

BARRY MURNANE
St. John's College, Oxford

“Toleranz – du nervst mich so”: Reinventing Lessing’s *Nathan der Weise* for the contemporary German stage

Nathan der Weise is frequently used as a vehicle in contemporary German theatre to engage with the geopolitical ramifications of globalization such as inter-faith conflict and violence. Despite this continuing popularity, the optimistic Enlightenment message of tolerance and toleration in Lessing’s play is often criticized as inadequate in an age in which cosmopolitanism and transnational movement of people are seen as the source of rather than remedy to identity political tensions. This essay discusses two recent innovative responses to Lessing—Elfriede Jelinek’s *Abraumhalde* (2009) and Emre Koyuncuoglu’s *Nathan schweigt* (2010)—and argues that contemporary female writers in particular have transformed Lessing’s play to engage with questions of the patriarchal and economic power structures lurking behind his concept of tolerance, enabling a forceful critique of contemporary neoliberal identity politics.

Gotthold Ephraim Lessing’s *Nathan der Weise* has an almost schizophrenic status in recent German theater history. The play’s continuing presence as a staple of high school reading lists means that it remains a fixture in most theaters’ programs but it is notable that barely any of the recent productions have escaped reproach for not being up to date in their content and their staging. In times of crisis, in particular, *Nathan* is called upon to serve as a supreme example of an enlightened, tolerant middle way, such as Claus Peymann’s “Ground Zero” production with the Berliner Ensemble directly after the New York terror attacks of 11 September 2001 (for a critical discussion see Kermani 34-43). Not infrequently, *Nathan*’s solution to questions of interfaith conflict—a general appeal to the concept and practices of tolerance—is regarded as no longer appropriate and in need of revision.¹ Following critical accounts Peymann’s earlier 1981 version in Bochum and Karl-Dirk Schmidt’s Nürnberg production of 1988, Barbara Fischer argues that the focus on marginalization, brutality, and violence in *Nathan’s Tod*, George Tabori’s rewriting of the play in 1991, is a sign that a “Lessingsche Zeit der Umarmungen als Illusion der Vergangenheit [erscheint]” (154). Similarly, hearing that Nicolas Stemann was to direct *Nathan* for the Thalia Theater in 2009, Elfriede Jelinek disbelievingly asked whether he

was serious (Gutjahr 194–95). Katharina Finke gets to the heart of this criticism in a commentary on the guest appearance of Peymann’s Berliner Ensemble at the 2010 Hamburger *Lessingtage*, almost one year after Stemann’s version. Where productions (such as Peymann’s) pursue absolute faithfulness to the text to the extent that they fail to open up new fields of reference, it becomes a case of there being “[i]m Nathan nichts Neues” (Finke).

The present essay proposes sharpening our gaze to consider possible innovative readings, which try to take something new from *Nathan*’s content and form. Besides Peymann’s, there have been several prominent productions and adaptations in the period under consideration, including those by Stemann, Andreas Kriegenburg (Berlin 2015), and Armin Petras (Stuttgart 2016). It is notable that female writers and directors have increasingly engaged with Lessing in recent years, including Jelinek’s *Abraumhalde* (Hamburg 2009), Emre Koyuncuoglu’s *Nathan schweigt* (Freiburg 2010), Leonie Böhm’s *Nathan die Weise (sic!)*, Hamburg 2016), or Daniela Löffner’s highly regarded Zürich production (2016).² These re-workings of Lessing’s play by women have been a source of some innovation, introducing questions of gender, sexual identity, and the economic and political consequences of neoliberal globalization in particular as central problems into their responses. Thus despite suggestions that Lessing’s play is of waning importance, these different versions underline *Nathan*’s continuing significance, even if only as a point of departure.

The scope of the following article is narrowed to two plays in the season 2009–2010, Jelinek’s *Abraumhalde*, first performed as part of Stemann’s aforementioned production, and Koyuncuoglu’s *Nathan schweigt*. Starting with Jelinek’s theatre text, I will show how a contemporary female writer has transformed Lessing’s original in order to play out questions of the patriarchal and economic power structures within contemporary structures of globalization, neoliberal identity politics, and religious affairs. As such, Jelinek’s play responds originally and productively to feminist deconstructions of the implicit, and at times explicit, phallogocentric nature of Lessing’s ring parable. As some critics have argued, the “gleichberechtigte Miteinander, um das sich Lessing und Nathan bemühen, meint ausschließlich männliche Menschen” in a world of religious debate which ‘vaporizes’ women like Sittah, Daja, and Recha from view (Schrattenholzer 37-8). I will then show how Koyuncuoglu’s *Nathan schweigt* engages with related questions, but expands its focus to include the challenges of Western liberal relativism from the viewpoint of the Muslim and female ‘Other’. In this way, *Nathan schweigt*

takes seriously the view that “Lessing’s play has not been written in order to address [the concerns of] Arabic or Muslim audiences” or, indeed, artists (Kühne 100). As a female Turkish playwright, speaking from a marginalized position, Koyuncuoglu’s play represents an important intervention which develops problems of non-identity and rootlessness in a globalized world that have the potential to lead to extremism. Both plays are timely illustrations of Schrattenholzer’s warning that “die Heilshoffnung des Stückes, die vor über 200 Jahren fortschrittlich war, im Lichte heutiger Erkenntnisse keine mehr ist.” (11)

While formally and thematically different, both plays share many similar concerns and non-naturalistic staging methods. *Abraumhalde* is a heavily intertextual text that departs from the central tenets of Aristotelian dramatic form. There is no notable division into scenes, although the text is split into 15 ‘blocks’ of various lengths, ranging from 10 to well over 50 sentences. There is no coherent action, but there is a series of recurring themes. Likewise, there are no recognizable characters, although Jelinek’s ironic ‘instructions’ to the director do refer to “Figuren, die sprechen”, albeit with actors wearing giant papier-mâché masks to generate a non-naturalistic performance (A). While these instructions include the possibility of a staged representation with a set design, the instruction that the “Text kann aber auch [...] als reine Geräuschtapete eingesetzt werden” (A) underlines the experimental qualities of this “no-longer-dramatic theatre text” (Poschmann). *Nathan schweigt*, on the other hand, is organized as a loose collage of 25 scenes in which ten extracts from *Nathan* collide with new and original texts. With the exception of the passages from *Nathan* which maintain Lessing’s characters (although even here the roles are rotated amongst the various actors), these scenes offer a panorama of completely unrelated figures identified only by performers’ names, thus rupturing the fictional characterization. Koyuncuoglu directed the Freiburg performance herself and alongside the general outline of the theatre text described here, the performance included instances of heightened self-reflexivity. For example, the play began with a round of introductions where the actors introduced themselves and their different roles: “Ich spiele Daja, Sittah, mich selber und Kant” (Hasselberg and Koyuncuoglu).³ Such non-diegetic elements—including light installations on the plain white stage, electronic music, actors spreading dirt on the walls and floor of the stage, plays-within-a-play—were recurring features in the performance.

“Baugrund”, “Tugend”, and “Eigentum”: Elfriede Jelinek’s feminist re-reading of Lessing in *Abraumhalde*

Based rather loosely on the depiction of religious conflict in Lessing’s *Nathan*, Jelinek’s *Abraumhalde* relocates the basic plot of Lessing’s play to a dystopian contemporary setting and shifts the focus onto the play and the author himself as reified artefacts of Western power structures that coalesce around the enlightened idea of “tolerance”. The play represents a particular form of the intertextual and metadramatical tendency in Jelinek’s work for which she has developed the term “Sekundärdrama”. The *Sekundärdrama* functions as a critical commentary on the pretext (in this case *Nathan der Weise*), and is designed to be included as part of the performance of what she calls the ‘main’ text (Jurs Münby; Kovacs, “Unterbrechung”): “Das Sekundärdrama darf niemals als das Hauptstück und alleine, sozusagen solo, gespielt werden. Eins bedingt das andre, das Sekundärdrama geht aus dem Hauptdrama hervor und begleitet es,” and Jelinek sets no requirements for staging options (“Anmerkungen”; see also Kovacs, *Drama*).

Abraumhalde offers a vision of the neoliberal present, with its globalized economic policies and identity politics, in which tolerance and intolerance have become almost indistinguishable:

Haben Sie nicht vorhin etwas von Toleranz gesagt? Also ich persönlich finde Toleranz absolut unmenschlich. [...] Ich habe die Toleranz abgeschafft, und zwar um sie zu schaffen, danke, ich fühle mich sehr gut dabei. Ich halte jeden Verkehr auf, nur meiner darf durch, und es geht mir eigentlich gar nicht schlecht dabei.⁴

Being “tolerant” in this reading is having permission to decide what is “democratic” and “undemocratic,” even to the point where tolerance itself risks becoming intolerant. We might object that Jelinek’s re-writing of *Nathan* departs quite radically both from the philosophical and political contexts of the discourse on tolerance and from Lessing’s original intentions with the play in this respect (Fick 455; Sutcliffe 208-214; Nisbet). Indeed, recent Lessing scholarship has argued persuasively that *Nathan* reevaluates and valorizes both Jews (Goetschel, Hess) and Muslims (Kuschel) in order to challenge the narrow-minded bigotry of Christian orthodoxy in eighteenth-century Germany and to advance the cause of Jewish emancipation (Fischer 16, 61–

64). While this is certainly true, Robertson has also argued that this “strategic” appeal to toleration is predicated on an abstract, *bürgerliche* vision of “humane benevolence” lacking in cultural difference (Robertson, *Jewish Question* 41, 43). Indeed Kermani writes that “Lessings Toleranzbegriff zunächst vom bürgerlichen Normalbewußtsein, später auch von den Kirchen so restlos aufgesogen worden [ist], daß er jeden herrschaftskritischen Impuls verloren hat.” (Kermani 34) And Robertson has argued elsewhere that Lessing affords “Nathan’s ethical humanism the status of an unchallengeable master doctrine that relativizes all other beliefs” (Robertson, “Dies hohe Lied” 115), meaning that the play transports the potential for an intolerant rhetoric and politics that homogenizes rather than respects cultural and religious difference. Jelinek may be reading *Nathan* in a manner that transcends its original horizon, but this is a reading that sits firmly within the play’s critical heritage.

From a formal point of view, Stemann’s comment on Jelinek’s approach, that the “meisten von ihr verarbeiteten Zitate” are on “den ersten Seiten” of the pretext is enlightening in this respect (Kovacs, “Sie nerven” 378). A condensed version of the first act of Lessing’s text centered around a provocative focus on the motif of fire and, later, the defamiliarizing paraphrase of the beginning of the ring parable (“Vor grauen Jahren lebten Menschen im Osten”) turn almost into leitmotifs of the piece:

Das Haus, das brannte, das brannte, da kann man nichts machen, es hat hier gebrannt, wir bauen uns ein neues, ein bequemerer, ein bequemerer.[...] Ich verkünde Frieden. Christus ist Frieden. Nein. Umsonst. Kein Frieden. [...] Gott kann man nicht beweisen. Man kann aber auch nicht beweisen, daß er etwas anderes ist als das, was wir glauben. Vielleicht jemand anderer gefällig? Von mir aus, aber nicht etwas anderes! Darauf bestehe ich. Das Haus, das brannte. Wir bauen uns ein neues. Aber wir können es nicht. Wir haben keinen Platz. Wir haben kein Bargeld. Wir haben auch keinen Baugrund. Ich wüßte den Baugrund auch gar nicht. Wo den Baugrund suchen? (A)

This passage needs some unpacking: starting from fire motif already central in Lessing, Jelinek opens up a broad vision of the coercive structures of Western bourgeois, liberal social history. These include secularization (the unprovable nature of gods); Holy War (both the historical crusades and Bush/Blair’s crusade against a so-called “Axis of Evil”); the discourse of tolerance as a justification for the global spread of neoliberalism; the settlement policy in Israel and

Palestine (“Baugrund”); fundamentalism and terrorism; and finally genocide and anti-Semitism (the trope of burning). *Nathan* functions as a palimpsest into which the historical reality of tolerance during and after the Enlightenment has been inscribed. This starts with the biblical motif of the grave and resurrection (“Des Auferstandnen Grab umkreisen wir und finden keine Antwort”; A) and extends to the current conflict in the Middle East (the pictures of Israeli air strikes on Gaza City from 2009 in the version on Jelinek’s website explicitly invite a reading of “Baugrund” in this context, A). As these violent references suggest, in *Abraumhalde* tolerance has become part of a Western political discourse experienced by non-Europeans as neo-colonial and intolerant of dissenting religious practices or beliefs. Images drawn from the perversion of intercultural tolerance in Auschwitz (“Mit Millionen Freunden als ausgewählte und vorsortierte Sündenböcke in die Öfen gehen”, A) collide with the attacks on the World Trade Centre (“Es brennt, viele brennen, aber der Selbstgemordete ist jetzt schon bei seinem Herrn und bei seinen Jungfrauen”; A), underlining this reading. This is a point invoked by recent Lessing criticism: Zahim notes that Muslims experience a “klare Bedrohung ihrer Kultur und Traditionen” as a result of “Kolonialisierung und der Doppelmoral des Westens, der später in diesen Ländern feudal-despotische, restaurative Herrschaften zur Demütigung der Bevölkerung errichtet hatte” (Zahim 239), making Lessing’s play of questionable relevance to contemporary problems (Horsch 115-7). Kühne likewise argues that “Lessing’s play has not been written in order to address Arabic or Muslim audiences” and that his “Muslim characters but mask his criticism on Christian contemporaries” (Kühne 100; see also Mecklenburg). As such, *Nathan* barely “meets the multi-religious and multilingual challenges that contemporary societies and inter-human performances are confronted with today” (Kühne 93).

Abraumhalde circles around the central idea that the contemporary world is as a negative fulfilment of various cultural patterns which emerged in the Enlightenment, including a liberal economic order, and it argues that these have resulted in acts of violence and counter-violence. This moment is most clearly visible in the many passages referring to economic inequality: “Vor grauen Jahren lebten Menschen im Osten, [...] die nichts von unschätzbarem Wert aus lieber Hand besaßen. Na und? Jetzt besitzen sie es immer noch nicht.” (A) What seems to be at stake here is a process of securing economic power through the exclusion and degradation of others. Thus, extracting natural resources is intricately linked to violence and economic inequality: “Und wägen wir die Kosten für diese alte Gesellschaft, [...] Alternativen zu befördern, die der

Befriedung, der Befreiung, der Befriedigung, der Beendigung, der Beerdigung und dem Betrug zum Beispiel in Sachen Ölsaaten und Öl solo, im Kanister, dienen, dann haben wir den Salat [...]" (A). Interfaith relations are reduced to a battle over oil, and tolerance is little more than a smokescreen of respect for others which actually hides strategies of political and economic calculation, culminating in warfare: "Weil die Leute alle hier noch Auto fahren dürfen, greife ich auf den Krieg zurück, damit die das nicht mehr dürfen, nein, auf den Krieg, damit die fahren dürfen, weil wir das Öl dafür herangeschafft haben [...]" (A) Accordingly, the parable of the rings can be read as a thinly veiled economization of theological, philosophical, and social factors: "Sie können doch nicht wie Geld in den Sack, wie Geld aufs Konto, wie Geld in die Aktie, Sie können doch nicht die Wahrheit einstreifen wie Geld!" (A)

Equating Lessing's parable with a business transaction, Jelinek not only switches the focus from truth to money, she also argues that the contemporary celebration of tolerance should actually be understood as a backdrop for the power structures of late capitalism. This economic interpretation of the ring parable in terms of capitalist competition goes back to the Romantic period (Och, "Judenbilder" 160–62) and was rekindled by Heinz Schlaffer in order to formulate a criticism of the symbolic communication of the capitalist economy (Schlaffer 109–10).⁵ *Abrahamhalde* draws on these readings to develop a dark and violent image of global communication and co-existence of the faiths in the present. The explicit references to "Toleranz," "Redefreiheit," "Demokratie," and "Besserung der Gesellschaft" (the Enlightenment's belief in "progress") in the final third of the piece suggest that the Enlightenment is the point at which the structures enabling and promoting this violence crystallized and developed. Lessing's *Nathan* is a paragon drama of the Enlightenment in which Jelinek identifies the ideological foundation ("Baugrund") of liberal modernity. Whether rightly or wrongly, what emerges is a suggestion that tolerance is not so much the "performative theology" that is encapsulated in the ring parable (Assmann; Vollhardt), but rather a mechanism within a cold, secular 'realpolitik' of rationality whereby the West claims ownership over deciding what is tolerable or not: "Ich habe die Toleranz abgeschafft [...] ich möchte, daß die Menschen, die mich stören, dann alle auswandern." (A) In focusing on these acts of exclusion, *Abrahamhalde* analyzes the legacy of the Enlightenment ideal of tolerance ('ideal' because Lessing's play too acknowledges the counterfactual nature of Nathan's ring parable in respect of the *actual* relations between Christianity, Judaism, and Islam; see Fick 489, Pfaff, Hess 187–8).

As such, Jelinek's theatre text can be read more as a rejection of twentieth-first-century voices (such as Kuschel) who see in *Nathan* a functional model for negotiating cultural and confessional differences in a post-9/11 reality, rather than simply as a rejection of the play itself.

Jelinek's play uses the subsequent liberal history of Lessing's model of tolerance as a lever to test the actual historical effectiveness of *Nathan*'s harmonizing message, rather than celebrate its utopian potential. A tendentious reference to *Hausvaterliteratur* and Lessing's domestic tragedy opens up a related line of argument, but shifts the focus to a different type of social and political control, namely patriarchal power structures and the disempowerment of women in Western society, as I will now suggest. Jelinek extends the thematic relay of "Baugrund", tolerance, and the economics of "Eigentum" to a staple feature of Enlightenment drama, "Tugend": "Das Eigentum an Kindern, das allein, danken wir der Tugend" (A). This opens up an engagement with patriarchal social structures in the West because feminist critics have long identified virtue as a highly problematic moment in the emancipation of the middle-classes, with the integrity of the female body often being the medium through which this virtue is represented in Lessing's domestic tragedies. Whether in *Miß Sara Sampson* or *Emilia Galotti*, middle-class honor is most powerfully expressed and maintained at the price of female autonomy, whether by controlling female sexuality or in the ultimate sacrifice of death or murder (Stephen, Prutti, Wurst). Unlike "Tugend", "Baugrund" and "Eigentum" maintain at best an associative link to Lessing's source text. These terms refer to the case of Josef Fritzl, who imprisoned and raped his own daughter, fathered children with her, and held the "family" captive in a cellar under his house in Amstetten, whilst claiming the children were legitimate offspring from his marriage to his wife: "Schau, da liegt schon wieder eine fromme Kreatur. So, da kann sie gleich beim Hausbau unter dem eigentlichen Haus mithelfen, beim Ausbau des Seins, im Keller haben wir dann endlich jede Menge Platz" (A). In Jelinek's chain of association between *Nathan* and the present, both daughters—Fritzl's daughter Elisabeth and Nathan's adoptive daughter Recha—are seen as the true victims of the bourgeois family. In Recha, we see that the female subject is given hardly any agency within Lessing's family-centered denouement to the play. Switching between threatened adoptive daughter, prospective lover, and finally, in a fairy-tale ending, back to adoptive daughter and platonically-loved sister, Recha's stunted potential for development is presented as a foundational moment of a bourgeois household where patriarchal rule consistently prevails (Kovacs, *Drama* 174-7). Fritzl's family is quite clearly abominable and

violent, this latter-day *Hausvater* creates a second family, swapping his wife for a daughter he has locked up in an underground household: “Jugend gegen Alter, beides Leben [...] bleiben nur noch zwei Stück Töchter zurück, eine nehmen wir mit in den Keller, zuerst die eine, die macht dann die andre, die andren Gotteskinder blieben derweil noch droben” (A). By associating Nathan as paterfamilias and Recha’s guardian in Lessing’s play with the disturbing deformation of the patriarchal household in the Amstetten case, Jelinek points to woman’s limited scope for development within the bourgeois family (Kovacs, *Drama* 181-3).

It may seem quite a stretch from Lessing’s familial ideal of tolerance to Josef Fritzl, the incestuous paterfamilias with a God complex who treats his daughter as a possession, but the leap in Jelinek’s play is supported by a close reading of *Nathan der Weise*, where Daja asks, “Nennt Ihr alles, / Was Ihre besitzt, mit ebensoviel Rechte / Das Eure?”, and Nathan answers Alles, was / Ich sonst besitze, hat Natur und Glück / Mir zugeteilt. Dies Eigentum allein / Dank ich der Tugend” (Lessing 9). In Jelinek’s text we read: “Wir nennen alles, was wir besitzen, mit jedem Recht das unsre. Unsere Frauen und Kinder. Kostbarster Besitz, vergraben wie Gold. Nichts mit größerem Recht nennen wir unsren Besitz!” (A). In both cases, women and children are something to be owned, something over which the (adoptive) father has obtained all rights of possession. In Jelinek’s play, the father can—in an emergency—even eat them: “Ganze Familien sind dem Ehrgeiz bereits zum Opfer gefallen, er hat neulich erst ein siebenjähriges Kind gefressen, weil Aktien auf einmal nichts mehr wert waren” (A). Here, the economy of the paterfamilias is linked to the crises of the financial sector in order to incorporate the business practices of capitalism within Jelinek’s range of criticism. Through the etymological derivation of economy from the Greek “oikos” of the paterfamilias, Jelinek presents Lessing’s version of family order based on domestic violence as the intolerant nucleus of liberal modernity (Kovacs, *Drama* 201). This reading of the text is supported by the reproduction of Moritz Daniel Oppenheimer’s famous painting of Lessing, Lavater and Mendelssohn in the online version of *Abraumhalde*: while the three men are busy reasoning in the foreground, the woman is relegated to the background where she carries a tea tray, a servant of the male household discussing serious philosophical matters in the foreground.

The reference to “Gotteskinder” (A) in Fritzl’s household in the quote above brings together the three pillars of her reading—misogynistic intolerance, religious intolerance, and neoliberal expansionism. The reference to God allows Jelinek to anchor these considerations

within the terms of Lessing's examination of the three monotheistic religions and their co-existence, but it also shifts the focus towards a critical examination of these religions in terms of their misogynistic fundamental structures: "Zum Gott beten, den Vater aber anbeten, dem Vater sich selbst anbieten, was gar nicht nötig ist, er nimmt sich schon selber, er konsumiert, was er kann" (A). Perceiving a logic of dangerous drives unfolding in this petit bourgeois, domestic context of Amstetten, Jelinek's play also draws a bold connection between Fritzl, misogyny and religious fundamentalism and terrorism via their shared topos of the virgin daughter: "Es brennt, viele brennen, aber der Selbstgemordete ist jetzt schon bei seinem Herrn und bei seinen Jungfrauen, bei vielen Jungfrauen, ja, dort ist er jetzt, der für seinen Glauben starb [...]. Andre Jungfrauen für andre, diese für mich allein. Vater!" (A) The suicide bomber and burning houses are references to the attacks of 11 September 2001, but through the association with Nathan as a Jew ("Es brennt" references the beginning of *Nathan*) and Fritzl as a Christian, they are broadened out into a sweeping blow at the patriarchal structures of violence in the three monotheistic world religions (Kovacs, *Drama* 172):

Jeder Gott ist der richtige, selbst ist der Mann, leider nur für sich selbst, der eine Gott ist für einen selbst auch der einzig richtige. Gott ist stets der Richtige, allerdings immer für jemand anderen. Gott ist der Richter. Gott wird in freier und geheimer Wahl gewählt. Ein Stück Gott für jedermann. (A)

In the conflict of religions, men can at least agree to play God in miniature and claim ownership of their respective women and children, whereby virtue ("Jungfrau," "fromm") becomes the currency of this economy of violence.

As a productive adaptation of and engagement with Lessing, *Abraumhalde* is a sign that there is something new to be discovered in *Nathan der Weise* after all, and that the play can indeed be made relevant for the contemporary stage. Whereas tolerance for Lessing could be postulated as a harmonizing utopian blueprint, Jelinek suggests that in the face of the cosmopolitan mixing of cultures and religions that has actually taken place as a result of globalization, this ideal has now shown itself to be a false promise. False, because the concept of tolerance in Lessing's play comes at the cost of female self-determination; false too because this tolerance is then shown to evolve into a dishonest ideology used to justify and fuel a neo-colonial and neoliberal militarized version of world politics. I am not concerned with asking whether or

not Jelinek's associative connections are convincing. What strikes me as important is that she inserts a layer of feminist critique into her re-writing of *Nathan der Weise* which enables her to draw out the latent but suppressed currents of violence in Lessing's play as a basis to engage with contemporary questions of identity politics, geo-economics, and gender relations. As such, Lessing's text gains a new and contemporary relevance, albeit in the form of a 'contrafactum', which reveals tolerance to have mutated into a medium of broader misogynistic structures of violence in the three monotheistic world religions.

Tolerance in Times of Globalization? Emre Koyuncuoglu's *Nathan schweigt*

Reading Lessing against the grain, and using him as a starting point for an independent work that raises new perspectives and questions, is also the prime motivation behind Emre Koyuncuoglu's *Nathan schweigt*.⁶ From its roots as a guest production by the Freiburg Theater in Istanbul, *Nathan schweigt* is the more-than-polite refusal of the original enquiry from Freiburg as to whether Koyuncuoglu might like to stage Lessing's *Nathan* (Kramer). Her objection was based not only on the contrived familial resolution to the knotty problem of tolerance at the end of Lessing's play (already criticized by Jelinek as misogynistic). The logic of asking her—as a Turkish woman—to stage what had come to be perceived as Germany's pièce de resistance about tolerance (Fischer, Feinberger) on a German stage with a German ensemble for a German audience did not seem immediately sensible to her. Indeed Koyuncuoglu criticised Lessing's play for being simplistically harmonizing and for being a “sehr christliche Thematik” which ultimately brings possible dialogue between cultures to a standstill and obscures the voice of the Other (Kramer). This echoes the disorientation experienced by Muslim actors in recent Egyptian and Israeli productions (Kühne 97-99) and shares Kühne's skepticism over the play's “ideological adaptability for contemporary audiences” in the “context of encounters between the Western and the Muslim world” (91). Koyuncuoglu nevertheless agreed with the subsequent suggestion to use Lessing as a springboard for a new, different project.

Nathan schweigt is organized as a loose collage of scenes including ten extracts from *Nathan* in blank verse collide with new original texts, highlighting the deliberately intertextual engagement with Lessing's pretext. As already noted, Koyuncuoglu directed the Freiburg performance herself and even where the performance deviates from the theater text, these

additions serve to foreground the play's position within the intertextual and theatrical discourse *about* scripture and faith since Lessing, as the opening of the performance made clear:

Ich glaube an uns, an heute Abend, an ein neues Wir, jetzt. Ich glaube daran, dass heute Abend so etwas unverrückbar Kluges und Gutes gesagt wird, was ich niemals vergessen werde. Ich glaube, dass ich heute Abend, den richtigen Ton treffe. (Hasselberg and Koyuncuoglu; see also *N* 26)⁷

The theater text is highly selective in its use of passages from *Nathan* and although largely chronological, it deviates from the pretext's progression at various points, including re-arranging Recha's conversation with Daja in *Nathan* Act 3 Scene 1 to follow rather than precede the ring parable. Importantly, this contrasts Nathan's deconstruction of religious bigotry with Recha's sexual desires, on the one hand, and with Daja's wish that Recha should return to her actual homeland, Christian Europe, with a Christian lover, on the other hand. Thus unlike the rational reconciliatory structure of its precursor, a form of ethnic and religious nativism is prioritized here. This is underlined by the original sections of the text in which tolerance and reason are seldom visible. For example, Scene 4.5, "Atomkraftwerk," begins with the provocation "Toleranz—du nervst mich so [...]. Du spülst mich weich" (*N* 20). Likewise, an account of the Books of Revelation and Genesis in a religion lesson follows in Scene 8.2, leads to the conclusion: "Wer auf Gott hört, wird von ihm gerettet. Wer nicht auf ihn hört, verliert sein Leben"; *N* 27).

Nathan schweigt is also notable for its use of non-diegetic visual effects throughout the play as a means of developing this thematic focus further. At the start streaks of light fly about and form themselves into a sleeping/suffering figure, then into Greek, Arabic and Hebrew letters and characters, perhaps a reference to the play's translation of *Nathan* into the global digital era. The visual dimension also brings the merging and a certain interchangeability of the different faiths into focus, reflecting the role of writing as the foundation of the three religions. Over the course of the play further non-diegetic forms of staging are central, including—alongside the already noted light projections—repeated use of a play-within-a-play (e.g., Scenes 4.1 and 4.2 where "Kant" becomes a spectator on the stage), choral sections (e.g., in the presentation of Nathan's ring parable in dialogue form in Scene 9), and finally physicality (e.g., in Scene 18,

when one actor strips naked and smears himself with dirt before being mistreated by another). In “30 Fragen”, based around a discussion of a questionnaire about cultural differences similar to the German citizenship test (N 35–42), the principles of democracy, tolerance, secularization, and freedom of speech—named elsewhere as foundational principles of the West (N 14–15)—are called into question as the pristinely white stage becomes increasingly grubby, with buckets full of earth tipped over the stage. The implication of Koyuncuoglu’s play is that these are visual representations of the problems that had to be swept under the carpet in Lessing’s drama in order to enable its utopian coming-together of the family in the service of tolerance.

Koyuncuoglu takes Lessing’s play as a springboard to examine the ideological value of tolerance in times of globalization, intifada, and terrorism without coming to clear or simple conclusions. In scenes like “Atomkraftwerk”, where a woman labors over the disorientation and ambiguities of a multicultural society that she criticizes as “sick” there is an explicit understanding that the desperation is the result of increased social complexity through globalization and migration. When a discussion unfolds about the attacks by Islamist terrorists of 2001 in New York and 2004 in Madrid in “30 Fragen”, the figures B. and M., representing the Western perspective, are more interested in aggression than exchange. Whereas their opposite numbers F. and H. remain relatively calm and explain “Freiheitskämpfer” as somebody, “dem es nicht darum geht, seinen Raum auszubreiten und seine Religion auf andere auszubreiten, sondern jemand, dem es um grundsätzliche Sachen geht”, M. interjects repeatedly and violently: “Dann mache ich sie halt kaputt!” The section concludes with M. seizing control by engaging in a ritual stoning: “Du bist ein Terrorist und ich steinige dich jetzt. Auge um Auge, Zahn um Zahn”. (N 37–38) The supposedly liberal mentality consists of claims and counterclaims with little true exchange or intercultural understanding, and ultimately degenerates into violence. This lack of distinction between liberal and fundamental positions was heightened in the performance: despite the initial allocation of the speaking roles the actors moved between different roles and positions on stage, making it increasingly difficult to identify the voices and statements with any particular political, religious or social positions.

As with Jelinek’s *Abraumhalde*, *Nathan schweigt* uses the intertextual dialogue with *Nathan der Weise* as a basis to engage with contemporary geopolitical issues rather than simply with Lessing’s play itself. The critique of Western capitalism articulated here even suggests that tolerance and multi-culturalism may be a false ideology that disguises an uncompromising neo-

colonialist accumulation of power and capital: H. explains the terror attacks as a fight “gegen die kapitalistische Übernahme des Ostens durch den Westen” (N 37). Structurally and thematically, this collision between Enlightenment discourse and contemporary experiences of globalization is reflected in the rhythmical alternation between extracts from Lessing’s *Nathan*, heavily edited and abridged sources like Kant, and new original texts. The scenes taken from Lessing focus primarily on faith-related and social conflicts and are deliberately assembled against the chronology of Lessing’s play in order to intensify this interpretation. For instance, following the general round of introductions Recha bursts into the first scene (“Engel”) with extracts from *Nathan* Act 1 Scene 2 debating the possibility of miracles and emphasizing the rational basis for faith. The next sections quoted from Lessing are, in order of appearance, the conversation between Nathan and the Templar from Act 2 Scene 5, where Nathan and Curd agree to an interdenominational friendship (N 9), followed immediately by Act 2 Scene 2, where Al-Hafi, Saladin, and Sittah discuss the Sultan’s money troubles and formulate a stereotypical image of Nathan as a rich Jew (N 11), moving from the metaphysical question to look at the problems that arise from religion’s status as a social practice. Following Friedrich Vollhardt’s interpretation of the ring parable on the basis of Charles Taylor’s action theory, enabling us to understand Nathan’s negation of any religion’s claim to the ‘truthfulness’ of its beliefs as a shift towards a more anthropocentric model of religion (Vollhardt 225-7), Koyuncuoglu’s intervention seems highly apposite. Indeed, the assorted scenes, monologues, and non-diegetic interludes in *Nathan schweigt* essentially ‘riff’ loosely on this theme throughout, albeit without arriving at any conclusions.

As convincing as Vollhardt’s reading is as an interpretation of Lessing’s play, the analysis of religion as a social practice also highlights one of the reasons why *Nathan* appears to be of questionable usefulness in contemporary multi-cultural and multi-religious conflicts. Notwithstanding the positive nature of faith being proved through *good* actions in Lessing’s play, Sutcliffe has argued that Lessing’s approach creates a “universalist humanism” (220) which means that any concrete instantiations of religious identity or practices—and the potential conflicts these could harbor—are notably absent in *Nathan* (224). From a twentieth-century vantage point, the legacy of such an intellectualization and perhaps even secularization of religious difference into functionally identical systems is impossible to overlook (see Robertson, *Jewish Question*, 40 and Horsch 100–2; for a different reading see Kuschel 172). Muslim critics

such as Kermani and Horsch have noted that this humanist ideal of tolerance has been used in the service of the West's "sehnsüchtige[m] Verlangen immer auf eine einheitliche Weltgesellschaft", meaning that "Anhänger der Religionen—insbesondere des Islam—vor einer Frage ihres Beitrags und ihrer Aufgabe gegenüber dieser kulturellen Invasion [stehen], um ihre eigene Zivilisation zu bewahren" (Zahim 224). Such ideas are central to the "Wilders-Broder" dialogue in Scene 4.3 of *Nathan schweigt*, an imagined conversation between fictional versions of the Dutch populist Geert Wilders and the German publicist Henry Broder, a fierce critic of both Anti-Zionism and liberalist discourses on Islam. The Wilders-figure quotes from an actual speech which Wilders had planned to give to the British House of Lords in 2009 (Wilders) in which he introduces the disingenuous distinction criticized by Kermani between individual 'Muslims' and a terrifying 'Islam' in the nightmare vision of a "Koran, [der] befiehlt den Muslimen den Islam der gesamten Welt aufzuzwingen" (N 14). This rhetoric of exclusion and othering of Muslims by Western politicians and commentators develops a vision of a paradoxically "fundamentalist" cosmopolitan tolerance in the contemporary age.

This is a complex and violent world in which tolerance has become an instrument of power for the global North that can be used to exclude other cultures. For example, Scene 4.1 quotes from the fifth sentence of Kant's cosmopolitan appeal "Idee zu einer allgemeinen Geschichte in weltbürgerlicher Sicht", which perceives the best form of civic state order in a "Völkerbund [...], wo jeder, auch der kleinste Staat seine Sicherheit und Rechte [...] von einer vereinigten Macht [erwartet]" (N 12). In the premiere, this philosophical ideal of world citizenship was undermined by a recording of Freiburg's cathedral bells ringing, thus anchoring the philosopher's progressive philosophical thinking problematically in (Western) Christianity. The manner in which this ideal is presented is also disturbing: the actor shouts Kant's text polemically and aggressively from the pulpit as a monologue such that it takes on a fundamentalist tone. From this a conversation between two characters develops in Scene 4.2 that abridges and defamiliarizes Kant through a distinctly non-cosmopolitan reading: "F. Die größte Freiheit in der Menschheit (durch) die Sicherung der Grenzen"; "B. Genaueste Bestimmung und Sicherung der Grenzen!" (N 13) This back and forth of tolerance and intolerance, of cosmopolitanism and regressive nationalism is also palpable in the "Wilders-Broder" dialogue in the following scene 4.3. In the quotes selected by Koyuncuoglu, the Wilders-figure criticizes the open, multicultural world culture and neoliberal business practices (illustrated by Bill Gates,

mobile phones, and credit cards; *N* 16) as the source of dangerous relativism on the one hand, only to then deploy the West's rhetoric of cosmopolitan tolerance as an antidote to Islam's allegedly equally dangerous tendencies, on the other hand: "Die Trennung von Kirche und Staat, die Redefreiheit, das alles steht auf dem Spiel durch die Islamisierung. Islam und Freiheit, Islam und Demokratie sind nicht miteinander vereinbar." (*N* 14) In highlighting these inconsistencies and in drawing out Eurocentric prejudices concealed behind a disingenuous ideology of Western secularist humanism, Koyuncuoglu provides a powerful response to the demands of Kermani, Kuschel, Horsch, and others to modernise and actualise *Nathan der Weise* for the twenty-first century.

In *Nathan schweigt* Lessing's utopian vision of tolerant coexistence is shown to have transformed into an ideology that feels like a straitjacket, most obviously around the character of Recha. In the interplay with the intertextual sources, Recha's experience develops into a medium for sounding out the consequences of the Western, bourgeois, secularized discourse of tolerance emerging from the Enlightenment for a society shaped by the far-reaching forces of globalization. In Koyuncuoglu's selection of scenes, Recha appears as an immature, undereducated figure (see for example *N* 51: "Ich gelesen? – Sittah, / Du spottest deiner kleinen albern Schwester. / Ich kann kaum lesen") who mainly believes in miracles for this reason and is therefore mocked by Nathan as an enthusiastic dreamer (*N* 3–4). This can be read as a diagnosis of the emergence of blind, fundamentalist beliefs (along the lines of Wilders' prejudices), but it also gives her the ability to develop her own hybrid, interdenominational cultural identity: "Ich sei aus christlichem Geblüte; sei getauft; / Sei Nathans Tochter nicht; er nicht mein Vater! – / Gott! Gott! [...] Sieh mich aufs neu' zu deinen Füßen ..." (*N* 52). This briefly opens up a potentially liberating and genuinely inter-confessional identity and tolerant relationship between Judaism and Christianity for the future, at least, but Koyuncuoglu shuts this opportunity down almost immediately. In her streamlined version of *Nathan*, Lessing's resolution of the play's tensions and conflicts in the tableau of familial harmony and happiness becomes simply another instance of disorientation and rootlessness. Even Lessing's genealogy is presented as highly uncertain: Saladin's plea "Hör! hör doch, Nathan! Sagtest du vorhin nicht – ?" (*N* 57) is quoted in a way that suggests contradictions in Nathan's story, revealing his explanation of Recha and Curd's parentage as pure hearsay. Koyuncuoglu largely omits Nathan's investigation of witnesses so that Lessing's plot becomes factually questionable in this version. In the end, Recha

stands lost between three possible father figures—Saladin, Nathan, and the dead German Wolf von Filnek/Assad. This all suggests little prospect of a future, especially for Recha. Through the loss of a possible love affair for her with Curd, which could have brought about a new generation and generated a tolerant relationship between Jews and Christians at least, only self-denial and abstinence remain available to her as options for the future. Recha's contribution is even shortened here to only eight lines of text and she is completely silent in the final third of the scene.

Recha's silent self-denial addresses two key issues emerging from *Nathan* and its critical heritage. Firstly, Recha almost personifies the criticism that the universalism of Lessing's play elevates tolerance "above the level of ordinary religions" and strips it "of the consoling rituals and convenient codifications that they provide" (Sutcliffe 220). Lessing took a great risk in writing *Nathan der Weise* with its sharp critique of the extreme positions of bias and bigotry occupied by the Christian orthodoxy in Germany, in particular, but also all forms of religious partisanship more generally (Fick 253 and 467; Horsch 55-6; Kuschel 85-8 and 122-3). Recha's fate in *Nathan schweigt* begs the question whether Lessing's play perhaps throws the baby out with the bathwater in its abstraction of religious belief to the question of truthfulness. Her lack of orientation is not resolved by the end of the play, indicating that Koyuncuoglu shares Robertson and Kühne's skepticism about Lessing's inability to address concrete religious beliefs and practices. Her play, by contrast, shows us these practices at length but also acknowledges their difficult position in a world dominated by an increasingly secular and abstract version of tolerance. In Scenes 8.2 a flickering video projected onto the wall becomes a teaching aid at a religious school, and whilst the teachers rattle through their catechism without reflection, the younger figures have difficulty in coming to a statement of faith. In Scene 10.1 a speaker stammers through a prayer as an empty ritual, symbolically staged in the Freiburg production in complete darkness.

Moreover, in the interplay between Nathan's ring parable and the three new texts that interrupt his narrative with images of extreme belief in Scenes 8.1, 8.2 and 10, a longing for the simplicity of Lessing's fairy-tale ending emerges. The parable itself is delivered with such sincerity that it appears to be a remedy against extremism and desperate declarations of faith, but it appears overly naïve when confronted with the images of extreme belief elsewhere. Saladin's reference to "tausend tausend Jahre" of religious conflicts (*N* 33) appears helpless in the face of

the aggressive delivery of the preceding “Litanei,” an effect underlined by the seamless transition from “Lamm Gottes” to the anguished cries of “Gott! Gott!” (N 32–33). The conciliatory happy end taken from Lessing’s play appears bloodless and unconvincing when deployed as the play’s final scene, especially when the ensemble forms a frozen family tableau on a stage full of filth, looking to the audience in desperation and disbelief. Lessing’s play seems not to provide any answers to the complex questions posed here, and resolution or rational clarity appear to be a citation at best. The “stumme Wiederholung allseitiger Umarmung” (N 57) at the end of the play reminds us of the play’s title, *Nathan schweigt*. This was itself a pointed reference to Nathan’s reduced role outside the family at the end of *Nathan der Weise*, his strategy of telling the ring parable and uniting the family having secured his existence, but at the cost of marginalizing him as a Jew (Reemtsma). This silence can be read as a performative act: it is only through silent repetition that Lessing’s lesson of tolerance could reach the status of acceptance and it is only through the repeated return to *Nathan der Weise* in contemporary discourse that its status as the epitome of good German and European tolerance can performatively be maintained.

While Nathan falls silent in Lessing’s play, Koyuncuoglu’s focus shifts to Recha, Sittah, and Daja who are comprehensively marginalized as disempowered women. Recha’s dislocation and voicelessness in particular point to a critique of patriarchy that unites Koyuncuoglu’s and Jelinek’s plays. The parable of interreligious relations is one in which mothers, daughters, and sisters are not mentioned and the play’s final scene of philanthropy and rapprochement renders Recha speechless and without any say; in Koyuncuoglu’s redacted version, Saladin exclaims: “Nun mußt du doch wohl, Troztkopf, mußt mich lieben!” (N 54). Schrattenholzer has deconstructed the ring parable as explicitly misogynistic because of its focus on wise old men, submissive sons, and social relations that distribute power solely among males—underlined by Saladin ordering Sittah to leave the room while Nathan tells his story and ultimately in Recha’s disempowerment: “Was nicht zur Sprache kommt, kann nicht diskutiert werden, wer nicht nicht zum Sprechen kommt, kann nicht mitdiskutieren.” (Schrattenholzer 28). This is also a key moment in Koyuncuoglu’s text. Importantly, both the matter of religious identity and female disempowerment seem intricately related here, with multiple references to the role of women in Islam, more generally, and to Muslim women in Europe in particular, suggesting that *Nathan schweigt* views Lessing’s play and its familial resolution as doubly inappropriate in addressing the role of women in multi-ethnic and interreligious dialogue. Koyuncuoglu’s play seems to

share Schrattenholzer's conclusion that: "Das gleichberechtigte Miteinander, um das sich Lessing und Nathan bemühen, ausschließlich männliche Menschen [meint]." (37)

Nathan schweigt preserves the core of Lessing's *Nathan der Weise* and raises questions about the coexistence of the world religions under the sign of tolerance. Koyuncuoglu's play presents a ruptured experience of identity and belief that oscillates between hopelessness and radicalization in the face of contemporary globalization, secularization and hybridization. In dialogue with Lessing, and above all through Recha's problematic silence at the end of the play, *Nathan schweigt* turns towards an interrogation of how people find their identity in late capitalism and neoliberal globalization. The religious emphasis of Lessing's play remains the central point of interest, although the play focuses more on religion as a form of identity politics, thereby signaling its critical distance to Lessing's Enlightenment drama.

"Wieder lesbar und auch spielbar"

Joachim Lux, director at the Thalia theater in Hamburg, argues that Lessing's *Nathan* needs to be released from its "Kontextualisierung zum Holocaust" acquired after 1945 in order to make it "wieder lesbar und auch spielbar" (Lux 38). These plays by Jelinek and Koyuncuoglu attempt to achieve precisely this, albeit at the cost of Lessing's original intention to develop a more positive relationship to Judaism. Responding to post-9/11 revivals of *Nathan* as a catechism of Western tolerance, these plays occupy a highly critical and productive position in these debates. Whereas tolerance for Lessing could be postulated as a harmonizing utopian blueprint, Jelinek suggests that this ideal has now shown itself to be a false promise in the face of late-capitalism's global mixing of cultures and religions. Not only does she suggest that tolerance comes at the cost of female self-determination in Lessing's play, but also that it has also evolved into a dishonest ideology used to justify and fuel a neo-colonial and neoliberal militarized version of world politics. With *Nathan schweigt*, Koyuncuoglu likewise frees herself from the source text in order to tackle contemporary questions that Lessing could never have imagined. In the spaces between the citations from Lessing and her own original texts, Koyuncuoglu portrays a world where the concept of tolerance has been abused to serve the purposes of business and ideology—a far cry from the Enlightenment utopia of world citizenship, for which tolerance was originally a foundational principle. Koyuncuoglu's play instead presents a ruptured experience of identity and belief that oscillates between hopelessness and radicalization.

These re-readings and re-writings of Lessing's play have been a source of innovation in the critical discourse surrounding Lessing's play. Their real originality comes in their taking seriously the warning that Lessing's concept of tolerance requires liberation from the exclusive focus on religion in order to retain its progressive power on the stage today (Schrattenholzer 11). Read through the lens of these plays, Lessing's text gains a new and contemporary relevance, revealing tolerance to have mutated into a medium of broader misogynistic and Eurocentric structures of violence in the three monotheistic world religions. Despite repeated suggestions that Lessing's play appears to be of waning importance, these different versions of *Nathan* underline the play's remaining presence in more recent theater, albeit in the form of a 'contrafactum'. *Abraumhalde* and *Nathan schweigt* both read Lessing against the grain to address much wider issues of gender and the consequences of neoliberalism and globalization. To borrow from Jelinek's theoretical model of the "Sekundärdrama", Lessing and his model of tolerance have become secondary in both theatre texts, they are present, but only as intellectual precursors to be tested, rejected, and reinvented as part of the critical "Beschäftigung mit [der] kosmopolitischen Kultur" of our own contemporary world (Lux 28).

¹ There have been several excellent accounts of twentieth-century performances of *Nathan*, especially Gerhard Stadelmaier, Anat Feinberg, and Barbara Fischer.

² An initial survey of critical responses to these performances can be found in the "Kritikenrundschau" offered by the *Nachtkritik*-website: <https://nachtkritik.de/>.

³ In the stage manuscript, the speaking roles are designated with the names of the actors from the premiere: Anna, Betty, Frank, Hendrik, Lena und Martin.

⁴ *Abraumhalde* has not yet appeared in print; all further references are to this version and will appear in the main body of the text with the abbreviation *A*.

⁵ Och ("Judenbilder") makes an important observation about the anti-Semitic origins and connotations of this interpretation, noting that such readings reduce Nathan's wisdom to a sign of a stereotypical "Jewish" economic shrewdness. There can be no question of Jelinek being anti-Semitic here, right from her first publications she has been a fierce critic of Anti-Semitism in all its forms.

⁶ *Nathan schweigt* has not yet appeared in print; all further references are from the unpublished stage manuscript and will appear in the main body of the text with the abbreviation *N* and relevant page number. I am grateful to the dramaturg Viola Hasselberg for her generous assistance.

⁷ In the stage manuscript only an improvisation is indicated here ("Ich glaube, dass [...] trotz allem"); the dvd recording documents this more elaborate version.

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