

VERONIKA WEGENER

University of Augsburg

Heinrich Heine. *On the History of Religion and Philosophy in Germany and Other Writings*. Ed. by Terry Pinkard, transl. by Howard Pollack-Milgate. Cambridge University Press, 2007.

Heinrich Heine (1797-1856) is one of the most significant German poets of the 19th century. That some of his prose texts and poems are now presented within the series *Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy* is as astonishing as it is noteworthy: the series aims at extending the range and variety of texts in the history of philosophy that have been translated into English – and Heine, though best known for his lyrics and despite his essay *On the History of Religion and Philosophy in Germany*, is a less well-known author within the philosophical discourse.

Heine is an author of a transition epoch: He is not only a witness of the altered conditions of literature at the “end of [...] the ‘Goethean Period of Art’”, as he states in *The Romantic School* (p. 136). He also witnesses the multi-faceted socio-cultural transformations at the beginning of the secularisation, comments on the democratic movement in Europe after the French Revolution and – at last – is a witness of the fundamental crisis of classical theism in the making of European modernity. Heine’s writings presented in this volume appear almost paradigmatic for the discourse of modernity. Within the context of Enlightenment, German Idealism and Late Romanticism they evince Heine’s subjectively biased and yet astute interpretation of religion and philosophy in Western Europe, his stressing of the social and political impact of certain philosophical ideas. The edited texts also reveal Heine’s lifelong struggle with God and his very distinct approach to the philosophical-theological question of the divine, which seems to shift from a pantheistic one in his early writings to a rather theistic one in his texts of the 1850s. This selection of prose and lyrics by Heine is thus of interest to scholars of both philosophy and theology who research German philosophy of religion around 1800.

Besides the complete essay *On the History of Religion and Philosophy in Germany* (1835) the volume contains several others of Heine’s writings, namely an excerpt from a letter to Moses Moser (1823), poems from *The Songbook* (1827) and *New Poems* (1844), a passage from *Lucca, the City* (1831), parts of the *Introduction to “Kahldorf on the Nobility in Letters to Count M. von Moltke”* (1831), the first two out of three books

from *The Romantic School* (1835), a fragment of the uncompleted work *Letters about Germany* (1844) and abridged versions of the *Afterword* to *Romanzero* (1851) and the *Confessions* (1854).

The selection of texts starts with Heine's *On the History of Religion and Philosophy in Germany*, a witty, ironical, vivid overview of church history and the manifold philosophical concepts of God (e.g. those of the Manicheans and the Gnostics, R. Descartes, B. de Spinoza, G.W. Leibniz, I. Kant, J.G. Fichte, F.W.J. Schelling, G.W.F. Hegel), which serve as antecedents or opponents for Heine's very own God-talk in the early 1830s. One of Heine's main purpose is to express "in a popularly understandable manner" the "social importance" (p. 9) of the big questions within the history of (German) theology and philosophy in order to enable the German public to emancipate both from religious as well as from political paternalism. Within that line, Heine's treatment of church history entails a harsh critique of the theistic concept of God as a transcendent creator: his interpretation of religion and philosophy leads to the "death announcement" of the Judaeo-Christian God, who was "executed" by Kant's Critique of Pure Reason (pp. 76-78, 86), and to the promulgation of pantheism as the "clandestine religion of Germany" (p. 59).

Stepbystep Heine guides the reader to his radical pantheistic rethinking of the classical God-world relationship: the pure transcendental, highly spiritualistic concept of God in the Judaeo-Christian tradition comes along with a strict demarcation between God and world and hence with a denial of the pleasure of the flesh (pp. 12-13 a.o.). In contrast to this, Heine sketches a talk of God that does not exclude the material desires of man. Opposing the spiritualistic primacy of the spirit he demands "to rehabilitate matter, to reinstate it in its dignity, to recognize its moral worth and give it religious consecration, to reconcile it with spirit" (p. 56). Heine uses the resources of Spinoza, Schelling and Hegel to negotiate the God-world-difference, and rather stress the immanence of God, his manifesting in nature and his self-revealing in mankind (p. 57). It is this pantheistic thinking of the divine, that finally serves as the philosophical foundation for the revolutionary overcoming of the Germans' religious and socio-political immaturity, given that "the consciousness of one's own divinity will inspire one to express it" (p. 58).

Following *On the History of Religion and Philosophy*, the short excerpt from one of Heine's letters to Moses Moser and the two poems from *The Songbook* (*Return home*, No. 35 and *North sea: second cycle*, No. 9) are

characterized by many intertextual associations. All three texts from the 1820s/early 1830s allude with subtle irony to Hegel's philosophy.

The passage quoted from *Lucca, the City in Travel Pictures*, Part IV broadens the frame of reference: The satirical conversation of the narrator with an old lizard – the “hieroglyph-skinned Naturphilosoph” (p. 127) – is dedicated to the concept of Hegel's and Schelling's philosophy of identity as well as to man's relation to nature. What becomes central in Heine's *History of Religion and Philosophy* a few years later – the topoi of the “divinity of human being” and the revolutionary fight for the “divine rights of the human” (p. 58) – is in a way anticipated as the old lizard's philosophical secret. This secret is: “Everything strives forward, and, in the end, a great advancement of nature will occur. Stones will become plants, plants will become animals, animals will become people, and people will become Gods.” (p. 127)

The writings of the 1820s gathered in this volume reflect Heine's keen observations of the philosophical discussions in Germany and their socio-political importance starting more than a decade before he began with his work on his *History of Religion and Philosophy*. Within this setting, Heine's introduction to *Kahldorf on the Nobility in Letters to Count M. von Moltke* is an impressive example for his reception of the French Revolution of 1789 and the July Revolution of 1830, and sheds more light on his revolutionary political request for the German people. In the introduction Heine words his groundbreaking thought, which he deepens in *On the History of Religion and Philosophy*: German philosophy (Kant, Fichte, Schelling, Hegel) has broken with past traditions and present institutions “in the realm of thought”, “just as the French in the realm of society” – and because the “great circle” of German philosophy is “successfully completed”, “it is natural that we [i.e. the Germans; V.W.] now go over to politics” (p. 131).

In the succeeding two books of *The Romantic School* (1835) Heine chattily presents a sophisticated overview of German romanticism and reveals its hidden restorative tendencies as they echo in the romantic aesthetics and religiosity. The concept of spiritualism/sensualism thereby serves in a similar way as it did in *History of Religion and Philosophy* as a model for the historical and systematic reconstruction of the main topics and leading figures in Germany's literary scene around 1800 (such as G.E. Lessing, J.W. Goethe, F. Schiller, the Schlegel brothers, L. Tieck, Novalis a.o.). For Heine, the romantic school is “nothing other than a reawakening of the poetic spirit of the Middle Ages” (p. 137),

that had emerged out of the ongoing conflict between spirit and matter. Beside all the achievements of the Schlegel brothers (aesthetic criticism, translation work) Heine claims that their school “lacks the solid ground of a philosophy, a philosophical system” (p. 147). Furthermore he accuses German romanticism in general of being faint, impotent in theory, feudal and Catholic: Fr. Schlegel – as well as many other romanticists – fled towards the end of his life “into the shaky ruins of the Catholic Church” (p. 166) and Schelling, who had a great personal influence on the romantic school and whose philosophy of nature animated poets to see that nature was “much more full of meaning” (p. 190), got caught “in the snares of Catholic propaganda” and “betrayed philosophy to the Catholic religion.” (pp. 187-188)

Although the larger part of this work is dedicated to German literature in general and romanticism in particular, the God-question is more or less constantly present. As in his other works from this decade, Heine agitates for a sensualistic worldview and refers to Spinoza, to Schelling’s philosophy of nature, to Hegel and the Saint-Simonians, while presenting his very own idea of a “Dieu-progrès” as he calls it in one of his fragmentary drafts to the *Romantic School* (DHA 8/I. 467): “His [i.e. God’s; V.W.] life is this constant manifestation; God is in movement, in action, in time; his holy breath blows through the leaves of history, the latter is the true book of God.” (p. 157) With that Heine’s history of the romantic school is an iridescent mixture of art and science, literature and literary criticism, integrating political and religious matters into the academic history of literature. It is medium for both: criticism of religion and criticism of politics. This critique anticipates the central ideas of his *History of Religion and Philosophy*, deepens these ideas or points to his other writings.

The following two texts – the first poem from *New Poems. Poems of Time* and the very short passage quoted from the fragmentary work *Letters about Germany* – both document Heine’s relation to Hegel and to his philosophy. Hegel is pictured in the *Letters* as the “maestro” of the now so popular atheistic “music”; Heine himself is pictured as Hegel’s disciple, who “was standing behind the maestro when he composed it” and of whom Hegel “was quite fond of” (p. 197).

The fragmentary *Letters about Germany* can be viewed as a precursor to the *Confessions* – the quoted passage appears there – although Heine’s appraisal of Hegel’s philosophy and the young Hegelian atheism changes radically in the late 1840s.

Heine's late writings translated in this volume form a network of intertextual self-references, which revolve once again around the "great question of God" (p. 5). In the mid-1840s Heine's ideal of a "democracy of gods" (p. 58), which he had proclaimed earlier, becomes fragile. The events of 1848 – the simultaneous failure of the bourgeois revolutions in Europe and the rapid deterioration of Heine's poor health – raise in a paradigmatic way the question about the meaning of history and with that impose the challenge of the pantheistic theology of divine immanence. The experience of helplessness, pain, historical contingency and human finitude that is connected with both the political and the personal catastrophe, becomes a leitmotif in the works of Heine's final years. Amongst others, these writings entail a fundamental critique of the teleological thinking of Hegelian provenience and a questioning of the Hegelian theorem of the self-revelation of the divine in history and humanity.

The religious vocabulary Heine uses changes at the latest with the July Revolution of 1848. In the *Afterword to Romanzero* (1851), in the *Preface to the second edition of On the History of Religion and Philosophy* (1852) and in the *Confessions* (1854) – all of them texts which oscillate between fiction and factuality – he retracts in one way or the other the groundbreaking thought of the *History of Religion and Philosophy*. The Germans have not "outgrown deism" (p. 59), but deism "is most alive" and neither has "God's existence itself [...] been ended by the critique of reason" nor was deism at all killed by the "spider web of Berlin dialectics" (pp. 5-6). The texts of the agony sample the idea of a personal and transcendental God, who reveals himself in the bible and to whom the dying poet – at least as a fictional figure – returns home. Heine's confession to theism, yet, is full of tension, constantly broken, withdrawn, alienated or abandoned by irony and scepticism, humour and satire ("On my way, I found the God of the pantheists, but could not make use of him. This poor dreamy being, interwoven and intermingled with the world, imprisoned in it, as it were, just gapes at you; it is without will and powerless. To have a will, one must be a person; and to manifest a will, one must have one's elbows free. If you seek a God who can help you – and that is the whole point – you have to accept his personality, his transcendence, and his holy attributes, his infinite goodness, his omniscience, infinite justice, etc." (p. 199)). However, the writings of the 1850s can be read as testimonies for Heine's struggle with the pantheistic and theistic concepts of God. In his Parisian "grave of mattresses" (p. 198) his texts paradigmatically

put into words the scepticism of the enlightened intellectual, who is torn between philosophical truths of reason and Judeo-Christian truths of faith – without giving a final answer.

Besides offering a fresh and elegant new translation of Heine's writings by Howard Pollack-Milgate, the volume contains a sound introduction by Terry Pinkard, who outlines Heine's relation to Hegel, E. Gans and F. Nietzsche. The volume also includes a chronology of Heine's life and work, a short list with further readings and a comprehensive index. The text is lightly annotated and the translation follows the historical-critical Düsseldorf Heine-Ausgabe (DHA) and for some letter excerpts the Heinrich Heine Säkularausgabe (HSA). Especially as both sources are now available online at the Heinrich-Heine-Portal (URL = <http://www.heine-portal.de/>) it would have been convenient to quote from these editions in Pinkard's introduction as well, and to exactly refer with each translated text to the corresponding original in these editions, thus providing the reader with the necessary bibliographical information.

The merit of this publication is to present a colourful collection of Heine's texts to the English-speaking world, which do not stand for his poetic work, but focus on his rethinking of German philosophy. Yet the text selection, especially of the poems and of those texts, which are published only as text fragments, leave a mark of being somehow arbitrary: one misses for example a hint to the criticism of religion in *Lucca, the City*, and it is also not indicated that the *Confessions* end with an accusation of God following the biblical book of Job. Regrettably, those parts from the *Letters about Germany*, in which Heine deals with Feuerbach's critique of religion and which could have shed some light on Heine's relation to K. Marx's philosophical thinking and to the young Hegelian in general, are not included in this volume. It also would have been very interesting to publish some of the draft manuscripts to the *History of Religion and Philosophy* and the *Romantic School*, which reveal that Heine seems to be strongly influenced by Schelling and Spinoza.

By all means, this volume encourages discussing Heine's reception of German Idealism as well as the impact of his interpretation on the discourse of philosophy of religion in the second half of the 19th century. After all, several topics and basic ideas in his writings point to Feuerbach, Marx and Nietzsche.