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## Romanzero

(1888 words) [Print](#)

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### Heinrich Heine

(1851)

Willi Goetschel, University of Toronto

Domain: Literature. Genre: Poem Collection. Country: Germany, Continental Europe.

*Romanzero*, Heinrich Heine's final collection of poetry published in 1851, is also his poetic legacy: an irreverent review of both life's depths and superficialities, which more often than not co-exist, sometimes as literal bed fellows as the opening poem "Rhampsenit" suggests. Breaking into the pharaoh's treasure chamber, Rhampsenit the daredevil not only walks away with the stolen goods, but is also awarded half the kingdom and the pharaoh's daughter as his bride, whose virginity he stole in the first place. In this figure, Pharaoh meets his equal, Heine suggests, and Egypt gets its most effective ruler. *Romanzero* ends by describing the nose of another queen – with a sense of smell both delicate and obtuse – whose claim to arbitrate a religious dispute gets both Jews and Christians into trouble. The state and its representatives of power, *Romanzero's* concluding verses remind us, are less the solution to than the problem of modernity.

*Romanzero's* three sections, "Historien" ["Histories"], "Lamentationen" ["Lamentations"], and "Hebräische Melodien" ["Hebrew Melodies"] offer three different perspectives on individual life and its relation to history. The first section pictures the world "upside down", where audacity is rewarded and virtue ignored, but where the forgotten details of everyday existence reveal a story hidden by historiography, whose broad brush strokes cover over the small but decisive details. While the caption "Historien" emphasizes plurality, highlighting the objective "evil eye" and examining history from the perspective of an outside observer, "Lamentationen" explores the subjective aspects of the individual's tribulations, whose personal suffering calls for equal attention. The series of "Lazarus" poems that makes up the latter part of this second section is told from the poet's point of view, an angle of vision pointedly different from the Romantic subject position. This particular mode of individuality is defined less by thematic choice than by the way the poet's position sheds its light on the contingency of life's experience. In poetic fashion, "Hebräische Melodien" brings the objective and the subjective together in a creative tension which highlights the dialogic structure sustaining the contradictory condition of human existence without the coercive urge to exclude one or the other of its aspects. Unlike the three/four time of dialectics – thesis, anti-thesis, synthesis – which sublates the vicissitudes of the way of the world into a higher providential scheme, *Romanzero* voices a critical caveat against any resolution that privileges objectivity over subjectivity. In modern fashion, Heine exposes the particularity of any claim to universalism.

"Historien", "Lamentationen", and "Hebräische Melodien" provide the three musical signatures for *Romanzero*, suggesting the genre of the romance, the figure of its author, as well as the playfully articulated tension between "Roman" and "zero". Written in a major key, "Historien" not only shows us history's bright side, but also brings its tragic aspects into view. Both are seen through a lens that registers world historical, rather than personal implications. "Der Mohrenkönig" records the silence of exiled King Boabdil's last sigh, followed by "Geofroy Rudël und Melisande von Tripoli", a poem describing how the world's most sublime lovers meet only in death. The next poem, "Der Dichter Firdusi", relates another instance of missed opportunities in life, and the eventual reward of the great Persian poet, which, however, does not reach him in time. As the Shah cheats his most accomplished poet of his promised prize, all regrets come too late when the caravan overflowing with riches enters the city, just as the poet's funeral procession departs through the other gate. Concluding this section is the miniature epic of over 600 verses "Vitzliputzli". A merciless critique of the colonization of Mexico, Heine narrates the story of the Mexican Godhead who, run out of the country by the brutal Spanish conquistadors, emigrates to Europe, where he joins the pantheon of the underworld as the ghastly nemesis of European colonization.

The section "Lamentationen" directs us back to history's calamities whose plotlines "Historien" record but whose "all-too-human" perspective obscures the actual human toll they take. At the same time, the section's caption, a reference to the prophet Jeremiah, points forward to "Hebräische Melodien". Elegiac not only in tone but also in its insistently world-weary stance, "Lamentationen" gives voice to a suffering incommensurable with the smug repose that defines the detached historian's point of view. In the literary tone of a minor key, the poems in this section expose the poet's subject position as the hidden ground of poetry's condition. The twenty poems united under the heading "Lazarus" that conclude the "Lamentationen" make this point starkly, as they address Heine's own mortality and posthumous concerns. This view from

below looks with wary scepticism on the world, in a voice that sets these elegies apart from the conceit of a clever savvy, while never taking on a posture of brooding melancholy. Over and against the cheerful brilliance of reason that defines the historical approach, this darker view and its subjective angle provides the kind of epistemological accuracy which the “objective” gaze cannot produce.

At the end of this section, “Enfant perdu” (Heinrich Heine, *Sämtliche Schriften*, ed. Klaus Briegleb, Munich: Hanser 1976, vol. 6.1, 121; *The Complete Poems of Heinrich Heine*, A Modern Version by Hal Draper, Boston: Suhrkamp/Insel, 1982, 650) gives distinct voice to the fact that the problem of objectivity is not so much the problem of reason as of the heart, which breaks while the hand that wields the weapon remains undaunted:

Ein Posten ist vakant! –Die Wunden klaffen –  
Der eine fällt, die andern rücken nach –  
Doch fall ich unbesiegt, und meine Waffen  
Sind nicht gebrochen--Nur mein Herze brach.

[My wounds are gaping wide – A post’s unmanned! –  
One sentry falls, another takes his part –  
And yet I fall unvanquished, sword in hand –  
The only thing that’s broken is my heart.]

The concluding third section, “Hebräische Melodien”, consists of three poems that pick up the tension between the two preceding sections, now entwining their opposing elements as a constitutive nexus. Heine represents this principle in the medley whose music emerges from the interplay between the universal and particular, and forms the “Hebrew Melodies”. “Prinzessin Sabbat” opens the section with what Hannah Arendt and others have seen as a description of modern Jewish alienation. The dog-like suppression of Jews during the week is here sharply contrasted with a divine elevation on the Sabbath that reinstates the Jews’ full-fledged humanity if only for a day’s Messianic respite from the week’s drudgery. More than simply pointing its finger at the problem of a painfully split consciousness, the poem exposes the underlying – or more precisely the superimposed – assumption that casts the modern Jew as torn between two worlds. Rejecting the logical fallacy that frames the challenge of modernity as the “Jewish Question”, the poem’s opening lines instead address Orientalism’s phantasmagoric moment:

In Arabiens Märchenbuche  
Sehen wir verwünschte Prinzen,  
Die zuzeiten ihre schöne  
Urgestalt zurückgewinnen:

Das behaarte Ungeheuer  
Ist ein Königssohn geworden;  
Schmuckreich glänzend angekleidet,  
Auch verliebt die Flöte blasend. (125)

[In Arabia’s book of fables  
We can see enchanted princes  
Who at times regain their former  
Human shape and comely figure:

Once again the hairy monster  
Changes back into a princeling,  
Dressed in brightly jewelled splendor  
Sweetly fluting amorous ditties. (651)]

The fatal curse, however, that returns the prince to his monstrous existence, is neither his own doing, nor a form of divine judgment. The poem refutes naïve versions of both enlightenment and theology as hermeneutic skeleton-keys and, instead, unmasks them as the ideological veil that screens, and thus attempts to lay claim to whatever resists assimilation: “Ihn hat verwandelt / Hexenspruch in einen Hund” (125) [“A witch’s magic / has transformed him to a dog”, 651]. Such witchcraft returns with a vengeance at the end of Shabbat: “Ist ihm doch als griffen eiskalt / Hexenfinger in sein Herze.” (129) [“It’s as if ice-cold fingers / Of a witch had clutched his heartstrings.” 654]. This “hündische Metamorphose” [“canine metamorphosis”] is anything but an ontological necessity, despite the power that makes it seem inevitable: the magic involved, Heine suggests, belongs to society, which, like all sorcery, projects an illusory screen of doom onto what it excluded.

The central poem of this section, “Jehuda ben Halevy”, stands out both in size (800 verses) and significance. Here, Heine evokes the medieval sage and poet in a way that makes him his alter ego. Halevy’s profoundly spiritual and at the same time superbly creative thought resonates with Heine’s approach to Judaism and the idea of tradition in general: both are seen as future-oriented, and therefore always reconstituted anew through the encounter of past experience with innovation. Yehuda Halevi’s magisterial cantorial performance highlights how it is art’s creative forms of transformation – its innovations – that give tradition its living voice. Along with its poetological meaning, the poem explores how history is more than a concatenation of successive events, like the pearl necklace seized from Alexander’s spoils, but bears a far stronger resemblance to the treasure chest in which the necklace was found. In this, Heine’s allegorical configuration of the form/content dialectic of historiography, the chest is also the container out of which Alexander’s dreams arise. History, the poem suggests, looks beyond the status quo to the larger horizons of history: to what could have

been, and what might come to pass.

While “Prinzessin Sabbat” examined the relation of past and present through the Messianic future promised by each Shabbat, and “Jehuda ben Halevy” looked at the present and future via history – the first stanza quotes Psalm 137 “If I were to forget thee, Jerusalem” –, the “Disputation” ends with a figure of past and future no less resonant. With a racy description of the Christian-Jewish debate that resembles a tournament, the poem famously concludes with the Queen Blanche’s abrupt verdict “[d]ass der Rabbi und der Mönch, / Dass sie alle beide stinken” (171) [“Of the rabbi and the friar: / Both of them alike, they stink” 688]. These lines announce a signal awareness for Heine: that the difficult European past, and Europe’s desire for a utopian future, remain trapped in a present that seems a fatal reiteration of the same. As long as Europe remains enclosed by structures of power from the past, Heine suggests, the white Queen – “Queen Blanche” – will stand for a secularism locked into the dogma of the nation state, and unable to comprehend its own oppressive limits. Unlike readings that mistake the queen’s arrogance for the poem’s final judgment, however, Heine does not acquiesce to definitive closure. His poem, rather, poses the more difficult question of whether the achievements of nineteenth-century progress and emancipation are in fact all that different from a medieval era honest enough to call religious suppression by its name.

*Romanzero*, Heine’s last major work, became a best selling success. It asserted his unquestioned stature as Germany’s foremost poet after the death of Goethe. But it also took Heine’s program of poetic liberation to a new level. More outspoken, direct, and with a razor-sharp diction that had acquired a deepened texture, *Romanzero* became the literary legacy of a poet whose advocacy of humanity’s rights found its voice in a universalism no longer predicated on exclusion, but which insisted on embracing the particular as the critical guarantor and ground of the universe.

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