she counterpointedly throws herself on the floor in tears of empathy and guilt. Recha then reproaches Daja for having influenced

Above: Martin Schwab as Nathan contemplates the chalk heart drawn around the Star of David.
Below: Anna as Nathan's child: Anna Graenzer and Martin Schwab. Photos: copyright Barbara Braun.

her imagination with romantic tales of angels, and in that way 'embarrassed her'. As Habermas clarifies:

We also call rational the behaviour of a person who is ready, and in the position, to free themselves from illusions, and specifically illusions that are not based on errors (about facts), but on self-deception (about own experiences).

A person who is capable of allowing themselves to be enlightened about their irrationality does not only master the rationality of a person who has the ability to judge and act with purposeful rationality, of a morally reasonable and practically

reliable, delicately evaluating subject, but also the power to act reflexively toward their own subjectivity and to see through the irrational limitations, to which their cognitive, their morally and aesthetically practical statements are systematically subjected.[8]   (Habermas, p. 42, 43)

When Recha meets the Templar again, in a comic moment of ecstasy, Graenzer runs towards Prisor and throws herself on the ground again, this time in an exaggerated *gestus* of gratitude. This is followed by careful reasoning again, as she presents a de-romanticized version of the Templar's rescue operation, while in turn the Templar's rational capacities are for periods suspended by his own expressions of passion.

> In Europe wine is capable
> Of spurring men to every kind of deed.
> It's just that Templars sometimes have to act
> Like this. Like rather well-trained dogs they
>   must
> Retrieve things out of fire or out of water.
>   (p. 70)

When the Templar rejects Recha's gratitude she reacts in anger. However, her subsequent change towards calmness in her stage position in contrast to the increasing restlessness of the fiery Templar creates an interesting dialectical dynamic between them: she becomes ever more composed while the young man is losing all composure. The Templar stares at Recha with a confused expression, and asks the audience in a stutter, 'What is the mountain called?' in reply to Recha's questions about his previous whereabouts on Mount Sinai.

'The Dynamic Potential of Real Life'

The experience for the audience is to witness the interplay between emotional reactions and human reason, and the dynamic potential of real life, realism in the Brechtian sense, that reveals the rich possibilities of each moment. This also achieves a picture of humanity not limited to rationality, showing the positive qualities of passion and emotion when they are mediated through reason. Rather than predicating an inevitable static nature in human interactions, this acting technique not only achieves a critical distance from the characters, but also demonstrates to the audience that every moment is full of possibilities, choices, and decisions, and that human relations and social conditions can be continuously changed and improved.

In this way, *Nathan the Wise* could be conceived as a kind of dramaturgical proto-synthesis between social realism, Brechtian realism, and Adorno's non-dogmatic process dialectics. Empathy is desired, but identification with the characters is prevented by distancing devices, and while there is a commitment element calling for critical thought and social change that is close to Brecht, in performance the play can achieve a dynamic dialectics of utopia that undermines static didactic dogma.

Intercultural Citizenship and Brotherhood

In *Nathan the Wise* the characters develop humanist thought processes through engaging in dialogue with others. Similarly to Kant, Nathan calls for people to use their faculties of reason as 'thinking persons' (p. 26) in order to develop empathy with others and effect positive change. By not recognizing the goodness in other humans, Nathan argues, one avoids paying them back with goodness in turn. Against such humanism the Patriarch sees human beings as mere tools, and to him humanity itself is devoid of value.

As Drescher-Ochoa has pointed out (p. 125–8), he prefers the death of an innocent Christian child to the good deed of a Jew (Nathan), who saved the child. While he 'reasons' that the child (Recha) would have been saved from eternal damnation if she had died rather than been brought up by a Jew (Nathan), it becomes clear that he only cares to preserve the authority of the Church over the minds of others. In contrast, the possibility of a universal brotherhood across religious and cultural barriers is articulated by Saladin's detection of a physical resemblance between the Templar and his long-lost brother, which prompts him emotionally to humanize the previously dehumanized enemy, and to pardon him.

Interestingly the very notion of such a resemblance, such a 'brotherhood' between

people of different cultures, provokes disbelief in others, such as Daja, who find this 'incredible'. Nathan asks why this should be more incredible than the divisive myths of difference that people believe in (p. 27). In the Berliner Ensemble production, as Nathan and Saladin begin to argue about religion and humanism, they are diagonally facing each other from a distance, then gradually draw closer. During the crucial lines, 'I am a Jew,' and 'And I a Muslim. And the Christian is between us' (p. 79), they stand on either side of the red chalk cross on the floor. Their differences are symbolically bridged in the course of the performance as they gradually cross the red line between them and embrace each other with brotherly affection.

This idea of brotherhood is extended to a *Geschwisterlichkeit* that includes women. Sittah is played as a confident and capable, argumentative, and opinionated woman. Her elegant blue wrap-around gown matches her brother Saladin's attire (black suit, blue belt, black hat, blue feather, and blue shoes), highlighting her equal status as his sibling. At one point Saladin and Sittah tenderly embrace one another while kneeling in the centre of the stage. Saladin lovingly thanks her for having managed his accounts and 'singlehandedly' maintained his court and expenses: 'Ah, how like my own dear sister! (*Embraces her*)' (p. 52).

This potential of the play to explore *Geschwisterlichkeit*[9] rather than male brotherhood is more fully developed by another contemporary touring production: Ensemble Theatrum's 2013 stylized metaphorical staging of the play features a double-casting of Nathan played by both a man and a woman, effectively dramatizing the ancient Hebrew spiritual unity of feminine and masculine elements.

The humanist hope in Lessing's play is rooted in an internationalist idea of a brotherhood of all people, shared with Freemasonry, which is often linked with enlightenment and with the French Revolution. Lessing connects the ideals of freemasonry with those of the Enlightenment in *Ernst und Falk: Gespräche für Freimaurer*, a text included in the programme of the Berliner Ensemble production alongside the original script and

cuts. In the play Nathan is characterized as a Freemason:

AL HAFI: They say he has explored the tombs of Solomon and David,
And he knows a mighty magic word with which he
Can remove their seals. (p. 56)

Drescher-Ochoa explains that the name 'Nathan' is that of the Hebrew prophet and historian of Solomon, whose temple is seen as the origin of the teachings of Freemasonry (p. 111). According to Nicolai, the Templars developed a fusion of Christian, Jewish, Egyptian, Greek, and Muslim philosophy.[10] Drescher-Ochoa links the concept of a true Freemasonry of brotherhood to Lessing's critique of institutionalized eighteenth-century Freemasonry, against which he stresses the universal equality of all humans: 'Nature knows nothing of the hateful distinctions that humans have firmly established among themselves' (Drescher-Ochoa, p. 111–12, 154).[11]

Nathan the Wise not only critiques religious dogma and divisions, but also oppression and class divisions. Nathan, Saladin, and Sittah give to the poor without religious or cultural discrimination. The Dervish Al Hafi, a Muslim with Zoroastrian, Hindu, and Buddhist spiritual sympathies (p. 33), who, according to Kuschel, represents the tradition of Sufi universalism (p. 25), was employed by Saladin as treasurer as he found his predecessor 'too cold' and 'too harsh' in his dealings with the poor (p. 34).

In the Berliner Ensemble production Al Hafi is played as a Bohemian figure, evoking an artist, political activist, or social worker, whose planned departure to the Ganges and attempt at persuading Nathan to join him perhaps also characterizes him as a kind of resistance figure forced into exile. He is dressed in a black jacket with a blue collar, a black cap with a white feather, a white frock or skirt, Converse shoes, and braces decorated with pearls. He enters the stage on his bicycle, ringing his bell, and cycles on the chalk lines on the floor, crashing his bike before stopping to embrace Nathan.

The joyful and tender manner in which Nathan and Al Hafi hug in the Berliner

Ensemble production, one lifting up the other and turning him around, suggests not only loving brotherhood but also the possibility of an erotic relationship. Al Hafi formulates a critique of the government system that perpetuates oppression and poverty, and of inaction in the face of the problem:

DERVISH: Isn't it plain folly, when
 A hundred thousand people are oppressed,
 Impoverished, despoiled, tortured, slaughtered,
 To play philanthropist to individuals?   (p. 34)

The Contemporary Relevance

Nathan the Wise is relevant to contemporary cultural conflicts, class divisions, poverty and injustice, and the scapegoating used by the dominant economic order to deflect responsibility for a financial crisis that leads to re-emerging nationalisms and xenophobia. The play continues to encourage audiences to develop a critical consciousness, intellectual freedom, equality, and humanity. By linking independent thinking, an awareness of historical processes and dialectics to the potential of humane relations between individuals, communities, and societies, the play also highlights the crucial importance of an education that fosters critical skills and autonomous citizenship in all people. Through Nathan's words, Lessing critiques not only bigotry and class divisions, but provides a proto-critique of the nationalism that emerged and spread in the following centuries:

NATHAN: Are we then
 Our people? What does 'people' mean?
 Are Jew and Christian, Jew and Christian first
 And human beings second?   (p. 62)

He challenges the Templar to acknowledge the common humanity of all people – 'Have I found in you a man who needs no other name than human being?' – and he responds by extending the hand of friendship. When the Templar begs Nathan for Recha's hand in marriage, not realizing she is actually his own sister, he takes Nathan up on his idea of human rather than cultural, national, or religious identity. He implores Nathan to respect 'the earliest bonds of nature!', to not be more

swayed by later ties – and to 'just be content with being human' (p. 88).

The Templar's bid is a call to the audience, in whom Lessing seeks to awaken the consciousness of their shared humanity. In the Berliner Ensemble production the final scene of love and friendship in which Nathan, the Templar, Recha, Saladin, and Sittah embrace one another in recognition of their *Geschwisterlichkeit*, the particular historical suffering represented by Nathan is highlighted by a *Verfremdungseffekt*, as he steps out from the tableau and continues to watch the others embracing from a distance.

On 28 November 2013 the enthusiastic applause that occurred as the curtain fell was abruptly brought to a halt and followed by another formal estrangement: a sobering recitation of an extract from Heiner Müller's *Lessing's Schlaf Traum Schrei*, which imagines Lessing's despair at modern inhumanity. This created a powerful shock effect of catapulting the audience out of the utopian image of the final reconciliation scene of the play back into the reality of a violent world of conflict.

The effectiveness of this device in provoking critical thought and preventing complacency in audience members became clear when, unsettled and puzzled, it took several minutes for the final applause to pick up again, which then erupted even more forcefully. Far from disempowering the humanism of the play, this dramaturgical decision strengthened its urgency. In the post-show discussion, Peymann powerfully argued against cynicism about political theatre by simply asking the audience to reflect on what the world would be like without political theatre: 'Wie wäre die Welt ohne politisches Theater?'

The ideal of enlightenment in Lessing's play is of a universal community of autonomous citizens engaged in a process of dialectical discourse. The transition of the characters from cultural conflict to dialogue, empathy, and intercultural understanding, is a journey that Lessing hopes audiences of *Nathan the Wise* will embark on. This journey would aim towards a utopian situation similar to Hegel's ideal, where 'every subject recog-

nizes and promotes active universality in every subject, where all men equally recognize and co-operate with one another' (Hegel, p. xvii). So, on a philosophical level, Lessing could be said to have already offered the synthesis that Goldmann pines for: 'a synthesis of the socialist-historical consciousness with individual freedom and toleration' (p. 96). This vision of a more humane world deserves serious consideration as a model for utopian aspiration.

Notes

1. Original German version: 'Und dieser Nathan übt keine Vergeltung, keine Rache, sondern die Vernunft kehrt wieder. Und über die Vernunft das Vergeben. Und das ist die Botschaft, die dieses helle Stück in dunkler Zeit vermitteln kann. Ich denke, das muß man heute postulieren, das muß man heute predigen, damit es alle Ohren hören.' (Peymann, Berliner Ensemble, <www.berliner-ensemble.de/repertoire/titel/13>, accessed 9 April 2004, author's translation.)

2. Original German version: 'Und anstelle von Mündigkeit findet man da einen existentialontologisch verbrämten Begriff von Autorität, von Bindung, oder wie all diese Scheußlichkeiten sonst heißen, die den Begriff der Mündigkeit sabotieren und damit den Voraussetzungen einer Demokratie nicht nur implicit, sondern recht offen entgegenarbeiten.' (Adorno, 'Erziehung zur Mündigkeit', *Vorträge und Gespräche mit Helmut Becker 1959–1969* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1970), p. 136, author's translation.)

3. Original German version: 'Kant hat in seiner Schrift, von der ich ausgegangen bin, auf die Frage "Leben wir jetzt in einem aufgeklärten Zeitalter" geantwortet: "Nein, aber wohl in einem Zeitalter der Aufklärung." Womit er also Mündigkeit nicht als eine statische, sondern ganz konsequent als eine dynamische Kategorie, als ein Werdendes und nicht als ein Sein bestimmt hat. Ob wir heute noch in derselben Weise sagen können, daß wir in einem Zeitalter der Aufklärung leben, ist angesichts des unbeschreiblichen Drucks, der auf die Menschen ausgeübt wird, einfach durch die Einrichtung der Welt und bereits durch die planmäßige Steuerung auch der gesamten Innensphäre durch die Kulturindustrie in einem allerweitesten Sinn sehr fragwürdig geworden.' (Adorno, p. 143–4, author's translation.)

4. Original German version: 'Ich würde, auf die Gefahr hin, daß Sie mich einen Philosophen schelten, der ich nun einmal bin, sagen, daß die Gestalt, in der Mündigkeit sich heute konkretisiert, die ja gar nicht ohne weiteres vorausgesetzt werden kann, weil sie an allen, aber wirklich an allen Stellen unseres Lebens überhaupt erst herzustellen wäre, daß also die einzige wirkliche Konkretisierung der Mündigkeit darin besteht, daß die paar Menschen, die dazu gesonnen sind, mit aller Energie darauf hinwirken, daß die

Erziehung eine Erziehung zum Widerspruch und zum Widerstand ist.' (Adorno, p. 145, author's translation.)

5. Lessing, trans. Stephanie Clennell and Robert Philip (Milton Keynes: Open University, 1992), p. 59. This close translation will be used for all further references to the Berliner Ensemble production.

6. Original German version: 'Die Strukturen einer Vernunft auf die Adorno nur anspielt, werden der Analyse erst zugänglich, wenn die Ideen der Versöhnung und der Freiheit als Chiffren für eine wie auch immer utopische Form der Intersubjektivität entziffert warden, die eine zwanglose Verständigung der Individuen im Umgang miteinander ebenso ermöglicht wie die Identität eines sich zwanglos mit sich selbst verständigenden Individuums – Vergesellschaftung ohne Repression.' (Habermas, *Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns: zur Kritik der funktionalistischen Vernunft* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1981), Band I, p. 524, author's translation.)

7. 'Und wenn er eingangs schreibt, die "Menschen auf der Bühne schrumpf[t]en sichtbar zusammen zu jenen Agenten sozialer Prozesse und Funktionen, die sie mittelbar, ohne es zu ahnen, in der Empirie" seien, so fühlt man sich zum eigenen Erstaunen vage an die Qualitäten Beckett'scher Stücke erinnert.' (Anja Nowak, *Elemente einer Ästhetik des Theatralen in Adornos Ästhetischer Theorie* (Würzburg: Königshausen und Neumann, 2012), p. 78, author's translation.) Nowak quotes Adorno in 'Engagement', *Noten zur Literatur, Gesammelte Schriften,* Band 11 (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2003), p. 416.

8. Original German versions: 'Rational nennen wir nämlich auch, und sogar mit einer besonderen Betonung, das Verhalten einer Person, die bereit und in der Lage ist, sich von Illusionen freizumachen, und zwar von Illusionen, die nicht auf Irrtum (über Tatsachen), sondern auf Selbsttäuschung (über eigene Erlebnisse beruhen).' (Habermas, p. 42.) 'Wer aber imstande ist, sich über seine Irrationalität aufklären zu lassen, der verfügt nicht nur über die Rationalität eines urteilsfähigen und zweckrational handelnden, eines moralisch einsichtigen und praktisch zuverlässigen, eines sensibel wertenden und ästhetisch aufgeschlossenen Subjekts, sondern über die Kraft, sich seiner Subjektivität gegenüber reflexiv zu verhalten und die irrationalen Beschränkungen zu durchschauen, denen seine kognitiven, seine moralisch- und ästhetisch-praktischen Äusserungen systematisch unterliegen.' (Habermas, p. 43.) Author's translations.

9. For a detailed exploration of the dimension of *Geschwisterlichkeit* as expressed in the interactions between Saladin and his sister in the play see Kuschel, '*Jud, Christ und Muselmann vereinigt'?: Lessing's 'Nathan der Weise',* Düsseldorf: Patmos, 2004, p. 103–7.

10. Nicolai, p. 112–44. Referenced in Fick, *Lessing-Handbuch: Leben, Werk, Wirkung* (Metzler, 2004), p. 396; and in Kuschel, p. 124.

11. Original German versions: 'Die Natur weiß nichts von dem verhaßten Unterschiede, den die Menschen unter sich festgesetzt haben.' (Lessing, *Briefwechsel*, quoted in Drescher-Ochoa, p. 154, author's translation.)

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