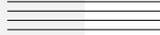


# O U R L E G A C Y

O N F R E E D O M A N D E X I L E I N  
H E I N R I C H H E I N E ' S W O R L D A N D I N O U R S



F R I T Z S T E R N

*Translated by Jeffrey L. Sammons*

*This text is a slightly shortened version of the Willy Brandt Lecture of 2015, which the New York historian Fritz Stern gave at Humboldt University in Berlin at the invitation of the Federal Chancellor Willy Brandt Foundation.*

At a memorial service organized by the Austrian Socialists for Willy Brandt in the chapel of the United Nations in New York, on 10 November 1992, I quoted Heinrich Heine. (When the organ played the “Internationale” at the close of the ceremony, tears almost came to my eyes.) Just the evening before I had found by chance some words by Heine that fit Brandt very well: “It is a peculiar thing about patriotism, about real love of the fatherland. One can love one’s fatherland while living to be eighty years old, and have never known it; but then one must have stayed at home. One does not perceive the nature of the springtime until winter, and next to the stove one composes the best May songs. The love of freedom is a dungeon flower, and one feels the value of freedom only in prison. Thus the love of the German fatherland begins only at the German border, primarily upon the sight of German misfortune from abroad.” Heine continued, “However, the Ger-

man patriotism I mentioned earlier consisted in hatred of the French, hatred of civilization and liberalism.”

Please allow me two confessions: first, I am a historian and not a German literary scholar, but since my childhood I have loved Heine. And second, exile and the love of freedom are not foreign themes to me; they have marked my life. When I was a child under National Socialism, the forbidden freedom was a burning dream, and the dungeon was a lethal metaphor. National Socialism for me meant heartless bellowing and violence, fear of truncheons and torture, horrors in the shadow of which I grew up.

When I was a child in Paris in the winter of 1933–34, my father was already reading Heine to me over and over, and, at my request, especially from *Germany, a Winter's Tale*. After those brief months in Paris came four more years back home in Breslau, where Heine became a secret refuge. But there were other travels in Europe: France, England, Denmark, Holland, and Switzerland. In this Europe I discovered a world that was not German and that seemed to me intact, a world in which I felt well.

Then in the fall of 1938 came a new beginning when our family moved to the United States. The country was still in economic distress and being shaken up by Franklin Roosevelt, who appeared to us as the bearer of hope for the democratic world. Already, in 1933, he had recognized the danger of Hitler's Germany, very much sooner than the statesmen of Germany's neighbors. Parting from Germany was easy for me; my homeland had been expropriated, lost. America was that blessed child of Europe that still kept itself in “splendid isolation.” Today, some Americans, threatened by new terrors, are apparently ready to exchange bits of their freedom for a supposed security, but the country still has the strength for reform, for reconsiderations; I see signs of reason amid the bleak decline. Usually exile includes a hope of return – but not for me. To be sure, I have never separated myself from Europe, and the Atlantic Ocean for me is not a boundary, but a connection. Instead of a physical return to Europe I found in friendships a cherished substitute, so I have the good fortune, I think, to be at home in two worlds and two languages.

Heinrich Heine was born in 1797, in French-occupied Düsseldorf, in the middle of the French Revolution, in which freedom (*liberté*) was the great hope, when the new *code civil* was to usher

in the rule of law, when a mere subject could rise to being a *citoyen*. As a child Heine experienced this great Revolution, and later he came to regard the French occupation of the Rhineland as a liberation. A French drum major was quartered with his family, and with his own eyes he witnessed Napoleon's festive entrance into Düsseldorf in 1811. He saw him as the herald of freedom, but nevertheless detested his tyranny. Soon after seeing the emperor, Heine wrote his hymn to him, the "Two Grenadiers," which Robert Schumann set to music and made immortal.

Napoleon, the world-historical genius on horseback, the "idea become a person," appeared as the exemplar of the Revolution and embodied in his imperial self-coronation the end of a narrowly ranked class society and the promise of free upward mobility. What a moment that Revolution had been! Joy and revulsion were the contrasting reactions. William Wordsworth rejoiced: "Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive, but to be young was very heaven." It was as though one had been suddenly liberated from the medieval constraint, from priestly rule, as though people, to quote Kant, had freed themselves from their "self-imposed nonage."

Wordsworth came to regret his intoxication, as many Germans did, too, who in the beginning had yielded joyfully to the liberation. Heine, on the other hand, remained true to the *tricolore*. For him Waterloo was the end of political hope, the Bourbon Restoration a miserable effort to reinstate the past. All Europe, he wrote, was now a St. Helena, and fear of revolution dominated the governments of the Holy Alliance. It was a time "of the great hunting down of liberal ideas; the great rulers are ever more zealous, their uniformed huntsmen shoot at every honest heart into which liberal ideas may have fled, and there is no lack of learned dogs to drag the bleeding word around as good plunder."

Heine: a blest poet! How he enriched the German spirit with his *Book of Songs*. Even only the first lines will refresh our memory: "Ich weiß nicht, was soll es bedeuten" (I don't know what it means), "Ich grolle nicht" (I'll not complain), "Im wunderschönen Monat Mai" (In May, the magic month of May). A new tone sounded in his *Harz Journey*, 1826:

I will climb up on the mountains  
Where dark firs are soaring high,

Brooks are purling, birds are singing,  
Stately cloudbanks sailing by.

Fare you well, you polished salons,  
Polished sirs and dames, adieu!  
I will climb up on the mountains  
And laugh down at all of you.

[trans. Hal Draper, *The Complete Poems of Heinrich Heine*]

But he was not only laughing; Heine was often mocking, hurtful, angry. He mourned the injured freedom.

The Revolution had given Jews equal rights. But Heine, born a Jew, felt himself to be an outsider; even after his baptism in 1824, which he famously called the “entrance ticket to European culture,” he could never part from Jewish themes, Jewish idiosyncrasies, Jewish wit, and caustic self-caricature. Between Heine and the anti-Semites there was the deepest enmity – though anti-Semites could easily have appropriated for their cause some of Heine’s caricatures.

A great lyricist, and also a poet and profound thinker who sought to understand – and to censure – his world, who loved freedom passionately, hated oppression and censorship, and continually pilloried the Germans’ servility, what he called their “sleepy-headedness” and “Teutomania,” with wit, jeers, and diabolical rage. He thought of himself as a child of the Enlightenment and the Revolution, and as a European. In 1824 he lamented the death of Lord Byron, to whom he felt uniquely close (he called him “my cousin”), whose bold poetry he valued, and whose wild way of life he perhaps envied. Byron, too, had gone into exile, a frequent fate of that time. Goethe, on the other hand, was no “cousin”; on the contrary, Heine regretted Goethe’s attachment to the *ancien régime* and his Olympian hauteur, and also thought that Goethe didn’t like him. He may well have been right about that, though it hardly excuses his comment that one can learn much from Goethe, but not manliness. Kindliness was not in Heine’s character.

Heine’s letters bear witness to the depth of his European feelings, to his desire to write European poems. He journeyed in Poland, England, Holland, and Italy, and wrote his famous *Travel Pictures*. Art, particularly music, politics, and intellectual life:

these were themes he addressed without pedantry in works he hoped would reach the new bourgeois public. He gave Europe a wealth of new impressions, processed with a European's deep, broad knowledge: it was not for nothing that he had been a student in Göttingen, and in Berlin a pupil of Hegel and August Wilhelm Schlegel. He moved fluently and easily from idea to idea, speaking of the "association of ideas" as we speak of a stream of consciousness. His understanding of dreams was a further sign of his modernity: "These nightly apparitions truly have as much reality as those raw elements of the day which we can touch without hands and with which we not infrequently soil ourselves. Yes, it was in a dream that I saw that sweet creature who of all in the world made me happiest." Freudian thoughts, pure and clear. He wrote of unrequited love and yearned to love. Like Byron and Shelley he hoped for a free, liberal world in which people could already be happy – and adieu to renunciation and superstition.

A newer song, a better song,  
 My friends, let's bring to birth now!  
 We shall proceed right here to build  
 The Kingdom of Heaven on earth now.

[trans. Draper]

And, to be sure, a kingdom of free, open sensuality, free of lies and fig leaves, of old Christian morality. He felt himself to be "a good soldier in the liberation struggle of mankind."

Heine had a serious, even reverential side. His whole life long he loved his mother, Betty, who believed in him. And Shakespeare remained for him the greatest of all human beings. With the severe overlord, the dear God, he had a shifting relationship, in the end probably acknowledging his existence but also complaining, especially in his last years, of the "mattress grave" to which God consigned him and let him suffer. With his contemporaries he also had shifting relationships: some remained lifelong friends, like the writer-diplomat Varnhagen von Ense and the satirist Karl Immermann. But there also could be breaches, as when he wrote a brutal diatribe against his erstwhile friend Ludwig Börne. He remained loyal to his enemies.

"I developed enmities that never left me; these friends remain true to me to this day. I believe my Teutomaniacal enemies would

vouch that I never wavered, never spared anyone, and never asked to be spared. I fought them honorably in all their disguises, and I fought well, and in high spirits." On occasion Heine lost all measure of discretion and was anything but honorable – as, for example, in his feud with Count Platen, in whom he claimed to see nothing but pederasty.

Heine wrote his most beautiful poems in both glorious high spirits and deepest sorrow, and this was true from the beginning, despite his early successes and his trust in his publisher and comrade in arms, Julius Campe. He had no secure income – he was dependent on his very rich uncle Salomon – and the Germans' "national servility" was deeply odious to him. He suffered under Prussian censorship, too, but he knew that the worst censorship is self-censorship, to which occasionally he succumbed himself. (In today's world we should be mindful of how wretched self-censorship is.) How he could thrash the German world and its sentimental prudery and hypocrisy.

As long as Heine lived in Germany he thought repeatedly of exile, although he knew that being German "is for me like water for the fish." Then, in July 1830, came the unexpected news of the revolution in Paris, where in three days the oppressor Charles X was driven off, and with the help of the old liberal hero the Marquis de Lafayette, the bourgeois King Louis Philippe ascended the throne. Old childhood feelings arose: in Paris there was triumph while at home "all thirty-six German kings lost their heads, and I finally became fearful of these headless apparitions." He was drawn to Paris, then the capital of European culture.

He gave up other hopes, such as for a professorship in Bavaria. In Paris, where he settled in 1831, he wanted to work for a better understanding between the French and the Germans, to sketch a better picture of German life than that of Madame de Staël. But even in Paris he suffered persecution from German authorities who claimed to have discovered a whole group of writers who loved freedom, dubbing them Young Germany, with Heine supposedly its head. In 1835 his books were banned in Prussia – his largest literary market. In 1843 he called out to German patriots: "Calm down, I love the German fatherland just as much as you. Because of this love I have lived thirteen years in exile, and just because of this love I return ever again to exile, perhaps forever, in

any case without whining or making a wry, long-suffering face.” In Paris he came to know highly cultivated figures of the juste milieu: François Guizot and Adolphe Thiers. And he cherished his cosmopolitan friends, who ranged from Gerard de Nerval, translator of Goethe, to Hector Berlioz and Karl Marx. He was also writing frequently for the Augsburg *General Gazette*, Germany’s best newspaper, and with the same ease for the best French papers. Eventually he received a small permanent pension as a refugee in Paris (perhaps today we could learn from this). When this became known in 1848, Germans denounced him for what they saw as treason.

Around the time of the Revolution of 1848 he developed a deep loathing of communism, in which he foresaw the decline of all culture. But he shared with Balzac, Stendhal, and others their disappointment when the Revolution failed: money ruled the world, he thought, and not the “spirit.” Just the same, he maintained close relationships within this new world and with the greatest man in it, James de Rothschild, with whom he cheerfully associated and who always treated him “famillionairely.” But he saw also the dark side of great wealth, including the constant supplications of poor, tormented people, and he concluded that “Excessive wealth is perhaps harder to bear than poverty.” It is a remark that perhaps found an echo in Nietzsche’s warning of 1871 that “a great victory is a great danger.”

Heine saw much and foresaw even more. He foresaw something of Germany’s future; he had an instinct for the unfinished nation, in which a great revolution would break out later than elsewhere. “Thought precedes the deed like lightning the thunder. The German thunder is, to be sure, being a German thunder, not very agile, and comes rolling up rather slowly; but it will come, and when one day you hear a booming as it has never boomed before in world history, then realize: the German thunder has finally reached its goal. At this noise the eagles will fall dead from the sky and the lions in the most distant desert of Africa will tuck in their tails and crawl into their royal caves. A drama will be performed in Germany, compared with which the French Revolution may appear as nothing but a harmless idyll.”

For German philistines and well-behaved citizens, Heine was a great vexation, the backbiting, destructive Jew pouring irony on

the sanctity of Christianity. The historian Heinrich von Treitschke hated him and began what would be decades of defamation. Only Nietzsche understood him. “Heinrich Heine provided me with the highest concept of a lyric poet. I look in vain in all the realms of the millennia for such sweet and passionate music. He possessed a divine malice, without which I am unable to imagine perfection. . . . And how he handles the German language! Someday people will say that Heine and I were by far the first artists of the German language – incalculably far ahead of everything that mere Germans have made of it.” Heine and Nietzsche, the best psychologists.

The high point of German hatred for Heine came during the Third Reich. Right at the beginning, at the book burnings of 10 May 1933, professors and students threw rejected works jubilantly onto the pyre, and Heine, Marx, and Freud were consigned to the flames. At the book burning in Freiburg on 24 June 1933, the rector of the university, Martin Heidegger, cried: “Flames, prophesy to us, illuminate us, show us the way from which there is no going back!” Only Nietzsche was more shamelessly treated: some of the Nazis wanted to use him as a prophetic witness to their spirit.

Heine thought of himself as a European fighter for the emancipation of mankind, and in his love of freedom one can see a real kinship with Willy Brandt, who as a young man experienced the terrors of National Socialism. At the request of his party, the Socialist Workers’ Party, he went, in dangerous circumstances, into exile in Norway in 1933. (The SWP was a splinter party, especially strong in Breslau, located between the Social Democratic Party, disastrously mired in a politics of tolerance and passivity, and the Communist Party, which yielded to Stalin’s criminal dictatorship.) In Norway Brandt lived in the shadow of reality, occupied with so-called illegal – i.e., clandestine – work. He returned for a short period to Germany in order to help his former comrades in the underground in the winter of 1936–37. Back in exile and in poverty he made a paltry living as a journalist for Norwegian socialist newspapers.

In exile it was already his most urgent concern to make clear to people that Hitler was not Germany, and that England’s hatred of

Germany was a world-historical error. And in exile he took on some aspects of Scandinavian pragmatism and spurned doctrinaire positions. In 1945 he returned to occupied Germany to report for Scandinavian newspapers on the first Nuremberg war crimes trial.

The whole terror of Nazism, the terror that Germans organized not only in Germany but everywhere in Europe, he understood; and described it in his 1946 book, *Criminals and Other Germans: A Report from Germany*: “Particular circumstances allowed [the Germans] to become tools – and victims – of Nazism.” This book by the young Brandt is an amazing testament of modesty and fairness, of reason and honesty (and of light humor: he writes, for example, that he hates ruins that are less than a century old). He was a true patriot, a realist who could turn his vision into reality. A great German and a great European. But Brandt was also for a time a vexation for Germans and a victim of dreary defamation. Still he was a blessing for the Federal Republic.

What the three days in July 1830 in Paris were for Heine, the last three months of 1989 are for us, when the citizens of Leipzig courageously and peacefully demonstrated against the East German regime and demanded their freedom, when people in Eastern Europe achieved their own self-liberation. That is our legacy. That was the happy ending of the “long way to the West.” In the spirit of Heinrich Heine and Willy Brandt, we should be committed to maintaining and improving this Western world. That is our task.