

Zur Geschichte der Religion und Philosophie in Deutschland [On the History of Religion and Philosophy in Germany]

Heine, Heinrich

(1834)

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Originally published as a series of articles in the French journal *Revue des deux mondes*, the essay *Zur Geschichte der Religion und Philosophie in Deutschland* [On the History of Religion and Philosophy in Germany, 1834] is Heine's most systematic theoretical work. Written in Paris in 1833/34, the essay is a meditation on the end of a period symbolized by Goethe and Hegel and the beginning of a new era. A first of its kind, the essay initiates intellectual history as a historiographic alternative to the Historical School's normative revisionism, whose "monumentalism" – as Nietzsche was later to dub it – was supposed to challenge the antiquarian approaches of more traditional history writing. A critical reflection on history and its constructions, Heine's essay rewrites the past in the light of a future whose outlook the famously prophetic conclusion announces less as a fact than a critical perspective for the release of the past's liberating potential. In stunning fashion, Heine's take on history prefigures interventions by Nietzsche, Freud, Benjamin, Adorno, and Foucault.

Together with *Die Romantische Schule* [The Romantic School, 1838] the text represents Heine's response to Madame de Staël's influential *De l'Allemagne* that had introduced France and the rest of Europe to a well coiffed image of the profound world of German thought and letters. Pulling the curtains behind the impressively staged account of the former French finance minister's notorious daughter, Heine turns the spotlights on the strings and ropes that move German and European cultural history in general. In an original revision of Hegel's world historical scheme and Germany's particular role, from which it takes its cues, Heine's intellectual history presents a stunning reconception. Focusing on processes of intellectual development rather than isolating its religious from its philosophical strands, Heine offers a critical approach to intellectual history that takes the Hegelian recognition of the constitutive correlation between religion and philosophy to its logical conclusion. As philosophy develops out of religious spirituality, the essay outlines an historical trajectory that breaks with the historiographic conventions of linearity and circularity, as it envisions an approach that eludes the problematic framework of progress and decay. History, Heine proposes, is not the reflection of a teleological plan of providence, but a process of conflicting forces and antagonisms that results in various formations which are often symptom-like crystallizations of the struggle between the unconscious and conscious. There is no longer certainty, then, about the intentions of history's minor and major actors. Consequently, the historian's task consists not in reconstructing pristine origins and rational choice models of action but, rather, in reflecting history's contingencies in a literary form which captures the thick weave that makes history's textual fabric.

This intellectual history – the essay argues inaugurating its own genre – is therefore primarily interested in the "social importance" of theology and metaphysics (Heinrich Heine, *Sämtliche Schriften*, ed. Klaus Briegleb, Munich: Hanser 1976, vol. 3, 514). Tracing the emergence of German philosophy out of its origins in Protestant theology therefore also means the examination of the pre-Christian traditions that precede Europe's Christianization. Book One traces this aspect, addressing the fact that "there still exists no history of Christianity" (516). But "the national religion in Europe – in the North even more so than in the South – was pantheistic" (522f.). The various autochthonous spiritual cultures inform the national differences which, in turn, explain the differences of the various European intellectual traditions. The courtly fairy worlds of England and France, for instance, provide a habitat in which sprites assume more civil features than the kind of leprechauns, imps, goblins, troll, and poltergeists that only thrive on German soil: the "grey and often rather scurrilous German sprite scoundrels" (523). Containing this "old Germanic religion of nature", the Christian Church has insidiously transformed the German's pantheistic worldview into pandemonic superstition (529). While Luther no longer believed in Catholic miracles, he still tried to drive away the devil with his inkpot. The Catholic

Church, however, relied staunchly on the devil's powers when it financed the construction of St. Peter's Cathedral bankrolling it with the liberal sale of indulgence letters. Christendom's symbol, St. Peter, Heine notes, was thus literally built by the devil: a formidable victory of spiritualism that had sensualism build its most sublime temple (532).

But with Luther, a new age begins. Luther firmly grounds the freedom of thought and the right to reason, and thus breaks the grounds for modern German philosophy. In addition, Heine recognizes Luther as the beginning of modern German literature whose ideal is no longer to be objective, epic, and naïve, but subjective, lyrical, and reflective (549-51). Adopting Hegel's view on the signal importance of Lutheran Reformation for German intellectual history, this narrative receives a critically new accentuation with Book Two.

In the middle of his essay, between the Reformation and "the philosophical revolution" set in motion by Kant (553), Heine inserts a "pantheistic excursion" (572) that presents a bold intervention in both historiographic and philosophical terms. Placing Spinoza at the center of this narrative leads to a revision of the history of philosophy that allows Heine to reconnect critical aspects of German classic literature and idealist thought with the spiritual grass root tradition Book One recovers. Presenting Spinoza as the catalyst who articulates ancient pantheistic motives in uncompromisingly modern philosophical fashion, Heine succeeds in redeeming the emancipatory potential of a pagan legacy against the repressive moments of forward moving reformatory efforts. Through this recovery, he thus addresses contemporary philosophy as the heir not only to the Reformation, as Hegel would have it, but also to a folk tradition whose specifically "Germanic" roots offered a critical antidote to the one-dimensionally rational thinking defining most British and French post-revolutionary thought. Recognizing Spinoza as the critical hinge that establishes modern German philosophy's link to its roots in folk tradition, Heine liberates the conventional view of philosophy as an armchair activity as he highlights the praxis-oriented impetus that drives modern critical thought. With the pointedly eccentric insertion of the Dutch Sephardi Jewish philosopher at the heart of the development of modern European thought – and in critical distinction to Descartes, Hobbes, Locke, and Leibniz – Heine figures the role of German Jewish cultural experience in a way that takes on the conventional framework of nationalism in provocative manner. If the idea that a Jew could be a philosopher has for many modern Europeans been unthinkable, a Jew who would redeem German traditions to their own modernity posed a direct challenge to their self-understanding. The provocation, however, of Heine's suggestion to consider Spinoza's role for German culture as a prefiguration of later German Jewish exchange remained largely ignored, i.e. was only picked up by German Jews themselves.

Identifying "pantheism" with a Spinozist approach, Heine also bypassed the Saint-Simonist reduction of emancipatory thinking into a mere project of social engineering whose doctrinary limitations became increasingly problematic. With pantheism as German philosophy's "public secret" (571), the mystic and metaphysical tradition emerges as of one piece with the concerns of the most advanced positions in German Idealism. The celebration of the Enlightenment champions Nicolai, Mendelssohn, and Lessing closes with the commemoration of "deism's 21 January", i.e. the execution of God, whose curriculum vitae (from its humble beginnings as local chieftain to the exclusive position of God-King with his own temple, and then to his career move to Rome, there exchanging jealousy and revenge for love and mercy) – finds its sudden end with the appearance of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* in 1781 (590f.).

The central figures of Book Three are Kant, Fichte, Hegel, and Goethe. Kant who forged "the sword with which deism was executed" (594) is paired with Robespierre, while Fichte is the German Napoleon: both represent "the grand, grim ego" (610). Similarly, Kant and Robespierre were limited by their critique, i.e. their negative vision, whereas Fichte and Napoleon put firm systems in place (607): "Where Kant analyses, Fichte constructs" (609). With Goethe, a new figure comes into the picture and bridges the link from Kant and his followers to Hegel and Schelling, whose Spinozist component Goethe prefigures in poetry.

If deism had been taken care of by Kant, and Fichte initiates Germany's best kept secret, atheism, Goethe offers a more creative and joyful picture: the pantheism which Heine earlier on equates with Spinozism (565). Thanks to Spinoza, Goethe's pantheism is distinctly different from the pagan variety. As Heine notes: "Goethe was the Spinoza of poetry." If the Romantics act on a pantheistic instinct they themselves do not understand (619), Goethe purifies it to perfected form. Superior to the false alternative between the crude forms of materialism found in France and England, and Fichte's godless and clumsy idealism, Goethe's Spinozism holds the liberating promise that both materialism and idealism betray.

Schelling's appropriation of Spinoza, however, lacks Goethe's clear-eyed vision. If Schelling's significance consists in his recognition of Spinoza's philosophical importance, he disappoints in the end as renegade of his own philosophy, taking shelter in the arms of the Catholic Church (633). If Kant was the "terrorist convent", and Fichte the Napoleonic Empire, Schelling embodies the restoration's reaction (635). Hegel pushed him from the throne, took his crown, and shore him;

and while horrified Schelling lives ever since as a poor little monk in Munich, Hegel has come to dominate German philosophy (635f.). The German philosophical revolution has thus reached its end.

The essay concludes with what has traditionally been read as a prophecy, which some readers would argue came true with the rise of Nazi Germany. But the dramatic finale's vision of Kantians and Fichteans gone militant, armed with swords, axes, and radical ideas is less an accurate prognosis of the future than a call for attention to Germany's present quest for emancipation. Heine's warning that the French Revolution is harmlessly idyllic compared to what was brewing in Germany is historically true in a more profound way than historical accuracy could care: the intellectual historian's insight that thought, however slowly and reluctantly followed by deed's final realization, may be heavy handed, but nonetheless historically powerful and consequential.

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