

HEINRICH HEINE: ANTI-SEMITE OR MISUNDERSTOOD GENIUS?

by *Ean E. Eskra*

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That I will be a defender of Jewish rights, of that I am certain... But a born enemy of all positive religions will never champion that religion which was the first to bring in its wake that disregard for people which causes so much anguish to this day.¹

Heinrich Heine

The brilliant German poet Heinrich Heine came of age in the German town of Dusseldorf, on the Rhine, during the passing of French Enlightenment thinking and the birth of German Romantic Nationalism. Enlightenment thinking taught Heine to be skeptical of traditional thought and to celebrate individual thought and reasoning. It also taught him to value humanity in the same manner. However, Heine's own individuality, specifically his Jewish heritage, kept him from attaining civic and political equality (which was the goal of the enlightenment) with the gentiles of his German homeland. This essay will show that scholars have misinterpreted Heine's resulting bitterness, Enlightenment values, and the wit of a satirical poet for Jewish self-hatred.

The Enlightenment beliefs that Heine had experienced and acquired in his early childhood from the French Revolution directly conflicted with German Romantic Nationalism, which arose in reaction to the Napoleonic conquest of German territories. Unlike the Enlightenment, which centered around skepticism, individualism, universalism, logical reasoning, and disdain for the middle ages, German Romantic Nationalism celebrated mysticism and the middle ages in search of an organic whole. Unfortunately for Jews, that organic whole had no place for them.

The best and shortest explanation of Heine's life is that of Lothar Kahn. He wrote:

It is not easy to explain the phenomenon of Heine. He has baffled critics whose opinion of him is hopelessly split along political and religious lines. More than most

¹ Paul L. Rose, *Revolutionary Antisemitism in Germany from Kant to Wagner* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990), 159.

writers he must be viewed against the background of his time. He stemmed from a people about to engage on a new and uncharted course; the period in which he lived was an age of transition; he was between generations and systems; in a real sense he existed between the no-longer and the not-yet. He appears to have viewed everything from the outside, never really daring to step inside any house, developing loyalty to none, but mocking the follies of all.²

This description captures the essence of Heine. He was filled with confusion and contradiction because the century in which he lived, the nineteenth, was filled with the same characteristics. At an early age Heine realized his Jewish heritage would deny him the equality afforded to gentile Germans. This knowledge did not have a serious effect on him until 1825, the year he was baptized as a Christian. In April of that year he passed his examinations at the University of Bonn and became a lawyer. However, Heine could not practice law unless he became baptized because, "...it was the law then in Germany that none save professing Christians could ever be admitted to the bar, or accorded almost any other governmental recognition."³ In June Heine became baptized into the Christian religion.

At first, Heine saw baptism as his, "entry ticket to European Civilization,"⁴ but the ticket actually led to his exile from Germany. Soon after his baptism, Heine realized that his alienation in German society had only increased. He no longer desired to become a lawyer and could not obtain a professorship due to his Jewish heritage. Heine wrote in a letter to a Rabbi:

I am very sorry I had myself baptized. I do not see that things have gone any better with me since. On the contrary, I have had nothing but misfortune. Is it not absurd? As soon as I am baptized I am decried as a Jew... Now I am detested by Christian and Jew alike!⁵

Although he was a trained lawyer and a brilliant (if still unrecognized) poet, Heine bitterly realized that there was no place for him within Romantic Nationalist German society. He also realized there was no place for him in Jewish society either.

Heine joined radicals, such as Jewish-German born Ludwig Borne, in search of freedom for humanity. Heine and other German radicals like him dreamed of a revolution that would sweep Germany and change the established order of the country. In July of 1830 their revolution came, but it was not in

² Lothar Kahn, *Mirrors of the Jewish Mind* (New Jersey: Thomas Yoseloff Publisher, 1968), 22.

³ Lewis Browne, *That Man Heine* (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1929), 136.

⁴ Rose, 159.

⁵ Browne, 137.

Germany. Heine and the others falsely believed that the revolution in France would spread into Germany. Unlike the other radicals, Heine remained in Germany awaiting the revolution. At this time he wrote a supplement to his series *Travel Pictures*, which criticized German Romantic Nationalism and anyone Heine considered his enemy. Because of his faith in the revolution he had written this book without restraint.⁶ Heine wrote in a letter to a friend:

The book is deliberately one sided. I know very well that the Revolution embraces every social interest, and that the aristocracy and the Church are not its only enemies. But I have purposely represented them as the only allied enemies, so as to consolidate the struggle.⁷

When the censors discovered this book Heine was forced to leave Germany forever. He would spend the rest of his life exiled in Paris, permanently alienated from the country whose language he had mastered and which he loved dearly.

Many scholars have attempted to prove or disprove the presence of a kind of anti-semitism in Heine's thoughts, but none have been able to give a definite answer. No writings have been recovered in which Heine directly addressed the issue of Jewish self-hatred, although he did leave writings which allude to embarrassment about and misunderstanding of his heritage. In his work *The Barbs of Lucca*, for example, Heine described a Jew as follows:

This old Jew with a long beard and a torn cloak who can not speak an orthodox word and is a bit mangy feels himself happier than I do with all my education... He does not have to worry about culture, he sits wrapped contentedly in his religion.⁸

Also, while commenting on his "race," he said that Jews were,

A mummified people that wanders the earth, wrapped up in its swathing of prescriptive letters, an obstinate piece of world history, a specter that bargains for its maintenance with bill of exchange and old hose.⁹

These writings and others like them, which criticize the Jewish people and religion, appear to illustrate a contempt for his heritage, but do not prove a hatred of it or his people. Quotations like these have inspired scholars to attempt to answer whether Heine should be claimed and celebrated by the Jews or shunned and criticized for his seemingly anti-semitic thoughts. Two such researchers are Israel Tabak and Sandra L. Gilman. In his book, *Heine and His Heritage*, Tabak attempts to prove Heine's Jewishness by showing Heine's use of

6 *Ibid.*, 199.

7 *Ibid.*

8 Sandra L. Gilman, *Jewish Self-Hatred* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), 175.

9 *Rosc.*, 161.

Hebrew, the Old Testament, post-Biblical literature, Jewish history, and Jewish folk themes with in his poetry.¹⁰ However, Jeffery L. Sammons, author of *The Elusive Poet*, writes:

Rabbi Tabak's book must be regarded with caution...The several hundred allusions to the Bible that Tabak so assiduously collected do not prove his point, for it has always been fundamental that German writers are Bibelfest, and Heine, after all, responds exclusively to that inexhaustible wellspring of German language, Martin Luther's translation.¹¹

He added that Tabak's attempt to prove Heine's Jewishness through parallel passages in the Talmud and his poetry was unconvincing.¹² Also, Sammons did not believe that a man, "...who did not know the calendar date of Passover..." and "...nearly put the anniversary of the fall of the temple on the tenth day of Ab when the Hebrew name of the fast, Tisha b'Av, means literally 'the ninth day of Ab'..." could be thoroughly immersed in Jewish tradition.¹³

Unlike Tabak, Gilman attempts to prove Heine's anti-semitism. In her book, *Jewish Self-Hatred*, Gilman supplies the following definition of self-hatred, which he uses to interpret Heine's writing:

Self-hatred results from outsiders' acceptance of the mirage of themselves generated by their reference group--that group in society which they see as defining them--as reality...The liberal fantasy is that anyone is welcome to share the power of the reference group if he abides by the rules that define that group. But those rules are the very definition of Other. The Other comprises precisely those who are not permitted to share power. Thus, the outsiders hear an answer from their fantasy: become like us--abandon your difference--and you may be one with us. On the other hand is the hidden qualification of the internalized reference group, the conservative curse: the more you are like me...the more I am aware that you are but a shoddy counterfeiter, an outsider.¹⁴

Gilman uses this logic in explaining Heine's writings. She agrees that Heine subverted other Jews in order to make himself, a baptized Jew, more appealing to the increasingly anti-semitic German culture he loved so much. One passage Gilman interprets is a passage by Heine on the Polish Jew. Heine wrote:

The Wadzeck Weekly chronicle, cooked in porridge, could not have nauseated me any more than those rag bag figures of dirt; and high minded speech of the third former enthusiastic about fatherland could not of martyred my ears so exultantly as the Polish Jew jargon. Their German language was sprinkled with Hebrew and Polish.¹⁵

10 Israel Tabak, *Heine and His Heritage: A Study of Jewish Love in his Work* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1956), 6.

11 Jeffery L. Sammons, *Heinrich Heine, The Elusive Poet* (Mass.: Yale University Press, 1969), 452.

12 *Ibid.*

13 *Ibid.*

14 Gilman, 3.

15 *Ibid.*, 25.

Heine elaborated this statement by stating that he preferred the Polish Jew with his lousy beard and garlic breath to the assimilated Jew of Germany. Although Heine admits his preference for these Jews, Gilman interprets the preceding paragraphs as being anti-semitic. She states that even though Heine believed the Polish Jews were better than assimilated Jews, Heine reviles their imperfect German dialect. By doing this, Heine is raising himself, a master of the German language, above these Jews, thus attempting to make himself more appealing.

Gilman's interpretation of Heine could be valid, but she forgot she was dealing with "the one who mocks the follies of all."¹⁵ Heine was so obsessed with his own genius that he not only intellectually belittled the Jews, but everyone else. One can see this trait in his early life when he was living in Hamburg, a city he hated. He unflatteringly described its citizens: "Arrogant caviling, dense insensibility, hatred for anything better than themselves; this was the attitude of the citizens; hypocritical middle class morality combined with squalid debauchery."¹⁷ His own arrogance can also be seen in a conflict with his millionaire uncle, Solomon Heine. After Heine defrauded his uncle of money, Solomon became very angry with Heine. Heine, feeling justified in his action, said, "The best thing about you is that you bear my name."¹⁸ These two examples illustrate Heine's egotism. Gilman neglects to consider this characteristic while evaluating Heine's comments about Jews.

T abak and Gilman both offer reasonable interpretations and observations about Heine's attitudes toward the Jews. However, these observations and interpretations are open to question. Unless a document is recovered that directly addresses the subject, no one will be able to know definitively if Heine was indeed anti-semitic. However, reading Heine's *Concerning the History and Philosophy of Germany* makes it difficult to believe he was anti-semitic. This book reveals Heine's thoughts about religion in Germany and about religion in general. Although he does not directly address Judaism, the views he reveals concerning religion are ones which are not consistent with anti-semitism.

Ludwig Borne comments on Heine and religion: "Christianity and indeed religion all together are not only abhorrent to him, they revolt him."¹⁹ Heine had

a religion, but it was not a traditional religion. It was a celebration of his own genius. Rather than believe and accept Christianity and Judaism, both of which he found joyless, tyrannical and oppressive, Heine subscribed to his own religion. This was a religion with a God that manifested himself in each individual and became real through humanity as a whole. Although he never started his own religious sect, Heine did attempt to follow his own faith. He demonstrated this in his sympathy for Saint-Simonism.

Saint-Simonism was a movement and a religion that was aimed at emancipating the poor and oppressed. Ultimately the movement failed, but Heine was drawn to its cause. One of the main reasons was the movement's religious beliefs, which were similar to his own. Saint-Simonism was a religion of joy, not oppression and tyranny. It was a religion of humanity, not for humanity.

Heine's dream of this religion of humanity is revealed in *Concerning the History and Philosophy of Germany*. Heine wrote this book while he was in exile in Paris and being influenced by Saint-Simonism. Heine reveals a respect both for the early pagan gods of Germany and for Martin Luther, while also yearning for a refined pantheism. These elements are all part of Heine's "religion."

Heine had respect for the ancient pagan gods of Germany because these gods lived among the people and were at one with nature. When Catholicism entered Germany, it transformed these gods into devils, demons, and goblins and replaced them with one God. This God was above the people, and religion was removed from earth. Heine believed this was a great injustice. Catholicism had not only taken away a religion that was close to the people, but it transformed this religion of nature into an evil thing. However, Heine believed that the pagan gods would remain in German minds forever, even if only in their obscured form, because Luther "expelled" Catholicism from Germany. Although Catholicism's monopoly of spiritual issues was ended, the ghosts, goblins, and devils it created from the pagan gods remained with the people.

Heine's views of the man and the religion that expelled Catholicism were benevolent. He admired Luther for three contributions. First, he made it possible for German thoughts, needs and wants to be expressed. Second, he did away with religious authority and let reason rule. He did this by breaking the Papal

16 Kahn, 22.

17 E.M. Butler, *Heinrich Heine: A Biography* (New York: Philosophic Library, 1957), 18.

18 *Ibid.*, 51.

19 *Ibid.*

authority over people's thoughts. The right to freedom of thought, which Luther advocated, supported two other fundamental principles: freedom of the press and academic freedom. Third, he allowed man to face his creator. These were main beliefs of Heine's own religion.

Heine's religion was heavily rooted in pantheism, but although he respected the ancient pagan gods, he wanted a more refined pantheism. He believed that God was everywhere, in plants, animals, the earth and the free thinker. Heine thought "that in man the deity attains self-awareness and reveals this self-awareness through man."²⁰ He did not believe this happened in individuals only. He believed it occurred through the collective of humanity, "...the result being that every human comprehends and represents only one portion of the divine universe, whereas collective humanity will comprehend and represent the totality of the divine universe of idea and reality."²¹

Heine's religion was founded on the belief that all humankind is an incarnation of God. Each human is part of God. This belief opposed both Christianity and Judaism. As he saw it, in these religions people rely on God. They are like a sponge and God is like a great lake. People simply soak up His divinity. Heine, however, believed that man was an active part of God. This made it necessary for him to celebrate the flesh, unlike the other religions which shunned it.

Unlike Christianity, Heine's religion was joyful and in the material world. He thought that the divinity of man was revealed in material form. Christianity saw matter as evil because it fought the spirit world. Heine did not agree with this view because he believed that the spirit perishes when the body is debased and put through misery. Thus, he believed that life in the material world should be joyful in order to allow the deity to become self-aware. He criticized Christian belief because it created sin by forcing the material and spiritual worlds to clash. The oppression of the material world, the world in which humans exist, turned Heine away from Christianity and towards his own beliefs.

Heine's three main points in *Concerning the History and Philosophy of Germany* are not consistent with the anti-semitic mentality. Heine was a man who had a religion of man's own creative genius. Although he never

²⁰ Heinrich Heine *Concerning the History and Philosophy of Germany*, trans. Helen Mustard (New York: Random House, 1973), 339.
²¹ *Ibid.*

created his own religious sect, he thought his religion was best for humanity. Heine once said, "Lay a sword upon my coffin; for I was an honest soldier in the war for liberation of mankind."²² Heine saw the traditional religions as oppressive and joyless, rather than liberating.

Heine was not anti-semitic. However, he was not willing to accept the traditional religions of Judaism and Christianity. Because he exposed what he believed was wrong with traditional religion, Heine's reputation has suffered. In *Concerning the History and Philosophy of Germany*, Heine wrote in typical nineteenth Century fashion of a man whom he considered another misunderstood genius, Gotthold Ephraim Lessing. In this revealing passage, Heine wrote:

You readily understand that a man like Lessing could never be happy. Even if he had not loved truth, even if he had not defended it on every occasion, he would still perform have been unhappy, for he was a genius. "People will forgive anything," said a poet recently, "they will forgive you your fine figure, they won't even mind if you're talented, but they are pitiless towards a genius." And Alas! even though he may not encounter it! will from without, a genius would still find himself the enemy repairing misery for him. Thus the history of great men is always a martyrology: even when they did not suffer for the greatness of the human race, they suffered their own greatness...²³

Heine was not anti-semitic. He was a man who suffered for his own genius and/or religion rather than accept those which he found oppressive and joyless. Heine's religion of human genius was typical of romantic notions of self-creation.

²² Butler, 75.
²³ Heine, 361.