

**Die Erziehung des Publikums: Lessing's Dramaturgy of Stepwise Enlightenment in *Minna von Barnhelm***

In my paper today, I will focus on the *pragmatics* of education/revelation through art that Lessing suggests in *Erziehung des Menschengeschlechts* (1780). I will trace a similar "successive enlightenment process" through aesthetic experience in *Minna von Barhnhelm* (1767).

Why *Minna von Barnhelm*? The one drama that certainly comes to mind first in relation to *Erziehung des Menschengeschlechts* is *Nathan der Weise* (1780), and the ways in which these two works were obviously conceived in close dialogue with one another have been explored in various studies. I propose to take a time leap backwards of about thirteen years and look at the drama, written at the height of Lessing's career at the theater. 1767, the year he completed *Minna von Barnhelm* was also the year he was appointed dramaturge at the newly founded Hamburg National Theater. The enthusiasm and the optimism Lessing still had with regard to the possibilities and potentials of theater as the preeminent educational institution of Enlightenment (this being before his profound disappointment only 2,5 half years later), this optimism when it comes to educating his audience as well as the actors, I find expressed *in nuce* in *Minna von Barnhelm*.

I propose to read Lessing's famous comedy as an example of the mode of theorizing and generating thought procedures that Lessing's antagonist, pastor Johann Melchior Goeze, quite aptly diagnosed as Lessing's "Theaterlogik". This is one of those cases where a critical observation in fact provides quite surprising insights. Not only do Lessing's "theoretical writings" contain "Bilder und Gleichnisse", it can also be said that many if not most of Lessing's dramatic writings connect Theater with Thought in a unique way. Lessing's dramas do not merely *exemplify* philosophical concepts, but stage thought processes that take effect by way of aesthetic experiences. They perform, so to speak, the integration of praxis and theory. In other words, Lessing's dramas propose a particular *practice of theory*. Moreover, the *content* of these thought processes is closely related to processes of Enlightenment. Just to give you an idea of what I mean, in the early comedies (written 1747-49), Lessing discloses the nature of *social prejudices* based on

imaginative and cognitive limitations, and his first bourgeois tragedy *Miss Sara Sampson* (1755) stages the interdependency of sympathy and imaginative processes. Now *Minna von Barnhelm*, (and here in the double sense of the play *and* the titular character), *Minna von Barnhelm*, I take it, presents us with a parable about *education by theatrical means*, and thus with a particularly striking parallel to the integration of praxis and theory, or what I call pragmatics of theory, that Lessing explicitly addresses in *Erziehung des Menschengeschlechts*.

It needs to be stressed that I do not read *Minna von Barnhelm* anachronistically as a realization of the theoretical content in *EdM* or something along those lines. Rather, I understand both texts as related in the sense that they express a similar understanding of what I take to be the *pragmatics* of enlightenment, that is the concrete ways in which Lessing understood Enlightenment to be achievable. Again, at the time Lessing writes the piece he was still very much convinced of the *powers* of the dramatic arts.

I will proceed in two steps: I start with explaining what I mean when I speak of *pragmatics of theory* in *Erziehung des Menschengeschlechts*, particularly with regard to progress through aesthetic experience, and will then trace what I take to be the *stepwise enlightenment process by theatrical means* in *Minna von Barnhelm* – which will reveal some striking resonances.

My argument is based on two observations from the text both of which you find on the handout:

1. The title of *EdM* asserts that education and revelation are indeed more than merely structurally analogous as proposed in the first paragraph.

That is to say, besides functioning as an analogy or metaphor that helps to exemplify the concept of revelation (in terms of an *intuitive cognition/anschauliche Erkenntnis*) I take it that *education* implies a pragmatic dimension central for the process of revelation itself. The *Vorstellungsverhältnis* (relation via conception), Lessing assumes for the relation between Education and Revelation in §3 (the second quote on the handouts), does not merely function as an illustration but reveals something about the processes by which revelation finds expression. revelation here understood as the cognitive process *per se* of

being confronted with truth. The *pragmatic* aspect is explicitly mentioned, when Lessing introduces Christ as the first "praktische Lehrer" – "practical/pragmatic teacher", and it is implied in the various accounts of aesthetic processes (the educational devices of the elementary book for example).

2. The second observation derives from the first. Namely that Lessing basically equates education with *art*.

3<sup>rd</sup> QUOTE Darauf [Uneigennützigkeit des Herzens §80-§83] zwecke die menschliche Erziehung ab: und die göttliche reiche dahin nicht? Was der Kunst mit dem Einzelnen gelingt, sollte der Natur nicht auch mit dem Ganzen gelingen? (§84)

Here Lessing uses *Kunst* synonymously with human education.

How can one conceive of the role of *art* in the *pragmatics* of education/revelation? In *Erziehung des Menschengeschlechts*, Lessing does not say too much about art in particular, this is the only explicit mention. He does, however, refer to *aesthetic* procedures and devices, of which I will mention just a few.

The paragraphs from which the *aesthetics* of "revelation/education" can be inferred most clearly are certainly §43-§48 (quotes 4-6 on the handout), in which Lessing mentions the three modes of *teaching* that an elementary book, such as the Bible, employs in order to reach the sensible people (sensible here in contrast to intellectual): *Vorübung*, *Anspielungen* and *Fingerzeige*. Even though he speaks about a particular *period* of the development of mankind (more precisely pre-Christian), I take these three aspects to be applicable to Lessing's general idea of aesthetics of Enlightenment.

In the short paragraph on *Vorübung* (§44), Lessing interestingly introduces the notion of *sympathy* as a "Vorausfühlen" (*anticipatory feeling*). The *Vorübung* encompasses a thought process that demands an imaginative act, by which the "father" has to *anticipate* the misery of his descendents. That is, *anticipatory empathy or sympathy* here functions as a *Vorübung*, a preparatory exercise applied by the *doctrine* (Lehre) of the immortality of the soul (Unsterblichkeit der Seele). What Lessing describes here is, as it were, an act of mental projection. Thereby he links education with revelation by way of an aesthetic process.

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Panel: Poetics of Progress in Lessing's *Erziehung des Menschengeschlechts*

With *Anspielung*, Lessing points at the effects that can be elicited by way of *poetic devices* > metaphors > similes > ellipsis and so on. These devices are supposed to raise attention by way of allusion, by providing hooks for thought processes instead of dictating norms. Instead of answers, an *Anspielung* is supposed to elicit questions.

A *Fingerzeig* presents a hint toward a larger truth. The *hint* contains this truth "im Keim", in a nutshell, out of which it has to be developed.

These three aspects imply a particular understanding of aesthetic education that I see applied and even staged in *Minna von Barnhelm*, namely in Major Tellheim's stepwise enlightenment from his imaginative pre-occupation/pre-conception *through an overtly aesthetic experience*.

Let us bring to mind the plot for a moment: Minna's fiance, Major Tellheim, is obsessed with his discharge from the military which made him lose any opportunity to prove his honor and virtues, and he doesn't want to take help from anyone. And he also has lost interest in his fiancée Minna, or rather he *made himself lose interest*. Instead, he insists in the immensity of his misery.

Eventually Minna decides to teach her "Rechthaber" (her know-it-all (II/9)) a lesson (Lektion) in order to win him back. And as it turns out this *lesson* encompasses specifically theatrical means. First she mocks his alleged misery and laughs at him, in other words she turns him into a comic figure. Now Tellheim gets angry about her mockery and turns her laughter against himself, into a laughter of hatred. (they discuss these different *kinds* of laughter at length). Then Minna shifts gears, and takes on a tragic role. She pretends to be in great misery herself, which immediately refrains Tellheim from his own unfortunate circumstances and eventually enables him to reconnect with her. In the last scene, Minna reveals her scheme to him, (*that is she renders it all a comedy*), which makes him feel as if suddenly awaking from a frightening dream ("So erwacht man plötzlich aus einem schreckhaften Traume" V/12), and eventually he wants to come to himself (V/13).

The process, which can be called one of Enlightenment, as well as of revelation (now in the secular sense of something being disclosed) is consciously prepared in several dramaturgical steps (Schritte, Stufen). Minna *enacts* her scheme and thus confronts Tellheim with an as-if situation the illusionary quality of which he cannot see.

Now I want to come back to the three *aspects* of aesthetic education that I mentioned earlier. I propose that Minna's employment of *tragic sympathy* can be read along the lines of *Vorübung*, *Anspielung* and *Fingerzeig*. (the following refers to the last quote on your handouts, the moment, at which Minna *changes registers* and turns tragic)

Minna's scheme serves as a *Vorübung* which makes Tellheim sympathize with her and eventually "opens his soul again to impressions of tenderness", that is Minna's scheme re-enables Tellheim to allow himself to *feel* with someone else and act accordingly.

She evokes Tellheim's sympathy by means of *Anspielung* in the double sense of the word in German. She *alludes* to her alleged misery "Ihr Unglück ist wahrscheinlich, meines ist gewiß" – and exits. But one can also say *sie spielt ihre Rolle nur an*, in the sense that she does not fully *act her role out*. Instead she leaves the stage and has her maid (and accomplice) Franziska explain her situation further. But the *Anspielung* works, Tellheim is indeed alerted, and asks a lot questions. In other words: Minna gains his attention back.

The *Fingerzeig*, I understand also both in a metaphorical sense and a literal sense, as a hint, but also as literally referring to a finger. The carefully orchestrated circulation of the two engagement rings (fingerringe) serves as a symbolization of the entire story, and *versinnbildlicht* the disruption of the love story, as well as the shifts in agency. When Minna buys the ring back that Tellheim has pledged out of financial needs, she suddenly possesses both rings. The *connection* between the two lovers, one could say, lies in her hands. Thus the circulation of rings contains a *truth* that has to be developed, which Lessing of course implements again in the famous Ringparabel in *Nathan der Weise*.

One could find further resonances between the two texts, for example the "uneigennützige Liebe" (unselfish love) that Minna demands with regard to Tellheim's stubbornness (IV/6), resonates in the *Eigennützigkeit des menschlichen Herzens* that Lessing criticizes in EdM (§80). Or Tellheim's "blindness" with regard to Minna (V/12) resonates in the *blinder Gehorsam* discussed (notably with regard to soldiers) in EdM (§33).

In terms of binding my argument back to the topic of this panel, namely the question of *progress*, I suggest that *art* and *aesthetic processes* and *aesthetic procedures* play a significant role in the *pragmatics* of educational progression. Aesthetic processes (such as the ones that Minna forces on Tellheim) help to gradually bring about *revelatory* moments. Figuring out by figurating, as it were.

I want to close with a question and a possible starting point for further exploration. I want to suggest to examine *revelation* more closely in terms of its possible implications with regard to a particular structural element in the tradition of the dramatic arts, namely that of *anagnorisis*, which I take to play a significant role in many of Lessing's plays, yet in an entirely *new* way. The question would be (and I am not sure whether this point has been explored) whether a play such as *Minna von Barnhelm* recasts *anagnorisis* as a non-cathartic moment of revelation.