



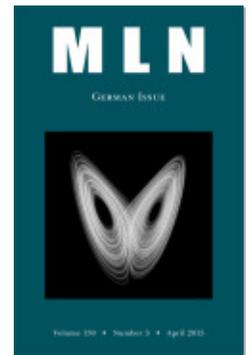
PROJECT MUSE®

Heinrich Heine Writes about His Life

Liliane Weissberg

MLN, Volume 122, Number 3, April 2007 (German Issue), pp. 563-572
(Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press
DOI: [10.1353/mln.2007.0071](https://doi.org/10.1353/mln.2007.0071)



➔ For additional information about this article

<http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/mln/summary/v122/122.3weissberg.html>

Heinrich Heine Writes About His Life



Liliane Weissberg

I. Phantom Wounds

None of Heinrich Heine's (1797–1856) manuscripts suffered as much speculation or provoked as much anticipation during his lifetime as his projected memoirs, which he pursued over many decades. Indeed, already in 1823 the young Berlin law student who attended Hegel's lectures was eager to apply these lessons to a vision of his own life. In those years, Heine describes his life as “tumultuous” on the outside and “dark” and dreamlike on the inside. He writes to his Jewish friend Immanuel Wohlwill,

Yes, *amice*, I had great luck; just as I left the philosophical lecture hall, and entered the circus of worldly affairs, I could construct my life philosophically, and I can look at it objectively now—even though I lack that higher calm and contemplation that would be necessary for a clear rendering of a large theater of life.¹

Heine calls this project his *Bekanntnisse*² in an allusion to Rousseau's *Confessions*, but quickly abandons the title for the sake of other alternatives. Years later Heine takes up the concept of confessions again and this time translates it into the more legal term *Geständnisse*.³ The

¹Heinrich Heine, letter to Immanuel Wohlwill, Berlin, 7 April 1823, *Heinrich Heine*, eds. Norbert Altenhofer in cooperation with Rosemarie Altenhofer, 3 vols. *Dichter über ihre Dichtungen* Ser. 8 (Munich: Heimeran, 1971) III:18. All translations are my own.

²Heine, letter to Ludwig Robert, Lüneburg, 27 November 1823, *Heinrich Heine*, III:19.

³See Heine, “Les aveux d'un poète.” The text appeared September 1854. Compare *Heinrich Heine*, III:34, n. 44.

Geständnisse, authored in the 1850s, were to preface his observations on Germany and were intended to counter Mme. de Stael's *De l'Allemagne*, as well as celebrate his own arrival in Paris two decades earlier.⁴ But these *Geständnisse* would also speak of the distance Heine had traveled from his early discipleship of Hegel to embrace a less "abstract" philosophy and affirm a newly regained sense of religion.

In 1823, however, Heine's *Bekenntnisse* had not yet taken that turn. Instead, he was eager to remove from them any personal considerations and to turn them into a picture of his times; he intended to include portraits of relatives and friends. Thus, Heine soon uses the term *Memoiren*⁵ and claims to have begun a work that would not only counter Rousseau's famous confessions but also Goethe's autobiography. Heine wanted not only to write about his times, but to invent a new genre of life-writing that would be appropriate for a new age. Memories, not confessions, were called for, that is, a picture of the times, not just the inner life of an individual. This genre would also imply the introduction of a French tradition into the world of German letters.

Heine's work seems to have progressed well, even though he wrote in fits and spurts. In 1837, over a decade after he began his autobiography and a few years after his move to Paris, Heine reports to his Hamburg publisher Julius Campe about his work. The story of his life had already turned into an "extensive work" that would be ready for perusal soon and would constitute not just a simple descriptive narrative or *Lebensbeschreibung*,⁶ but an extensive novel or *Roman*. "Day and night I labor over my great project," Heine writes, "and work on the novel of my life."⁷

He refers to his book with similar exuberance in letters to his friend Giacomo Meyerbeer. By 1838, Heine was once again preoccupied with his financial situation, which had remained precarious since his father's bankruptcy years earlier. Meyerbeer was to help him negotiate a yearly pension from his uncle, the wealthy Hamburg banker Salomon

⁴See Alfred Meißner, September 1850, *Heinrich Heine*, III:33–34, and Heinrich Heine, *Historisch-Kritische Gesamtausgabe der Werke*, 16 vols., eds. Manfred Windfuhr et al. (Hamburg: Hoffmann und Campe, 1973–97) XV:121–75. I will hereafter refer to this edition as *HKG* in the text and in the notes. Roman numerals designate the volume number and arabic numerals the page number.

⁵Heine, letter to Moses Moser, 11 January 1825, *Heinrich Heine*, III:20.

⁶Heine, letter to Julius Campe, 3 May 1837, *Heinrich Heine*, III:22.

⁷*HKG*, letter to Campe, 17 March 1837, *Heinrich Heine*, III:20. In regard to the naming of his manuscript, and its history, see also *HKG*, XV:1017–59.

Heine, who had assumed responsibility for his brother's family.⁸ In the following years, Heine mentions his work off and on again in letters to his sister Charlotte and to friends and business acquaintances,⁹ but his uncle, too, was well aware of his project, and anxious that Heine would protect the family name. After Salomon Heine's death in 1844, Heine's memoirs became instrumental in negotiations concerning his future pension payments. Salomon Heine did not leave a note regarding future pension payments in his will, and his son, Heine's cousin Carl, refused to honor the full amount of the pre-established payments. Indeed, he was only willing to issue a pension if Heine's memoirs were first sent to him for review, should they contain any reference to or biographical remarks about his late uncle.¹⁰

Although Heine would protest this form of "family censorship,"¹¹ an agreement was finally reached and his pension restored, as once again the author seemed to have been willing to meet the family's concerns about its reputation. This does not mean, however, that he abandoned his autobiographical project. Friends and visitors like Levin Schücking, Heinrich Laube, and Alfred Meißner would continue to ask Heine about his work and received similar answers: Heine was working on his memoirs.¹² First suspicions arose, however, in regard to the manuscript's existence. In 1846, Laube writes:

I should note today that the above mentioned memoirs had seemed to me a kind of myth then. I felt that Heine was talking quite too often and diligently about these memoirs [*Denkwürdigkeiten*], and he clothed himself in them a bit like Santa Claus, who would promise sweets to the pious children and the rod to the disobedient ones; quite like a kind of Zeus, the collector of clouds, who would lord over literary disputes and promise to offer beneficial rain or destructive lightning—according to everyone's merit in respect to Jove's altars.¹³

⁸Heine, letter to Giacomo Meyerbeer, 24 March 1838, *Heinrich Heine*, III:24.

⁹See, for example, Heine's letters to Charlotte Embden, 29 December 1844, *Heinrich Heine*, III: 25; Ferdinand Friedland, 18 July 1838, *Heinrich Heine*, III:25; and Johann Hermann Detmold, 9 January 1845, *Heinrich Heine*, III:25.

¹⁰See Heine's letter Johann Hermann Detmold, 9 January 1845, *Heinrich Heine*, III:25–26, esp. 26.

¹¹Heine, letter to Campe, 4 February 1845, *Heinrich Heine*, III:28.

¹²See Levin Schücking (Spring 1846), Heinrich Laube (late March, 1847), and Meißner (May 1847), cited in: *Heinrich Heine*, III:30–31. The statements appeared first in *Gespräche mit Heine*, collected and edited by Heinrich Hubert Houben (Frankfurt am Main: Rütten und Loening, 1926) 505–06, 568, and 590.

¹³Schücking, Spring 1846, *Heinrich Heine*, III:30; also in *Gespräche mit Heine*, 505–06.

After his auto-da-fé of family letters and manuscripts in 1849 and 1850, Heine claimed that parts of his memoirs were also burnt,¹⁴ but curiously enough the manuscript continued to grow. Once again, Heine was wavering between the titles of *Memoiren* and *Bekennnisse*, and in further letters to his friends, he claims to be able to fill at least three, and perhaps even four, volumes, much to the delight of his publisher.¹⁵ While Carl Heine was willing to pay a pension for Heine's silence, Campe was considering a higher advance for Heine's poetry so that he could secure the publication rights for his memoirs as well.¹⁶

And there was reason for Campe's anticipation because, at times, these memoirs would gain a curious notoriety. In carefully placed newspaper articles, the public was made aware of the author's familial quarrels and his exchanges with other writers or personalities, all of which would be described in detail in his forthcoming memoirs. Most of these articles were either written by Heine himself or initiated by him and penned by close friends.¹⁷ Thus, Heine's memoirs seemed to have changed in quality again, if not in spirit. What had first been thought of as a Hegelian contemplation would perhaps turn into a literary masterpiece or, more likely, a literary scandal.

Heine was well aware of the public's eagerness to read his text. Thus, Alfred Meißner writes regarding his visit to the poet:

He pointed to a little box which was placed on top of a closet just opposite his bed, and suddenly, he continued, newly revived: "Just look, right there! There are my memoirs, and I collect in them grotesque portraits, frightful silhouettes. Some know about my little box and tremble that I would open it, and their behavior wavers between frozenness and anxious anticipation, or they conduct a war against me, in a clandestine manner, via unimportant subjects and literary helpers. In this little box, there lies a great but in no way final triumph."¹⁸

This triumph could be viewed but not read. Here, too, the memoirs would function, not as a text, but an object enclosed and encased in a chest. The box was not to be opened, only pointed to.

After Heine's death, his memoirs seem to have been transferred

¹⁴ See Heine's letter to Ludwig Kalisch, 20 January 1850, *Heinrich Heine*, III:32. Compare also to Campe's letter to Heine, quoted in *Heinrich Heine*, III:37, n.52.

¹⁵ Cited by Meißner, September 1850, *Heinrich Heine*, III:33–34; also in *Gespräche mit Heine*, 673.

¹⁶ Gustav Heine, 19 July 1851, *Heinrich Heine*, III:35; also in *Gespräche mit Heine*, 804.

¹⁷ See *HKG*, XV:1049–55.

¹⁸ Cited by Meißner, early August 1854, *Heinrich Heine*, III:38; also in *Gespräche mit Heine*, 900.

from the little box to the closet itself. His widow Mathilde was known to open it to visitors, to point at a large manuscript of about six-hundred pages or more, and even to hand eager prospective readers the first pages, which were marked with Heine's well-known penciled script. But did he not employ secretaries in the last years of his life? The first page of the manuscript was entitled, *Memoiren*. But before the visitor would be able to read any further, Mathilde would call him to dinner, "But now, on to the table, the soup will be cold!" and quickly close the closet where the manuscript would remain—at least, metaphorically—until after her death.¹⁹

II. Winter Tales

Today scholars doubt whether a substantial, multi-volume memoir ever existed as anything other than a subject of negotiations with relatives, publishers, or even friends. In Heine's time, and shortly after his death, his relatives were bound by family considerations as well as eager to speculate. "It may be possible," writes Heine's niece Maria Embden, "that Heine had told his friends about his memoirs; that he had bound together a pile of papers and labeled it 'My Memoirs' [*Meine Memoiren*] only to tease people after his death and lead them astray."²⁰ If Heine was often talking about the "wounds" that were inflicted on him by others—and even by "Germany" itself²¹—his memoirs not only offered up phantom wounds, but became a weapon themselves to traumatize relatives and friends, and they drew money, if not blood.

In many ways, Heine's *Memoiren* can be considered his most successful work. It granted Heine a life-long pension, followed by a life-long pension for his widow, and favorable terms with his publisher for himself and his wife after his death. It also created an eager audience that awaited Heine's further works like stages of a denouement. Each of Heine's poems, each of his published fragments would point to the not-yet-published memoirs as a cliffhanger of sorts. And although the memoirs remained unpublished for a long time, readers were not left

¹⁹ *HKG*, XV:1057–58.

²⁰ Maria Embden, Spring 1854, *Heinrich Heine*, III:37; also in *Gespräche mit Heine*, 886–87.

²¹ Heine's descriptions of his "Judenschmerz" [Jewish pain] and the "wound" caused by Germany are widely discussed, see, for example, Walter Hinck's study *Die Wunde Deutschland: Heinrich Heines Dichtung im Widerstreit von Nationalidee, Judentum und Antisemitismus* (Frankfurt: Insel, 1990). See also Jan-Christoph Hauschild, "Die Wunden Heines," *Aufklärung und Skepsis: Internationaler Heine-Kongress 1997 zum 200. Geburtstag*, eds. Joseph A. Kruse, Bernd Witte, and Karin Füllner (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1999) 71–85.

starving. They could already gather facts about Heine's life in many of his other published works—such as the *Ideen: Das Buch Le Grand* or his *Börne-Denkschrift*.²² One can consider Heine's commodification of a non-existing manuscript as a coup of public relations and a further sign of his thoroughly modern attitude towards his work. But the pattern of Heine's commodification is a familiar one. Like Scheherazade in the *Arabian Nights*, Heine enacted a tale of deferral, keeping himself alive as a poet by assuming a publication that would never take place.

When a brief manuscript that could have been considered a memoir was found among his posthumous papers after Mathilde Heine's death, Campe and the editor of the *Gartenlaube*, Adolf Kröner, were able to buy it finally for the large sum of sixteen-thousand francs. It was published as Heine's *Memoiren* in that journal in 1884.²³ But the manuscript itself does not bear any title, and it contains Heine's brief reflections on his childhood only. The text includes sketches of his parents, teachers, and first love and leaves the author at age sixteen—not yet a law student, or a resident of Paris, or a famous man.

Still, the text shows an uncanny relationship not to the content of the memoirs, as Heine had described them, but to his use of them. In this text, we meet the child Heine in the attic in his uncle's house, named the "Arche Noah." For Heine, this attic room displayed a fantastical world of objects, including his mother's cradle, his grandfather's ornamental sword (*Galanteriedegen*), and his grandmother's stuffed parrot.²⁴ A stuffed parrot may be just a stuffed parrot, but then again it may not. In the "Bäder von Lucca," Heine would write:

What is the human being! One goes for a walk merrily outside the Altonaer Tor on the Hamburger Berg and looks at the sights: the lions, the birds, the papagoyim, the monkeys, the remarkable people [*ausgezeichneten Menschen*], and one uses the carousel or lets oneself have electricity run through one's body, and one thinks how much fun one would have had in a place two hundred miles away from Hamburg in the country where lemons and oranges bloom, in Italy!²⁵

"Papagoyim," of course, is not only a pun uniting parrots [*Papageien*] and *goyim*, but also a reference to Altona's synagogue, located in the Papgoyenstrasse. What may the stuffed parrot in the attic imply?

²² See *HKG*, XV:1018.

²³ *HKG*, XV:1059.

²⁴ *HKG*, XV:70.

²⁵ Heine, "Die Bäder von Lucca," *HKG*, VII/1: 92.

Most intriguing, however, was a notebook left behind by his great uncle, Simon de Geldern, which Heine describes as “the best and most valuable treasure that I had found in these dusty boxes.”²⁶ This notebook would prove to hold information about his great uncle’s life of foreign travels, successes at foreign courts, and adventures with beautiful women once rescued from its hiding place:

My great uncle . . . must have been a strange holy man. He received the name the Oriental [*Der Morgenländer*] because he had traveled extensively in the Orient and had always clothed himself in oriental garb upon his return.

He seems to have spent the longest time in the coastal towns of North Africa, namely the Moroccan States, where a Portuguese man taught him to forge swords, and he pursued this craft with much luck.

He made a pilgrimage to Jerusalem, and, on Mount Moriah, in the intensity of prayer, he had a vision. But what did he see? He told no one. (*HKG*, XV:71)

Up in the attic, Heine encounters the notebook of his great uncle, the armorer, but does not really have to read his notebook to learn about his life. Like a folk song, this relative’s life story is traded by his relatives—“about whom the old women had always so much to sing and tell” (*HKG*, XV:71); and even beyond his death, and beyond the written text, this relative would still keep his secret:

From the great uncle’s notebook, I could not discern much with certainty; perhaps as a precaution it was written in Arabic, Syrian, and Coptic letters, but he included strangely enough a number of French quotations, and quite often, for example, the verse: “Où l’innocence périt c’est un crime de vivre.” I was struck by some of his statements, also written in French; that language seemed to have been the common idiom of the writer. (*HKG*, XV:72)

Here, Heine seems to misremember and performs a curious form of acculturation. The manuscript survived, and while it, indeed, bears the above quotation from Claude Guimond de la Touche’s *Iphigénie*, the common idiom of the text is not French but Hebrew—and Heine’s citation of his great uncle’s manuscript is thus a reference to the Papagoyenstrasse as well.

Heine describes his great uncle as a very human figure but also a charlatan, who appears again and again in the dreams of his youth, leading the young boy to identify with the older “Oriental double”

²⁶ *HKG*, XV:71.

(*morgenländischen Doppelgänger*, *HKG*, XV:73). And indeed, much of the great uncle's attraction is already contained in the designation *Morgenländer* that provides de Geldern with his fairy-tale flair, a foreign, exotic aura that could hardly be captured again. If Heine can remember it, it is only because of its familiar unfamiliarity.

Indeed, it is shortly after the discussion of *Morgenländer* that Heine proceeds to reflect on his own name. He was called Harry upon birth due to his father's business relationship with an English textile dealer. Heine seemed to have eschewed this name as a signature for his poetry. His early poems are just signed "H. Heine." After the completion of his legal studies and his conversion to Protestantism, Heine assumes the German name "Heinrich," and later in France he was known as "Henri" (a name that would turn him into a "Mr. Un rien," *HKG*, XV:84). But only in these brief reflections about his youth would Heine write about his early discomfort with his name. "Only now, as I am no longer among the living, and therefore all social vanity has ceased to exist in my soul, I can talk about it without embarrassment," remarks the author, treating his text already as a posthumous one and writing from beyond the grave (*HKG*, XV:84–85). The English sound of "Harry" implies foreignness and a culture of commerce, but that was not at the root of Heine's discomfort with his name, nor was it the fact that "Harry" would constitute a popular choice as a secular name for the Hebrew Chaim. Instead, Heine relates the following anecdote:

Now I can talk without any shyness of the mishap that was related to my name "Harry" and has darkened and poisoned the most beautiful spring days of my life.

The story is the following. In my home town, there lived a man who was called "Dirty Mike" (*der Dreckmichel*), because he walked the streets every morning with his cart, to which a donkey was hitched. He stood still in front of every house. There, girls had swept garbage together in dainty heaps, and he would load it onto his cart and transport it to the garbage dump outside town. The man looked like his job, and the donkey, who looked just like his master, stood still in front of each house or continued to trot on, just as Mike formed the sound of the word "Harrüh!" with which he called upon it. (*HKG*, XV:85)

To his school friends, Harry became "Harrüh," and they teased Heine endlessly about donkeys. They started inventing riddles such as the following:

For example, one asked the other: "What is the difference between the zebra and the donkey of Balaam, the son of Beor?" The answer was: "One talks Zebrew, and the other talked Hebrew." Afterwards, the question followed: "How does one distinguish the Dirty Mike's donkey from its namesake?" and the impertinent answer was: "We don't know how." (*HKG*, XV:85–86)

III. Differences

Clearly, Heine had received the wrong name. The difference between Harry and the donkey seemed too small, while the closeness between Heine and the *Morgenländer* was invisible to most.

Heine's memoirs, kept in his box, unread, unreadable, and perhaps not even existent, would certainly provide a link that would connect a German poet, writing in France, with his French-writing ancestor in Germany. The memoir's secrets, moreover, may be more important than the text; the unwritten memoir would thus not only be instrumental but also self-descriptive, a Heine portrait in its silent, non-exposing way. Didn't the *Morgenländer* have a vision in Jerusalem, the holy city, but would decline to tell what it was? Would it be correct, perhaps, to view one's life as such a vision?

And here, ironically, the story assumes an unexpected twist—unexpectedly, perhaps, even for Heine himself. Because long after Heine had created his name, Heinrich, and assumed his status as Heinrich Heine, the poet and author of a famous, soon-to-be-published memoir, he discovered a secret not only enclosed in a box on top of his closet but also in his very name. The name "Harry" turned into a memoir of sorts. Alfred Meißner relates the following visit to Heine in summer 1850:

One day, I found Heine in the best of spirits, highly entertained by a book he had just been reading which lay upon his bed. One would not have thought of this book as an entertaining and amusing one usually, I would think, because it was none other than good old Tacitus.²⁷

Heine, we may remember, was already committed to his *Matratzen-gruft*, his tomb-like bed, and his reading of a Latin book should have evoked memories of his school years in a Jesuit institution rather than simple laughter. But as Meißner continues, he relates Harry's return to the *Morgenland*:

²⁷Meißner, "Heine Erinnerungen," *Begegnungen mit Heine: Berichte der Zeitgenossen*, ed. Michael Werner, 2 vols. (Hamburg: Hoffmann und Campe, 1973) II:171.

“Do you know,” he asked me, laughing still, “do you know the curious history that this dark Roman relates of the origin of the Jewish people? Never, never have I encountered a more vicious *pasquill!* Just imagine, this person proposes that the Jewish people, whom he calls, by the way, *genus hominum absurdum atque sordidum*, had descended from the lepers, and that they worship a donkey in their temple as a God.” . . . The pleasure that Heine derived from this story did not seem to end. Again and again he repeated: “a donkey in a temple!” and shook with laughter.²⁸

University of Pennsylvania

²⁸ *Ibid.* II:171, 173.