Berlin cobweb. The late Heine: Jewish wisdom, Hegelianism

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Heine’s particularism of non-belonging is in conflict with Hegelian universalism, which is questioned by his very Jewish wisdom. Hegel tried to show that philosophy is expressive of the identity between reality and thought, including the identity between man and thought, and so Hegel’s views came close to the Christian self-consciousness which ‘superseded’ the Jewish attitude which maintained the hiatus between man and God. This philosophy expressed an urge toward totality, incorporating all that is different into a single universal system. At this point, the philosopher’s background prevailed, and his judgement was prompted by the traditional rejection of Judaism.

It is clear that Heine’s Jewish wisdom can do little to remedy this fundamental wrong. On the contrary, it keeps old wounds open by voicing the bodily conscience discussed in Chapter II. It thus gives access to a knowledge capable of turning history into a different meaning. Heine argues that the idealistic trend of Hegel’s thought has made it senseless in a diasporic mode of life. He on his part needs a language of concreteness which speaks of finitude, rupture, and exile. Heine holds that savageness and suffering are characteristic of his world. We live in disorder, that is to say, in a world where good does not triumph. Neither God nor human institutions intervene to contest or right injustice. Those who are just are left to struggle and suffer with a justice which has no sense of victory. It is precisely from this sense of abandonment that a non-philosophical notion of God re-emerges. The distinctly Jewish sense of suffering which follows upon the struggle against injustice brings an intimate retrograde to a God who can be spoken to without always being in his debt. Heine’s ‘God-talk’ roots in his pride of being part of Jewish history. In living and suffering, one testifies to the divine. This faith refuses to resign itself to the world’s injustice. It continues to fight. The intimacy of Heine’s retrograde is therefore a conflicted one. For what relationship is closer, or more intimate, than the one in which the writer on behalf of ‘the people’ can demand of, reproach, rebel against, and cry out to someone absent?

The Ahasverian tenor can be seen as the concentration of that understanding. In between symbolic themes, ideologies, and significations, then, the poet introduces an ‘asocial’ element into civil order. Heine’s writing succeeds in transforming the writer’s inability to exit his historical status as a Germanizing Jew, perennially suspended in that displacement of the Wandering Jew between old and new, past and future, into that very option by which he can take the original measure of his roving and recover each time the meaning of this writing, according to the insight that it is only ‘outside’ that fundamental

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1 A concise survey of characteristic prejudices in Cruciger (i.e. Fr. H. von der Hagen, 1780-1856), Neueste Wanderungen, Umtriebe und Abenteuer des Ewigen Juden unter den Namen Börne, Heine, Saphir u.a. Zum Besten der Aristalten gegen die St. Simonie ans Licht gestellt von Cruciger, Berlin 1832.
problems become visible, and that it is his writing, at the furthest point of compatibility, which makes visible the real difference.

Contaminated Romanticism, therefore, is an alien element stressing the distinctiveness of poetry and, as such, an ‘eerie’ response to intolerable disillusionment with post-revolutionary life. The exceptional is the basis of social criticism, as it is made clear in what may be considered Heine’s amazingly imaginative sketch of a Preface to a French translation of ‘Bimini’. In this short yet dense fragment, probably dating from the end of 1852, Heine’s ‘I’ takes the guise of a young Lapp poet in exile. Lapland is the extreme northern tip of the Russian empire, and, the critical observer continues,

the distinguished and wealthy Laplanders suffering from giddiness are wont to travel to Saint Petersburg, in search of the enjoyments a southern climate would offer them. Among many of these ailing exiles, physical distress joins up with all those moral maladies European civilization is inflicting on them. And that is why they are dealing with politics and religion at present. They read the Petersburg Soirees, which they held to be a useful manual, a guide to this capital; it yet informs them that the foothold of bourgeois society is the executioner. After all, their reaction is not long in coming, and from De Maistre’s executionism they are prompt to jump to harshest communism; they declare all reindeer and seals to be State property, they read Hegel and become atheists. But as their spinal paralysis increases, they gently give in and turn to lachrymose pietism. (DHA III/1, 387-8)

Amid those ‘ailing exiles’ is also the poet whom we may identify as the author of ‘Bimini’.

In this miniature self-portrait, the late Heine sums up the essentials of his authorship. We learn that he had to go into exile because of ‘malady’, we see that poetry means otherness, peculiarity, we read about bodily conscience, radicalizing Hegelianism, revolutionism, atheism, and the contrary potential of Jewish wisdom, and we are confronted with the schlemihl Meyerbeer/Faibisch, whose hurdy-gurdy invalidates poetic pretentiousness once again. But what strikes us in particular is the fact that for all his miseries he dies ‘poetically’, that is, according to his own standards, voiced by an ‘I’, a self-stylized, self-dramatized instance which is presented out of biography and poetic licence, and staged as the suspension of commonplace and convention:

Among the maladies to which the Laplanders are exposed who travel to Saint Petersburg in search of the mildness a southern climate would offer them, poetry ranks as well. It is owing to such a contagion that we have the following poem. The writer is a young Lapp, who emigrated to Saint Petersburg because of spinal cord paralysis. There he died quite a long time ago. He was highly talented, he was on friendly terms with the capital’s elite, and he was actively engaged in German philosophy, which brought him on the verge of atheism. It was an heavenly act of
singular grace which saved him from this mental peril; even before he died he came to divine wisdom. His brothers in disbelief were scandalized; all the high clergy of atheism cried out an anathema on this renegade in ungodliness. Meanwhile, his bodily miseries increased, his finances decreased, and those few reindeer amounting to his fortune were soon finished up one after the other. In hospital, the poet’s last resort, he spoke to one of the two friends who had remained faithful to him: “Farewell! I leave this world, where money and intrigue are reigning. There is just this one thing which grieved me: I saw that money and intrigue also allow people to attain the renown of being a genius, and to be feted accordingly, not just by some nonentities, but by the brightest, by all contemporaries, up to the remotest corners of the earth.” At this moment, a hurdy-gurdy was tootling under the window of the hospital. It was playing *Gilt Chimeras*, that famous tune by Meyerbeer. The patient thereupon smiled, he veiled his head, and he died. (DHA III/1, 388-9)

Despite the manifest role of Jewish wisdom in Heine’s articulations of otherness, the innovative nature of his examinations cannot, and must not, be ignored. In the light of the challenge to tradition which appeared in the modern period, it would be impossible for this wisdom to retain vitality unless it combined its fidelity to the past with an ability to react creatively to post-revolutionary disillusionment. In lieu of a legal, ‘halakhic’ commitment, consequently, wisdom is established through the ‘haggadic’ loyalty of the schlemihl. The schlemihl shows that it is impossible not to remain a Jew. Under the cloak of otherness, his heroism in despising that he is despised surpasses the virtues of civilization. Though he was made contemptible, he did not cease to exhibit as his Jewish wisdom such precious treasures as his contemporaries of less profound experience could not bring forth.