

Reisebilder [Travel Pictures]

Heine, Heinrich

(1826)

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Reisebilder [*Travel Pictures*] is a collection of travel narratives that appeared in four installments from 1826-1831. Marking Heine's generic transition from lyric poetry to prose, the *Reisebilder* signal the arrival of a new sense of literary modernity. With its stylish, exhilarating take on the mode of travel writing increasingly popular at the height of the Romantic period, Heine's prose achieves a new tone that engages Classicism and Romanticism in provocative manner. Carrying over a rhythmic flow and tone from his poetry, the *Reisebilder* created a unique fusion of prose and poetry, in a carefree style that took on a paradigmatic significance for nineteenth-century culture.

The opening piece of the *Reisebilder*, "Die Harzreise" ["Harz Journey"], captures Heine's bold new attitude in exemplary manner. Brash, smart, and witty, the text plays with the tension between the formal requirements of the travel narrative's claim to impart objective information, and the conflicting fact that any narrative emerges from the subject position that constructs its objectivity. The text acts this back-and-forth out comically and with a sense of mischief that carries the picaresque to a new level. Beginning with a list containing bits of information, *Reisebilder* parodies the dilemmas of descriptive presentation while highlighting the narrator's technique as more than simple whimsy. With the flippant opening salvo, "Schwarze Röcke, seidne Strümpfe/Weisse, höfliche Manschetten./Sanfte Reden, Embrassieren –/Ach, wenn sie nur Herzen hätten!" ["Black skirts, silken stockings/White, polite cuffs,/sweet talk, hugging –/ Oh, if they only had a heart!" (Heinrich Heine, *Sämtliche Schriften*, ed. Klaus Briegleb, Munich: Hanser 1976, vol. 2, 103)], the listing of "facts" that follows the attempt to capture Göttingen is poetically upstaged by the opposition between nature and society's polished façade. The opposition between the poem's evocation of the fresh, inspiring atmosphere of nature, and the pinched scope of the city's social life challenges not only the conventions of a literary genre, but also the problematic distinction between poetry and prose.

This artfully poised equilibrium between prose and poetry sets in motion a narrative weave whose interstices both make and break the text: the narrator in "Harzreise" walks the difficult line between the poetic and the prosaic, reminding the reader of the precarious status of his fiction. Nominally contained by the frame of a short week's six day, five night journey from Göttingen, on to Goslar, and then the Brocken – Germany's emblematic mountain top – and down again to the Ilse river valley, Heine multiplies the Romantic resonances. The description amplifies the initial binary contrast between nature and society through the opposition between day and night, Enlightenment sunshine and Romantic moonlight. At the same time, the clearly marked route that the narrator travels salts these reversals away within its forward movement, in dream sequences that rewrite his daily travels in a series of provocatively distorted displacements. Travel means more than mere physical and mental mobility: Heine's travel pictures capture the movements that elude the firm grasp of daytime consciousness, namely the hidden but crucial changes that take place in the unconscious, a place where linear travel is notoriously difficult, and whose magnetic force-field re-imposes itself precisely where it is ignored, as Heine's text points out.

If in "Harzreise" the non-linear movement is highlighted, the poetic representation of the sea and the natural cycles in "Die Nordsee" ("North Sea"), part I and II, point to the circular aspects of existence. Celebrated as the most intense poetic representations of the sea in all of German literature, this section captures a sense of perpetual motion in poetic vignettes that emphasize a peculiar point of repose between the dynamic and the static. Yet these poems are anything but harmonious. "Seegespenst" ("Sea Ghost") reminds the reader of the uncanny underside of nature's beauty. Just when the narrator – who coincides with the author – is about to succumb to the seductive lure of a sea maid he imagines to recognize from the past, the captain grabs hold of his foot, saving his life while "laughing with anger": "Doctor, sind Sie des Teufels?" ["Doctor, are you obsessed by the devil?" 184].

Part II opens with “Nordsee III”, written on the island of Norderney. Far removed from the hustle and bustle of metropolitan life, the island provides the respite for Heine’s reflections on literature and literary critique:

[D]ie Kritik ist etwas Wandelbares, sie geht hervor aus den Ansichten der Zeit, hat nur für diese ihre Bedeutung [...] Jedes Zeitalter, wenn es neue Ideen bekommt, bekommt auch neue Augen, und sieht gar viel Neues in den alten Geisteswerken. (221)

[“critique is something changeable, emerging from the attitudes of an age, it has meaning only for it [...] Every age receives new eyes with its new ideas and sees many new things in the old works of the spirit”.]

Goethe and others may no longer seem contemporary but, Heine points out, new sensitivities open up new ways of seeing and understanding one’s literary tradition. Pretending to change the topic, the narrator goes on to divert the reader with the legend of the Flying Dutchman that Richard Wagner borrowed from this text. But Heine uses the legend in order to question linearity and circularity on its own terms, preparing the way for his later discussion of modernity. Introducing here the term “Modernität” into German in 1827, the word appears in the context of a remarkable juxtaposition of Walter Scott with Lord Byron. In Heine’s ensuing analysis, the pair comes to represent two different, but complementary ways to grasp the spirit of the age. The particular spirit of Napoleon as a man of modern times, Heine notes, can only be adequately captured in a creative negotiation between Scott and Byron. For while the idea of modernity seems out of place in the world of Scott’s historical novels, eccentrically clashing with the blinding aura of the new Napoleonic age, Byron’s approach falls equally short in its bid to capture modernity, lacking the ability to preserve those elements of the past that so profoundly inform the push toward progress and innovation. For Byron’s radicalism thus threatens to nip modernity in the bud, with aesthetic charms that tend to ignore that underside of history which Scott knows how to address. Modernity, Heine suggests, is nothing that can be captured by one cultural impulse or the other, but represents the moment where the old and the new come together in a creative antagonism, whose dynamics informs, defines, and thus comes to constitute the present.

“Ideen. Das Buch Le Grand” [“Ideas. The Book Le Grand”] takes the reader back into the midst of life and historical experience. Addressed to the elusive Evelina, the “book” is built around the motto with which it opens and closes, that of an “altes Stück” (old story): unrequited love. What follows is a song of the “ungeweinten Träne” [uncried tear, 248], the metaphor for the textual strategy informing this text, and a metaphor that reflects the endless task of understanding history as that point of intersection where private and public constitute each other. Ideas – the Hegelian paradigm – and the French officer Le Grand, assigned to board in the home of Heine’s family, are the two issues Heine uses to highlight this process by provocatively yoking them together. Napoleon – who makes an epiphanic appearance at the precise middle of the text, in Section VIII – epitomizes the ideas which his majesty’s drum beating officer communicates more effectively than any scholar could with all his wisdom. The farcical Table of Contents of the erudite book he proposes articulates Heine’s principal critique of Hegel: “I. Of Ideas. A. Of Ideas in general. a) Of Reasonable Ideas, b) Of Unreasonable Ideas, a. Of Regular Ideas, b. Of Ideas Bound in Green Leather”. (287) This comic moment leads to a digression on foolishness, and outlines the narrator’s complicated theory of the relation between the Party of Fools and the Reasonable Party, his sustained and comic take on the dialectics of Jewish emancipation and the pressures of assimilation. Here, the narrator finds himself caught between fronts: just as Napoleon’s drummer opens the narrator’s ears to the silenced sounds of history, Jewish experience opens his eyes to the insidious ways in which a self-glorifying reason achieves wholeness by excluding what it deems to be other. Concluding with the recurring line “Sie war liebenswürdig, und Er liebte Sie; Er aber war nicht liebenswürdig, und Sie liebte ihn nicht” [“She was lovely and he loved her; but he was not worthy of love and she did not love him” 308], Heine lets the reader in on the deeper meaning of this story of unrequited love: the anti-hero’s unworthiness to be loved results less from intrinsic qualities of his own than from Reason’s conventional and arbitrary modes of exclusion.

Part III opens with “Italy” (consisting of three books whose last will open part IV), and makes the return trip with the “Reise von München nach Genua” [“Journey from Munich to Genoa”], taking more conventional modes of ground transportation, or so it seems. Starting in Munich, ironically described as the new Athens of the North (321f.), the journey satirizes Eichendorff’s romanticism, as it begins on a carefree note: “Tirily! Tirily! Ich lebe!” (327), before the narrative confronts the reader with the theme of history and the problem of its representation. A poet’s fiction, the narrator notes, often captures history’s spirit more accurately than the historian (330f.). In addition to the play on Romanticism, Goethe’s *Italian Journey* as well as Italian characters from *Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship* make their overt and covert appearances. A visit to the battlefield at Marengo – scene of Napoleon’s defeat – evokes a central insight of Heine’s view on history: “unter jedem Grabstein liegt eine Weltgeschichte” [underneath every tombstone, a history of the world is to be found, 378]. Defining his poetic mission as political at heart, with an eye on the great struggle of universal emancipation, Heine writes his own epitaph a few pages later, requesting a sword be placed on his

coffin as well: “denn ich war ein braver Soldat im Befreiungskriege der Menschheit” [“for I was a brave soldier in the war of liberation for humanity”, 382]. This commitment, however, does not mean that history moves forward in linear fashion. Arriving in Genua in the final chapter, the traveler enters the portrait gallery in the Palazzo Durazzo where a painting by Giorgione brings him to identify the “dead Maria”, an enigmatic character, whose absent presence has informed the preceding narrative. In another painting, the narrator discovers himself. History, the text suggests, is pregnant with aspects of the non-contemporary in a way that impacts our contemporary existence more fundamentally than we can conceive.

The journey continues at “Die Bäder von Lucca” [“The Baths of Lucca”]. But before we finally meet some Italian characters up close, we are introduced to two kinds of tourists: The English lady Mathilde represents British common sense, sobriety and wit, with an Irish background (622) that not only explains her knack for satirical irony, but also her keen sense of social, linguistic, and cultural difference. In the odd servant-master duo of Hirsch-Hyazinth and Gumpelino, the one stands for the paradigm of the reluctant skeptic when it comes to assimilation, while the other passionately invested in the quest for social acceptance. The comedic duo goes on to stage the drama of Jewish assimilation in unforgettable fashion, making this book and its sequel “Die Stadt Lucca” a classic case study of Jewish emancipation. A second drama unfolds when the narrator meets Franscheska. The tension between his elective affinity for the brainy Mathilde, and this sensual attraction to the Italian Franscheska, who in turn fancies an Abbot instead, foregrounds the predicament of assimilation in a romantic register. These mutually exclusive claims of Protestant and Catholic culture on the narrator challenge his loyalties and point out the irresolvable interdependence between religion and secularization. After an overture of allusions that announce the theme, the second half of the book engages in an unrelenting dissection of August von Platen’s poetry, where Heine’s unforgiving exposure of the count’s homosexuality figures his response to the latter’s crude, antisemitic provocation.

Part IV with “Die Stadt Lucca” [The City of Lucca] and “Englische Fragmente” [English Fragments] concludes *Reisebilder*. On the narrative level, these two very different texts are linked through Heine’s alter ego Lady Maxwell (Mathilde) and thematically through the “theological-political” nexus between freedom and religion. Whereas “Die Stadt Lucca” argues for “politische Gleichheit der Gottesdienste, so zu sagen die Gewerbefreiheit der Götter” [“the political equality of the religious services, as it were, the free trade of the Gods”, 518], the “Englische Fragmente” add to this call for freedom of religion the appeal for a new, larger religion of freedom (533, 601). By broadcasting this vision of emancipation as a new form of religion, Heine outlines his own distinctively differential notion of human liberation. Re-rooting this vision of freedom in the interplay of religious traditions that “Die Stadt Lucca” performs, Heine defines the polysemic surplus of freedom as immune to any singular conceptualization. Instead, freedom for Heine challenges any premature attempts at intellectual and political closure, and finds support in the “religious” insight that the dictatorship of Enlightenment rationality is ultimately antithetical to human liberation. Just as the narrator, “als Protestant” [“as Protestant”], cheerfully secularizes the goods of the catholic clergy by carefully collecting Franscheska’s kisses, taking rational advantage of her mistaking him for her beloved abbot, so he also takes pleasure in the Catholic liturgy, and avails himself of its new and hidden meanings. Literally following the Mass – “Wort wird Fleisch, der Glaube wird versinnlicht, in Form und Gestalt, welche Religion!” [“the word becomes flesh, faith is sensualized, in form and shape, what a religion!”] – the narrator’s carnal desires provide him with a new reading, as he declares his love for slender Franscheska: “das ist der Leib!” [“that is the body!” 495f.].

As the narrator assumes this posture of the conditional Protestant and optional Catholic, the Jewish element of his persona makes its comic entrance (499). The emergence of the Jewish thematic is Heine’s powerful reminder that while the world seems to be comprised of two competing churches, each is in fact a product of a kind of secularization process, since each canon rests on a Jewish tradition it has appropriated for itself. If the Catholics behave as if they owned the heavens, the Protestants seem happy with their rental terms (487). In Heine’s final analysis, Jesus must take pride of place in the line of history’s most heroic freedom fighters, running from King Agis of Sparta, and the Romans Cajus and Tiberius Grachus, to Robbespierre and Saint Just (524, and Engl. Fragm. 598).

Though partly filler material to reach the volume-length required to avoid censorship – the Karlsbad decree of 1819 stipulated that books with 21 sheets and more be exempt from the censor’s review – the concluding “Englische Fragmente” articulates Heine’s vision of the new gospel of freedom. Just as Alexis de Tocqueville addressed the difficult relationship between freedom and equality a few years later in his *Democracy in America* (vol. 1, 1835 and vol. 2, 1840), Heine points out the uneasy tension between freedom and equality, in which one constantly threatens to eclipse the other. An early voice of the colonized, however – the “yellow man” on deck of the ship that brings Heine to London – enters the text to deliver the insight that both principles are little more than elusive ideals. Heine’s later encounter on another ship, importing goods from India, makes the complementary point of a universal principle of solidarity in which

every different people has its share. Lacking any means of communication with the Muslim sailors he encounters from India, Arabia, and Africa, Heine welcomes them with the greeting “Mahomet!”, which is enthusiastically returned by them with the equally joyful salutation of “Bonaparte!” (594). Both liberating and revolutionary, these battle-cries announce the fact that the spirit of universal liberation can only be expressed in particulars, and at the same time that the human difference in which the universal resides always remains communicable by human beings, though only in the name of the other.

Reisebilder thus became an inspirational text for the “Young Germany” movement, and succeeding generations of authors and critics, as well as a foundational work in the history of German journalism. It became a signal text for the generations after Goethe and the Romantics as it initiated a literature that embraced politics as its cause, and aesthetics as its critical weapon.

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