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READING HEINRICH HEINE

This comprehensive study of the nineteenth-century German poet Heinrich Heine is the first to be published in English for many years. Anthony Phelan examines the complete range of Heine's work, from the early poetry and 'Pictures of Travel' to the last poems, including personal polemic and journalism. Phelan provides original and detailed readings of Heine's major poetry and throws new light on his virtuoso political performances that have too often been neglected by critics. Through his critical relationship with Romanticism, Heine confronted the problem of modernity in startlingly original ways that still speak to the concerns of postmodern readers. Phelan highlights the importance of Heine for the critical understanding of modern literature, and in particular the responses to Heine's work by Adorno, Kraus and Benjamin. Heine emerges as a figure of immense European significance, whose writings now need to be seen as a major contribution to the articulation of modernity.

ANTHONY PHELAN is a Faculty Lecturer in German at Oxford and Fellow of Keble College.

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What I owe to Liz Dowler for her patience and persistence, as we head for an anniversary of our own one year after this Heine year, is more than words can tell.

A. P.

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Introduction

1997 saw the two hundredth anniversary of the birth of Heinrich Heine, and the one hundred and fiftieth anniversary of his death falls in 2006. In the fifty years since the centenary of his death in 1956 his reputation, his canonical status, and perhaps even his popularity have been consolidated by enormous scholarly and critical activity. Towards the end of the last century, however, two commentators speaking from widely different positions challenged the prospects for Heine's continuing vitality, both within the academy and more generally in the future of literary culture.

Over a number of years Jeffrey Sammons, Heine's most important English biographer, has kept an acerbic eye on the mounting critical literature. He recently suggested that the intense preoccupation with Heine since the late 1960s has run its course and become exhausted. In response to this state of affairs, he has called for (and contributed to) a fuller understanding of the reception of Heine's work, and a return to careful readings of his style.¹ The playwright Heiner Müller, on the other hand, responded to the award of the Darmstadt academy's Büchner prize in 1985 with a speech claiming that 'Heine the Wound has begun to heal over, crooked; *Woyzeck* is the open wound.'² Müller's comment acknowledges the disturbance in German literary awareness caused by Heine, and evoked by Adorno's lecture 'Die Wunde Heine' ('Heine the Wound')³ in 1956, but suggests that it has been settled – though not set to rights. The remaining sore point is Büchner's *Woyzeck*. Heiner Müller's intuition was that Büchner more sharply addresses the North–South divide, and the residual claims made on our Western consciousness by democracy, which Müller understood as entailing the social and economic emancipation of working classes, and a solution to the problem of poverty that Büchner summarized as the 'bread question'. Faced with these doubts, the question of what continues in Heine, what lives on to provoke and disturb – what survives two historical-critical editions and a scholarly yearbook – is more important than ever to our understanding of the history of modernity and its current

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shadow, the so-called postmodern. It is the purpose of this study to reassess Heine's relation to and articulation of modernity, both as writer and as critic, as 'talent' and 'character'.

Generally the *Modern* implies two historical definitions: within the general period since the Renaissance, the specific development of the industrialized and urban culture of the nineteenth century which extends to our own time. In Germany, the experience of modernity was typically dominated by quite sudden demographic and economic changes. In the latter part of the nineteenth century there was a shift in the German population from the country and an essentially agrarian economy to the metropolitan centres of Berlin and Munich and the growth of manufacturing industry. In the tradition of German sociology these changes are associated with a rationalization of social action and a corresponding curtailment of affect (described by Georg Simmel's fundamental study 'The Metropolis and Mental Life')⁴ and with increasing alienation, secularization, and disenchantment. Heine's experience is, on the whole, of an earlier phase of this development, but in a number of respects he recognizes structures which become dominant in later social formations: the capital-led changes in the intensification of industrial production, and the consequent importance of capital mobility; the social and political significance of the emerging proletarian response; and the collapse of traditional forms of religious belief. Heine's relationship with his uncle Salomon, and his reflections on the significance of Baron James Rothschild testify to his sense of the mechanisms and effects of capital investment; his awareness of the growing importance of the communist movement and its cultural consequences bears witness to his understanding of the democratic claims of the working class beyond the scope of bourgeois liberalism; and the repeated images of old gods in exile clearly address the question of the secular – whatever we make of Heine's personal return to religious belief towards the end of his life.

Heine's importance two hundred years after his birth is closely tied to his self-understanding, his understanding of the process of modernity, and to twentieth-century readings of the forms in which these understandings were articulated. In the first instance, however, Heine defines his position as a modern in relation to Romantic poetry: 'with me the old German lyrical school was closed, while at the same time the new school, the modern German lyric was inaugurated by me' (B 6/1, 447).⁵ He happily accepts this assessment by the literary historians of his own day; and his *Geständnisse* (*Confessions*) go on to identify his recovery of religious belief (the so called 'theological revision') by reference to Judaism as well as the Christian

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tradition, and of course in relation to the ‘communist’ atheism which he has come to abjure.

In this sense, it is also possible to see Heine’s modernity as defined also by his relationship to tradition – or rather to distinct traditions. In his memoir of Ludwig Börne, Heine structures his recollections by reference to three contexts: the July Revolution and the political future of Europe, the traditions of Judaism (in the Frankfurt ghetto) and of German nationalism (in the Hambach Festival). There is little doubt that he sees himself as engaging more adequately with problems of politics and aesthetics than his critical contemporary and sparring partner. The figure of Börne is presented as simply old-fashioned, but not, Heine claims, because there is any fundamental ideological disagreement between them. No doubt there were disagreements, but Heine understands his own position as defined by his written *style*.

In turn, this commitment to a modern writing has its own tradition. At the end of the first book of *Zur Geschichte der Religion und Philosophie in Deutschland* (*On the History of Religion and Philosophy in Germany*), Heine identifies the true origin of the modern style in Luther; again and again, in other work, Luther is associated with Lessing, the great literary and critical figure of the late Enlightenment, and, surprisingly, with the classicist translator and poet Johann Heinrich Voß, in a trinity of polemical and democratic *stylists*. Such modern writing has three essential characteristics in Heine’s view. First, it addresses the material interests of the present in a way which is combative and adversarial; Romantic writing in the previous generation, on the other hand, which is *not* modern, attempts to combine the national and the religious. Modern writing, secondly, returns to classical models of decorum and genre, while its Romantic predecessor is extravagant. Finally, it is rational, individualist and sceptical. These are the qualities which have encouraged recent critics to identify Heine as a precursor and ally of modern intellectual critique. Peter Sloterdijk, in his *Critique of Cynical Reason*,⁶ endorses his modernity by aligning the modern tradition Heine defined with the representatives of his own ‘Higher Kynicism’. Sloterdijk’s allusion attempts to harness Heine to the argument of his ‘postmodernism of resistance’;⁷ and in another quarter Jürgen Habermas has claimed him for the genealogy of the post-war German intellectual. Habermas sees him, perhaps more importantly, as presenting the form in which critical distance and political commitment to questions of German identity can be established.

Modernity in turn made its own historic claims on Heinrich Heine. They are the very conditions of his life and work which bring him

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within the scope of Habermas's problematic. In the (old, pre-unification) Federal Republic of Germany several aspects of political culture made the intellectual model provided by Heine vitally relevant: the electronic media, an expanded educational sector, the uneasy relations between parties and their 'supporters', and the constant demoscopic testing of 'public opinion'. Heine's sense of distance as a critical intellectual can be specified: his years in Paris provide the occasion for his close observation of the French administrations as well as of political culture in the capital, on its streets as much as in its salons. Yet it is not only the political imperatives of the July Monarchy or 'communism' that bind him to Paris. He acknowledges the power of urban experience in his critical prose and in his decisively modern poetry. There are perhaps few moments in his work that better express his acknowledgement of this urban imperative than the structure deployed in *Ludwig Börne: eine Denkschrift (Ludwig Börne: A Memorial)*,⁸ where Paris appears as the particular site of modern politics seen from the geographical remoteness of Heligoland (in the interpolated 'Briefe aus Heligoland' ('Letters from Heligoland')) and in comparison with the provincial follies of the Hambach festival ('O land of fools, my fatherland').⁹ Paris provides a geographical focus for Heine's engagement with the themes of the city; in terms of style and tone, his critical prose and journalism make formal commitments which will finally alter the lyric register in his late poems beyond all recognition.

These changes have given rise to the claims made by moderns for and against Heine's writing ever since Nietzsche. Friedrich Nietzsche hailed Heine as his greatest predecessor in the art of German style – and in 1908 Thomas Mann emphasized that judgement.¹⁰ Although Heine's canonical authority seems secure, Mann's remarks also coincide with the earliest reflections on Heine's status by his most virulent critic, Karl Kraus. As later chapters show, Kraus's work began a critical debate about Heine which has been conducted more or less in public and to which Habermas's essay is perhaps the most recent contribution. This intense and sustained engagement with Heine as a *problem*, in the critical tradition since Kraus, as well as Heine's continuing life in contemporary poetry make it possible, now, to consider a century view of him based not on the volumes of literary scholarship and critical editions, but on the disturbance his writing continues to make in the reflexes of modernity in Germany.

A couple of years ago a colleague in a British university remarked that he could never think of anything to say about Heine's poetry. This came as a surprise since the scholar in question had no trouble writing about difficult poets like Paul Celan. Heine's simplicity and, often, brevity can

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be deceptive. In the present study I attempt to follow the logic and implications of his writing as closely as possible, and to assess it in the light of strong readings in the twentieth century. The first part of the discussion traces the critical debate about Heine in a polemical tradition which Kraus initiated. His enormous anxiety in relation to Heine's style has constantly embarrassed later Heine critics. My purpose, however, is not simply to document this aspect of a difficult reception. Rather, by tracing the development of Kraus's case, its influence on Adorno's centenary talk in 1956, and the counterclaims made for Heine by Helmut Heißenbüttel, it is possible to identify a recurring biographical impulse. Kraus and Adorno need to fix the disturbances of Heine's writing in a corresponding *personality* with whom ultimate moral responsibility lies. Heißenbüttel responds by insisting on *textual* effects, and a formal and constructivist aesthetics which he associates with the documentary and the end of lyric metaphor. This argument provides a framework in which the poetry of *Das Buch der Lieder* (*The Book of Songs*) can be reconsidered as a text directly addressing the possibility of lyric subjectivity. Heine himself plays a kind of hide-and-seek with the expectations of autobiographical reference to make his collection a compendium of forms for supposed self-expression. In a close parallel to this game with self-revelation, the *Reisebilder* or pictures of travel, which first made Heine's name, explore the material and ideological constraints imposed on literary subjectivity.

Heine finds many ways of dismantling the poetic language of selfhood. In a further investigation of the forms in which he refracts modernity for the twentieth century, I examine the serious problems his ironies and cynicism presented for the German poets who established a durable symbolist aesthetic from the turn of the century. Here, anthologies compiled by Stefan George and Rudolf Borchardt show how strongly Heine's poems simultaneously lend themselves to and resist atmospheric vagueness. Within the framework of this symbolist aesthetic, Heine's writing in *Atta Troll. Ein Sommernachtstraum* (*Atta Troll. A Summer Night's Dream*) can be seen to deploy the lyrical discourse of personality and *character* with a calculated political edge. His celebration of 'l'art pour l'art' in poetry written *for its own sake* negotiates the relationship between poetry and politics on the terrain of style and form, and so defends his own art from the encroachments of mere ideology.

The work which most fully theorizes and practises the suspension of the personal in order to maintain the political freedom of the aesthetic is the memoir of Ludwig Börne – a work which on the face of it appears to flaunt personality and private resentments more than any other. In the history

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of Heine's reception it has been, strikingly, writers who have recognized the achievements of this notorious polemic. Heine's whole strategy in the memoir quizzically and smilingly upsets every possible assumption about public authorship and personal commitment, so that *style itself* becomes the instrument of the most rigorous and scathing political analysis.

In the third part of the book, Heine's encounter with the urban political life of Paris is examined. The political journalism of *Lutetia* exploits the destabilization of metaphor, begun in *Buch der Lieder*, in order to set in play a stylish political emblematics. To borrow a phrase from Jacques Derrida, Heine the famously 'elusive poet' derives the strength of his encounter with Paris and Parisian politics from 'knowing how not to be there'. Heine's other great encounter with Paris is conducted in verse, in the poems of *Romanzero* and his later poems of 1853 and 1854, and in posthumous collections. In examining this mature work, I first return to Adorno's claim that Heine did not achieve 'archetypes of modernity' of the kind created by his younger contemporary Charles Baudelaire; and then, following a hint in one of Adorno's letters to Walter Benjamin, I consider the ways in which Heine's late poetry very precisely articulates his relationship to modernity understood as the disruption of tradition.

Tradition disrupted continues to define the experience of modernity for the older generation of German poets writing at the moment. Here an epilogue considers the vitality of Heine's legacy in the verse of Peter Rühmkorf, Günter Kunert and Wolf Biermann. Heine emerges as a poet confronting modernity because he engages so profoundly with history, and does so at the point where he is most vulnerable and most exposed – in the secular defeat of poetry itself.