

## Heine's Critical Presence. The Poet in History

Willi Goetschel. *Heine and Critical Theory*. London: Bloomsbury, 2019. xii + 311 pp. ISBN: 978-1-3500-8729-3.

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It is only fair to say, as one does of any subject wallowing in infantile regression, that “‘western’ ‘civilization’” is presently “having a moment.” Since the specific value of the purely orientational variable, “west,” has always depended on where on the circumference of the earth one is,<sup>1</sup> and “civilization” has always, directly or indirectly, both yielded barbarism and overcome and yielded to it by turns,<sup>2</sup> analyzing the causes of the present state of any humanly effected “moment” will always appear short-sighted in retrospect, just as any contemporary intervention into its long-term development, routinely impeded by metaphor-laden debates concerning exactly “where” on the causal chain one is, may wind up merely turning in circles around the question of what constitutes the correct criteria for distinguishing “symptoms” from “disease.” Just as *social* regression requires the negation of the real Freud termed repression, so barbarism will never be eradicated by organic, epidemiological methods. Strength in numbers means one thing, calculable and, with equivalent concentration of effort, controvertible, when a positive object of research is in question. Collective repression, by contrast, reinforces our inability even to identify the object *or* question at hand, let alone determine, with the means we have created for doing so, what will or will not happen next. Borrowing the impersonal authority of nature, we tend to refer to these regressive causalities of our own creation as “matters of life and death,” forgetting that, while all organisms can kill and be killed, ours is the only that will fully bring destruction upon itself.

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<sup>1</sup>Cf. Kant, “Was heisst: sich im Denken orientieren?” in Kant, *Werkausgabe*, ed. Wilhelm Weischedel (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1977), vol. 5., 265–83 [orig. pub. 1786].

<sup>2</sup>Cf. Rousseau, *Discours sur les sciences et les arts; Discours sur l'origine et l'inégalité parmi les hommes* (Paris: Flammarion, 1992) [orig. pub. 1751; 1755].

The Heine of Willi Goetschel's newest book is just the figure for such shamelessly self-destructive times, not least of all because this most politically conscious, purposefully "playful" (1, *et passim*) and prolific lyric and prose stylist, singled out for the "divine wickedness" of his "scintillating" stylistic "virtuosity," and "refined" "sense of taste" by Nietzsche (who put him on unique par with himself [64–67]), knew historical "farce" when he saw it (whether "linguistic," nationalist, or otherwise "hegemonic" in its "ontological" garb [10–23, 65, 138, *et passim*]). Student of Hegel and probable source of his friend and fellow expatriate Marx's famous amendment, in *The Eighteenth Brumaire*, of a remark the latter attributes to Hegel, that, if indeed "all facts and personages of great world-historical significance ... occur twice" (Hegel), then "the first time as tragedy, the second time, farce" (Marx)—or, as Heine had already observed: "After tragedy comes the farce" [145–147])—the indefatigably imaginative Heine whom Goetschel's at once lucidly far-sighted and impeccably researched account conveys, from the twin, mid-nineteenth and mid-twentieth century summits of the poet's international stature and influence into the trenches of the rhetorically depressed twenty-first, is a thinker who realized, perhaps, first, that "farce" itself, when recognized as such, is never merely itself—i.e., good for a laugh—but the parodic delegitimization of apparently inevitable inequities past. Helpfully, often hilariously cited by Goetschel at length, the razor-sharp portrayals, in Heine's *Reisebilder* and commentaries, of the unmoored power of capital, more piercing than even Balzac's or Dickens' before and after, predate, as Goetschel importantly points out, Marx's own (51–64). No less than the poetic works, subverting the very genres of lyric they adopt, that Marx—frequent citer of Heine in his own texts—featured in full on his *Vorwärts*' front page, Heine's biting satiric prose, perhaps most akin to Brechtian dramas in its effect, reshapes the tragic into a *medium* not of socially or esthetically cathartic ends but of a "dialectic that is pointedly negative" (94), or without end, and thus inassimilable, in Goetschel's elegant terms, to "Hegel's supersessionist embrace" (18–19).

This inassimilability or particular capacity for resistance is what Goetschel emblematically calls "Heine's Jewish Difference." The title of its comprehensive "Introduction" (1–25), variants of which reappear, with the ineluctability of the Hegelian "Real," throughout the finely woven fabric of this magisterial book, that designation of Heine's specificity remains for the most part (very much like Hegel's irreducible "Real") both of necessity and necessarily undefined on Goetschel's account. This is because, in keeping with what Goetschel calls the "theological-political negotiations" that "begin with Spinoza ... and continue to Derrida" (228; see also 45, 149, and the summation of Goetschel's richly detailed reading of Heine's *Rabbi of Bachrach* [257]), "difference" can only be represented as the accompanying nonidentity or "other" of something we had conceived as an undifferentiated identity before.

This theoretical thematic is one of the pillars of this thoroughly nondogmatic book, itself as clearly a labor of love as of longform library research, written, in the spirit of its profoundly admired subject, with an exquisitely unpretentious, seductively light touch. As Goetschel contends, and his book's open-ended title suggests, that thematic directly aligns Heine with the lineage of modern critical theory, the many pathbreaking Jewish theorists and philosophers whose enormous debt to Heine—encompassing both direct and indirect, knowing and unknowing inclusions of the poet's most comprehensive critical conceptions into the foundational "difference" animating their own—his *Heine and Critical Theory*

successfully brings to the fore. Included among these are not only Marx and Freud, well-versed “readers” of Heine whose incorporations of many of the poet’s strongest insights are individually discussed by Goetschel at length (see Chapter 2, 49–87), but virtually every constitutive member of the Frankfurt School, as well as Benjamin (see Heine’s proposal of a “literary astrology” capable of revealing “constellations” of “ideas,” 156 esp.), Bloch, Arendt, Lukács, and, this reviewer would add, Brecht and Weill, perhaps the greatest twentieth-century inheritors, in both the conceptually and musically transformative sense, of the Jewish-German poet’s unparalleled centrality to the forging of the nineteenth-century “artsong” and song-cycle, and the spectacular popular rise of the new “Romantic” genre of *Lieder* settings, by classically trained composers, of integral lyric texts worldwide.

What “Jewish” signifies, in Goetschel’s account of the “difference” it makes, not only “negotiates” but blurs the boundary between the theological and political intentionally, seemingly secularizing the former while continually reinvigorating the latter, or, as Goetschel summarizes most clearly:

Echoing the critical line of the argument Marx developed a few years earlier in his essay “On the Jewish Question,” Heine’s critical plea for a more radical understanding of Jewish emancipation as a placeholder for the pressing need for universal emancipation resonates with the critical function that the unfinished project of Jewish emancipation carries in Benjamin, Adorno, and in Critical Theory more generally. (190)

Rather than at odds with emancipation, then, as Marx would write of religion generally, “Jewish” here names the condition of having continually to seek emancipation everywhere. And the perpetuation and interrogation of this exigency is not a “Jewish question” alone. A “placeholder” for the social condition of unfreedom that all social bodies incorporate within themselves, “Jewish” also bears the historical testimony or trace, not unlike the “wound” of Adorno’s 1956 Heine essay (expertly analyzed by Goetschel, 97–111 esp.), of the paroxysms of violence with which social bodies attempt to murder their own unfreedom by inflicting it, in the most radical, corporal ways imaginable, upon the physical bodies of designated “others” “rooted” within. Eventuating in “projects” of annihilation instead of emancipation that *per force* forget all genocide is a form of suicide, the administered “identification” and compelled expulsion from the body politic of the existence of all otherwise unidentifiable “difference” as such is (in the helpful antinomial terms of Kant’s First Critique) the application of a *purely theoretical* (i.e., nonexperiential) cognitive *positivism*, that is, a positivism that, self-refutingly, kills its object. If, in Goetschel’s view, “Jewish” names an identity positively defined only by the *failed* negation of difference, it is small wonder that, during a brief moment of emancipation (or respite from exile) “at home,” the Frankfurt School of critical theory would form, for, beginning with its systematic articulation by Kant, the work of distinctly *critical* reason has required the integration rather than projection and forced displacement of difference and negation above all.

Exactly in that vein, among the gems it offers the reader, *Heine and Critical Theory* contains one of the finest concise expositions of the thought of Adorno available to date. Chapter 3, “Heine’s Dissonant Aesthetics,” opens with a powerful analysis of the famous “Lorelei” poem (89–94), a lyric whose own nearly mythological status dialectically

maintains, in Goetschel's capable hands, the force of disenchantment—of the fatally enchanted—so effectively narrated and projected forward within it (one need only recall the deadly reiterations of the Lorelei's "golden" appearance, "dein goldenes Haar, Margarete" [your golden hair, Margaret], that surface and resurface, in excruciating apostrophic form, across the staccato syntax and unbalanced architecture of Celan's *Todesfuge*—a placeholder for "Germany" consistently terminating the lines in which it appears [ll. 6, 14, 22, 32, 35]). Goetschel next links Heine's poetics directly to Adorno's aesthetics, basing a synthetic examination of the central theses and dynamics of *Minima Moralia*, *Negative Dialectics* and *Aesthetic Theory* on Adorno's critical use of the technical musical concept of "dissonance" which, previously ascribed by Nietzsche to the Dionysiac in art (see 74), is defined by Adorno, in his prewar "Fetish Character of Music" (1938), as that which "refuses to trust the deception of existing harmony"; then emerges in the late *Dissonances: Music in the Administered World* (1962) as the "aniconic" "alternative to the primacy of vision" in the history of "discourse on art and aesthetics" (95), and ultimately finds crystallized dialectical expression, in the posthumous *Aesthetic Theory* (1970), as follows: "'Dissonance is the truth of harmony'" (94–95). In order to better explicate Adorno's two major essays on Heine (1949, 1956 [pub. 1958]), Goetschel effectively provides us with the motivating springs of Adorno's entire project: through a superb choice of paradigmatic citations, clearly and expertly interwoven and glossed, we receive the purposefully zigzagging fabrication of Adorno's *negative* dialectical thinking, conceived and crafted precisely to be "shrink resistant," so to speak, whole-cloth.

Goetschel's careful treatment of the Heine essays, and of the later, "Heine, the Wound," especially, is extraordinarily fine, with the apposite "wound" of its title first traced back to the poem in which, a full century before Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920) theorized the "repetition compulsion" on the basis of relived postwar trauma, Heine gave voice to the recurrent physical and psychological pain afflicting a "wound"-bearing veteran of Napoleon's Russian campaign ("Die Grenadiere" [1822]), before being examined, in all its psychological and historical complexity, as a stand-in for the exiled body and censored *corpus* of the poet himself, mark and "site" of violence unresolved (107). Whereas the Odysseus of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Goetschel suggests, may be Heine's very different "Other"—a master of "mimesis" (107) who, as Auerbach additionally observed (*Mimesis* [1946]), carried upon him the identifying scar of a previous wound he had forgotten, and so, when disguised, also forgets to hide—the "wound" of, or that "is" "Heine," on Adorno's account, reveals, Goetschel argues, a new way of understanding the events and experience of history itself, one that, he goes on to observe (here and elsewhere in *Heine*), very much resembles the unorthodox theory of historical experience that Adorno famously critiqued in Benjamin. Of Adorno's choice of names for the referent of compulsive repression known as "Heine" in German national history, Goetschel writes: "Calling it a wound opens and liquidates hardened positions, exposing the process of reaction formation and playing at the same time with the double aspect of trauma for victim and perpetrator. For Adorno, then, the image of the wound serves a critical purpose. It is a dialectical image" (107).

Each of the replete eight chapters of *Heine* adds another facet or dimension to the merely apparently contradictory orientations or "identities" of its expansive subject: dominant German poet of the 19<sup>th</sup> century/polemical, anti-nationalist writer-in-exile; literary lodestar of 20<sup>th</sup>-century postwar Britain/victim of national postwar oblivion at "home"; unabashedly

Jewish man-of-the-world/survivalist convert to German Protestantism; revolutionary/reactionary; paradigmatic German Romantic/subversive anti-German satirist; clear-eyed observer and theorist of modernity in advance of Baudelaire/model adherent of a Dionysian Hellenism before (and for) Nietzsche; paragon of musical lyricism/master of instrumental prose; long delayed, ultimately rejected subject of memorialization in the city and across the country of his birth/popularly selected subject of commemoration whose memorialization is rapidly effected, using the same Lorelei statue originally intended for Düsseldorf, in the Bronx. Yet, there is one feature which, Goetschel emphasizes, underlies all of the above: the gift of unrelentingly ironic, including fundamentally “self-ironic” humor (25). By comparison with that of other great writers of his time, Heine’s irony was additionally “self-ironic” because based in an acute “internal” consciousness of the “external” negation of the “identity” of the writer himself, the doubly tragic exclusion of “Jewish experience” not only from life as such but from its own “representation” as “tragic” in accordance with the anti-Semitic canons of the literary tradition that was Heine’s most native domain (or, as Goetschel observes of the “redemptive reading of Shylock” “inserted” “at the end of [Heine’s] discussion of Shakespeare’s tragedies”: “The conventions of literary representation simply did not allow for a Jew to appear as a central character in a tragedy” [9]).

In the face of prohibitions no less existential than artistic, what most characterizes and animates this nonetheless central German-language author, confined by physical paralysis to what he no less sardonically dubbed a “mattress grave” for the last decades of his life-in-exile in France, was what Goetschel calls his indefatigable “playfulness” (1, 11, 14, *et passim*), a kind of mental and verbal mobility without limits, and the quotations Goetschel musters from across his subject’s prolific body of work are indeed some of the most unforgettable contributions to the voluminous annals of Jewish humor this reviewer has ever heard or read. When Heine satirizes “the German censors of the press” by blacking out all words except for those themselves and the single entry “blockheads” [*Dummköpfe*] from a dozen-line text (119); or, when, tongue firmly in cheek, he recounts a Hegelian nightmare to a friend, in which the same friend reminds him, enacting a kind of mise-en-abîme of terror, that he, the dreaming Heine, has no cause for alarm, being, after all, “just an idea” (139); or when, in a mordantly unromantic commentary on the *Romantic School* (1836), the poet ponders “whether the religion of today consists in the monetization of the Deity or the deification of money?” (59), or previews the contemporary capitalist idioms of “smart money” and “the wisdom of the market” in observing the single truth worshiped within the “great marble temple” of the Paris *bourse*, to wit, that “an old louis d’or has more intelligence than any man, and can best tell of coming war or peace” (58); or opines, again all too prophetically that, as a result of the “marvelous changes” wrought by rail travel upon “our methods of perception and action” and “elementary ideas of space and time,” of these two experientially essential conceptions, “only time remains,” and “had we but money enough, we could kill the latter off as well!” (62), one recognizes the source from which every epochal Larry David springs.

While irony may be its oxygen, all, of course, is not fun and games in the antinomical world in conflict with itself that Heine represents, or rather, fun and games are not all fun and games themselves. To a delightful parable, prescient of Kafka, in which “three views on history” are represented by different theater viewers’ positions before, beside, and behind the stage, Heine adds the further subterranean detail, that unlike all of these partially blinkered onlookers, “mice”—having no practical, let alone theoretical reason with which to think otherwise—

”mistake the theater for the world” itself (159). The equation of all human “action and perception” (see above) with such self-replicating animal error is not a conception of human life Heine accepts, in that any “history,” properly speaking, along with any viewpoint upon it, is inconceivable without the conscious experience of difference, alteration, change, and the foundation of all these—as of irony—is our fissured life itself. Or, as Goetschel quotes from the draft introduction to Heine’s *Toward the History of Religion and Philosophy in Germany* (1835):

No, humankind does not revolve pointlessly in bleak circles with all its thoughts and feelings; there is development and progress, and one who actively works for it is no fool. Neither is everything in this world illusion and lie, nor are material interests all-powerful; matter obeys spirit, and if the spirit demands it, even the liar will sacrifice himself for truth, and the rogue himself for right. (159)

Supplementing the distinct human ability to shape matter at will with the “Spinozist,” political-theological observation, “Nor is God as pure spirit separated from the world, in a particular box called heaven; no, God is all there is,” Heine deftly identifies and refuses to worship at any “spiritualist,” or materialist, or—deforming fusion of the two—mytho-nationalist “golden” calf (159–60). To Goetschel’s own wonderful opening aphorism, “it could be said that Critical Theory equals Heine without the humor” (x), we might also say that, while all “progress,” or egress from “bleak circles,” is hard, there has never been nor will there ever be any without humor, the ability to bring the circular logic of regression into relief as not only infantile but ridiculous, citing and thereby bracketing it before, quicksand-like, it engulfs and smothers the “development” of consciousness essential to change itself. Humor is always part of any actual—“active,” experiential, and political, rather than passive-regressive, i.e., capital-made-me-do-it—logic of “progress,” the concrete scrutiny, under the reflective lens of irony, of the debris of the golden calves it breaks. Both the oxygen *and* canary in the coal-mine, when it sings we live (for the “shelf-life” of its afterlife, cf. Socrates.)

Always one step ahead of the regression it pillories, humor thus enables “progress” in the “actively working” mode of critique itself, bringing “home” to us, wherever it is we believe we live, truths at once immediately recognizable and inassimilably different from those we expect. To the great benefit of us all, Goetschel’s very funny Heine “is no fool,” but, on the contrary, that—regrettably—far rarer human phenomenon: a serious ironist in whom poetic and critical genius intersect to far-reaching, progressive effect. The Plato to its modern Jewish-German Socrates, Goetschel’s historic *Heine and Critical Theory* ensures its subject’s words speak to and beyond another present “moment” in the arc of a “civilization” whose orientation *toward* difference we designate, literally following Plato’s allegorical sun, “west.” The summit of Goetschel’s incisive interpretive thinking and prodigious scholarship to date, in word and in deed, in the best, most thoroughly dialectical sense, his brilliant *Heine* keeps the faith.