

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

PayPal

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

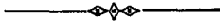
A table of contents for *The Churchman* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_churchman_os.php

importance of a careful choice of those to whom they commit the administration of the Poor Law ?

If the present increase of pauperism and the consequent demoralization of a constantly growing mass of poor is to be checked, this check will have to be effected by the ordinary citizen being brought to see his or her responsibility in this matter. And towards the bringing of these to see this responsibility the clergy must be able to exercise, and must constantly exercise, every means which a knowledge—at once scientific and gained by practical experience—of the various aspects of this question can give them for this purpose.

W. EDWARD CHADWICK.



ART. VI.—THE MARTYRDOM OF HEINE.

“THE only true knowledge of our fellow-men,” says George Eliot in one of her finest passages, “is that which enables us to feel with him—which gives us a fine ear for the heart-pulses that are beating under the mere clothes of circumstance and opinion. Our subtlest analysis of schools and sects must miss the essential truth unless it be lit up by the love that sees in all forms of human thought and work the life and death struggles of separate human beings.”

To the majority of people Heinrich Heine is only a name; to some he is an embodiment of dissipated living and atheistical opinion; while to a few he is a fellow-being suffering, striving, falling, rising, in the life and death struggle that constitutes our earthly existence.

That there is much in Heine's writings that his admirers would wish away is not to be denied by anyone who has read them; but many of those who condemn him are utterly ignorant of the circumstances of his life, and have never read the passage in his will in which he asks pardon of God and man for his unguarded words: “I die believing in one God, single and eternal, creator of the world, of whom I implore mercy for my immortal soul. I regret having spoken in my writings of holy things without the respect which is due to them; but in doing this I was rather led away by the spirit of the age than by my own inclinations. If I have unconsciously offended good manners and morals, I beg pardon for it of God and man.”

Heinrich Heine was born in the town of Düsseldorf in or about the year 1800. It was a time when the Jews were still subject to galling persecutions and to still more galling

restrictions: forced to live in the ghettos of the towns in which they dwelt, they were forbidden to enter any profession, and it was only owing to the enlightened action of Napoleon Buonaparte that they were allowed to join the army. While still a boy Heine discovered that to be a Jew was to be marked out for the scorn of his fellows; and when, on reaching manhood, he was baptized into the Christian Church as a matter of policy, he found that his position was not bettered, for his new brethren scorned him for being a Jew, while the Jews scorned him for being a Christian.

The troubles of the poet's life began early, but they were not caused by religion alone. At the age of twenty he fell in love with his cousin Amalia, the daughter of the rich banker, Salomon Heine, the head of the family. Whether it was by her father's command or by her own wish that his suit was rejected is uncertain; but in either case Heine believed that she had deliberately encouraged him, and the bitterness which this belief engendered never wholly left him to the end of his life.

His well-known song, "A Young Man Loved a Maiden," tells the whole story in its three brief stanzas; but there is another, less often quoted, which describes the effect that his disappointed love wrought upon him:

"Ah! yes, my songs are envenomed—
What other fate could they know,
Since thou hast poisoned life's flowers,
Ruined and laid them low?"

"My songs are all envenomed;
Yea, such they must be now,
For my heart is entwined with serpents,
And among them, love, art thou!"

This note of despairing desolation rings through all the lyrics of the book known as "Intermezzo," a book which, in spite of its sadness, contains some of the loveliest songs ever written:

"Why have the roses lost their hue?
Dearest, tell me why.
Why in the fields do the violets blue
Droop their heads and die?"

"Tell me why such a note of woe
I hear when the skylark sings,
And why from the sweetest flowers that blow
A poisonous odour springs.

"Why do the sad clouds veil the sky
And shadow the world with gloom?
Why doth the earth in darkness lie,
Like a land beyond the tomb?"

“And why doth the strength of my soul depart—
 Tell me : how can it be ?
 Life of my life, heart of my heart,
 It is that thou leavest me !”

But though Heine believed that in suffering the pangs of disappointed love he had suffered the worst that Fate could bestow, fresh troubles were in store for him. His daring utterances had brought him under the notice of the authorities—to question the existing order of things was nothing short of treason in those tyrannous times, and the young poet was forced to leave his home and friends behind him and seek refuge in Paris. How dark his existence was at this time we see in a letter to his friend Varnhagen : “ I have lately had in Hamburg a most desolate life. I did not feel myself secure, and since a journey to Paris had for some time dawned upon my spirit, so was I easily persuaded when a great hand considerably beckoned for me. My deepest sorrow consisted in the fact that I was obliged to leave my little family circle, and especially my sister's youngest child. It cannot be worse for me here than in my home and country, where I have nothing before me but struggle and want, and where I cannot sleep in security, and where all the sources of life are poisoned for me.”

Paris, in many ways, proved a congenial home to the young German. Its brightness and gaiety charmed him, and the society of the most celebrated literary people of the day consoled him in some measure for the friends whom he had left behind. His writings on music and art raised him to the front rank among critics, and there was something in his look and bearing that won the hearts of all who came in contact with him. Théophile Gautier describes him at this time as “ a handsome man of about thirty-five or thirty-six, with the appearance of robust health. To look at his lofty white forehead, pure as a marble tablet, and overhung by abundant masses of blonde hair, one would have said he was a German Apollo.”

In 1841 Heine was married to Mathilde Mirat, a Parisian *grisette*, beautiful, child-like, and unintellectual. The marriage has been as much discussed as the Carlyle marriage of a later date ; but if the poet's own testimony is to be believed, he loved his wife truly and fondly, recognising her limitations and her failings, but finding his affection in no way diminished by them. He took infinite pleasure in her beauty and in her gaiety of heart, and when ill-health cut him off from sharing in her enjoyments, he would have considered it utter selfishness to chain his wife to his side. “ Mathilde is not passionate, neither is she sentimental,” he writes eleven years after their

union ; “ she is good through and through—no beloved in a lyrical sense, but a friend, as only a Frenchwoman can be. I never now put any restraint upon her ; she comes and goes as she will. She stays out often the whole day, especially in summer, and then again she remains days long by my side like an angel.”

A last and crushing trouble had now fallen upon Heine. His rich uncle, Salomon, had for some time made him an allowance of about £200 a year. It was an understood thing that this was to be continued, but on his death, Salomon's son Karl not only declined to pay it, but refused to hand over a small legacy left to the poet in the will. The ingratitude of this proceeding troubled Heine even more than the difficulties into which it plunged him. Some years before he had, at the risk of his own life, nursed his cousin through an attack of cholera, and though the matter was at last satisfactorily arranged, the agitation caused by this ill-return for his past kindness brought on the first symptoms of the illness which was slowly but surely to bring him to the grave.

To read the accounts of this illness is to be reminded of the tortures of some terrible martyrdom. Beginning in the spine, it led to a gradual paralysis of legs, arms, throat, lips, and eyelids, while the cramping pains that accompanied it were so terrible that he hailed the anguish of the remedies applied as a kind of relief. A friend who had not seen him since the days of his health went to visit him, and thus describes the change in his appearance : “ The former healthy glow had faded from his face, and given place to a fine waxen pallor. All his features had become fine ; they were transfigured, spiritualized. It was a head of infinite beauty, a true Christ head, which was turned towards me. Struck at this wonderful change, and even shocked, I said to myself that in the state in which he appeared to be he could not live six weeks. And yet he lived full eight years.”

That Heine could have done any work at all under such circumstances is almost inconceivable ; yet he laboured hard, although at times he could not hold a pen, and though the sight of one eye was completely gone, and he could only use the other by propping up the paralyzed eyelid with his finger. It was not to supply himself with luxuries that he worked. The noises of the little Paris flat, the pianos, the hammering, the wrangling voices, affected his nerves painfully ; but though his condition might have been materially improved by fresh air, quiet, and sunshine, he willingly renounced all these things that he might make money for his wife, of whom he writes to his mother that she is “ the sweetest spendthrift who on this earth ever tormented or blessed a husband.”

That a man capable of such self-sacrifice was not devoid of good qualities hardly needs proving; but it was not until the publication of Heine's letters to his family by his nephew, Baron von Embden, that the nature which lay hidden under the reckless jests and the biting sarcasms was really understood. His love for his mother and his sister was a pure and perfect idyll, and it came as a revelation to those who had taken all his ironical expressions seriously, and in their light had believed him to be a heartless libertine.

His tenderest love was for his mother, his deepest confidence for his sister. On the one he poured out his heartfelt affection, to the other he told all those anxieties and sufferings which he would not allow his "little mother" to know for fear of causing her too much sorrow.

"Shall I ever get better?" he writes to his sister, after describing his terrible state. "That, God, who manages all things for the best, only knows. Write to me fully and frequently how all seems to be with the family. Let us keep my illness a secret from mother always in future, as before."

How fondly his sister loved him in return is shown in the touching account that she has left of the visit that she paid to him in Paris: "When I approached his bed, he, with the cry, '*Mein liebes Lottchen!*' at once embraced me, and held me long in his arms without speaking, then leaned his head on my shoulder and held out his hand to his brother. His joy at seeing me was indescribable, and I must not leave him from dinner-time till late in the evening. After what I had previously learned as to my brother's illness, I feared that the first sight of his suffering would shock me terribly; but as I only saw his face, which smiled at me with a wonderfully glorious beauty, I could abandon myself utterly to the joy of seeing him again. But when towards afternoon his nurse carried him in her arms to a *chaise longue* in order to make the bed, and I saw his shrunken body, from which the limbs hung down as if lifeless, I was compelled to summon up all my energies to endure the terrible sight."

For a man in such a condition a nurse was of course a necessity, but Heine's unselfishness in insisting that his wife's room should be as far as possible from his own, that she might not suffer from disturbed nights, is shown, when we see what relief he found in his pain from the presence of one dear to him.

"I heard his fearful sobs of agony in the night," says his sister, "and when I hastened to his bed the laying of my hand on his forehead seemed to give him at once relief. He liked to put his hand in mine as I sat beside him."

But whatever his sufferings might be, he retained to the end

his resolution of keeping them from his mother ; and when it was absolutely impossible for him to write to her with his own hand, he excused himself on the ground that it was necessary for him to spare his eyes. Each one of his letters to her breathes a mingling of love and respect, while the playful fancy that no pain could extinguish steals in from time to time like a ray of sunshine.

“ And so, my dear mother, farewell !” is the close of one of these letters. “ May the good Lord preserve thee, guard thee from all sufferings, especially of the eyes. Take care of thy dear health, and if things do not always go as thou wouldst have them, console thyself with the thought that few women are so loved and honoured by their children as thou art, and as thou truly deservedst to be, my dear, noble, upright, and true mother ! What are others compared to thee ? People should kiss the ground where thy foot hath trod.”

“ The cold weather has begun here already,” he writes in another letter, “ and I think with terror how the wind may attack thee in thy dove-cot. Oh, that I could be by thee to stop every hole through which a draught of air could pass ! We are always talking of thee, and my wife says that it seems as if she had seen thee only yesterday, but I feel as if I were always by thee !”

It is touching to find that the sick poet, who was carried from bed to sofa wrapped in blankets, not only sent presents to his mother and sister, but thought much and fondly of their personal appearance. On one occasion he writes :

“ DEAREST GOOD MOTHER,

“ I thought I had an opportunity to forward something to Havre, and prepared for that purpose a small box, in which were two silk dresses, a black one for thee, and a violet, light-coloured one for dear Lottie ; but as the opportunity was missed, I sent the box directly by post. Although I gave orders to have it paid for in advance, I do not know if this was done, and thou hast perhaps, dear mother, a heavy freightage to pay. Tell me if this was so. I and my wife looked out the clothes ourselves, she rejoicing like a child at doing so, and hopes that Lottie will approve of her taste. That I never heeded or thought of thy approval in any case is to be understood, and I shall be contented if thou dost not quarrel with me about it.”

The increasing torments of his illness and the consequent heavy drain upon his income never prevented him from sending his periodical presents, though at the same time he was denying himself many comforts that he might make a better

provision for his wife. His niece, the Princess della Rocca, gives a graphic account of a visit that she paid to him: "Wearied, he lay there almost lifeless; the sick-room was but badly lighted, a lamp burnt sadly and dimly behind the screen, and one could hear the monotonous ticking of the clock. I did not dare to disturb his repose, and sat immovable on my chair, when all at once he endeavoured to change his position, which his physician had prohibited being done without the aid of his nurse. He was attacked with agonizing pains and groaned in the most terrible manner. This scene was something new to me; I believed it was his death-struggle when I saw him thus wrestling for breath, and I prayed God to free him from this torture. Pauline, his faithful nurse, endeavoured to calm him, declared it was but a passing pain, and that she had often seen him in such a state. I remained no longer in the room, but hastened away, sobbing."

Yet, only a short time after this we find him choosing gowns for his sister and her two girls: "The last fashionable pattern of plaid I mean for Lottie, the robe *gris de perle* for Anna, and the blue dress for Lena. I have bought nothing for mother, as she would not have a fine gown made for her, and would only scream at it. I therefore beg thee to buy for her in Hamburg a very fine cap."

In one of his most beautiful sonnets Heine tells how the yearning for love that pursued him through his youth found its satisfaction in the love of his mother:

TO MY MOTHER, B. HEINE.

"With foolish fancy I deserted thee:
 I fain would search the whole world through to learn
 If in it I perchance could Love discern,
 That I might Love embrace right lovingly.
 I sought for Love as far as eye could see,
 My hands extending at each door in turn,
 Begging them not my prayer for love to spurn.
 Cold hate alone they, laughing, gave to me.
 And ever searched I after Love—yes, ever
 Searched after Love, but Love discovered never,
 And so I homeward went with troubled thought;
 But thou wert there to welcome me again.
 And ah! what in thy dear eye floated then—
 That was the sweet Love I so long had sought!"¹

These family letters give us, indeed, a different picture of Heine from that to which we have been accustomed; they show us a man "sick unto death," as he expresses it, yet whose soul "has not suffered much; a weary flower, some-

¹ Translated by E. A. Bowring.

what drooping but not withered, which still has its roots firmly planted in the ground of Truth and Love." His mocking words remain indelibly fixed in his pages—biting jests at the expense of Faith and Love and of all those things which men hold most sacred; but as their echo dies away we hear the heart-beats of him who suffered anguish patiently, who toiled ceaselessly in spite of his infirmities, and who exhibited an unselfishness and consideration for others that might well put some of his critics to shame. Many of his speeches, we must remember also, were born of the lip only, and had no connection with his real beliefs. "I have often laughed and invented witty sayings about such things," he said once, when speaking of his love for his wife, "but I have still more earnestly thought about them."

How earnestly he thought about his cherished wife, whom he has so often been accused of not loving, may be seen in the exquisite lines in which he consigned her to the care of God shortly before his death :

"O little lamb, I was assigned
To be thy shepherd true and kind,
And 'mid this barren world and rude
To shelter thee as best I could.
I gave thee of my bread thy fill,
I brought thee water from the rill,
And through the raging winter storm
Safe in my bosom kept thee warm.
I held thee close in that embrace;
And when the cold rain fell apace,
When through the gorge the torrents poured,
And wolves and floods in concert roared,
Thou didst not tremble then, nor fear
E'en when the lightning's mighty spear
Cleft the tall pine—upon my breast
Still didst thou sleep and calmly rest.
My arm grows weak and faint my heart :
Pale death creeps near. The shepherd's part
Is now play'd out, the game is o'er.
O God, then in Thy hands once more
I lay the crook, and do Thou keep
My little lamb when I to sleep
Am laid. Oh, guard her day by day
From every harm, and shield, I pray,
Her fleece from storms that may bring pain,
And from the miry swamps that stain!
Beneath her feet in field and wood
Let greenest pastures spring for food ;
And let her calmly sleep and rest
As once she slept upon my breast."¹

So, too, with regard to his attitude towards religion. He is guilty at times of utterances which must shock all pious souls,

¹ Translated by Alma Strettell.

even when describing his return to his early faith in God ; yet in almost the same breath he speaks of it in exquisite phrase as “ a heavenly home-sickness.” It is strange to notice how constantly his mind seemed to dwell upon Nebuchadnezzar, his pride of intellect, his crushing calamities, and his subsequent humbling of himself before the Almighty. It is evident that he applied the story to his own case, and in simple words he has told us what it was that wrought the change in him : “ It was neither a vision nor a seraphic convulsion—not a voice from heaven, not even a remarkable dream or a miraculous vision which brought me back to the way of salvation. I attribute my illumination entirely and simply to the reading of a book. Of a book ? Yes, and it is an old, homely book, modest as Nature, natural as Nature ; a book which has a workaday and unassuming look, like the sun which warms us, like the bread which nourishes us ; a book which looks at us as cordially and blessingly as the old grandmother who daily reads in it with her dear trembling lips, and with her spectacles on her nose. And this book is called *the Book*—the Bible. With right is it named the Holy Scriptures, for he who has lost his God can find Him again in this book, and he who has never known Him is here struck by the breath of the Divine Word.”

“ My experience,” he says again, “ was like that of an impoverished man would be who had lost everything and had death by hunger before his eyes, if he were to discover a million in a forgotten, despised drawer of his money-chest. For I, through the loss of that inestimable treasure, health, became bankrupt of earthly happiness, and then I found a still place in my heart, where the treasure of religion had hitherto reposed unsuspected, and I am saved thereby from utter prostration.”

The long martyrdom came to an end at last. On February 15, 1856, an access of pain and sickness showed that death was at hand, and early in the morning of the 17th Heine passed away quietly in his sleep. He is buried in the cemetery of Montmartre beneath a stone which bears the simple inscription : “ Heinrich Heine.” His sorrows and trials are over, but as we turn from their contemplation the words which Gladstone applies to another martyr-poet—Giacomo Leopardi—rise inevitably on the mind : “ Nor let us, of inferior and more sluggish clay, omit to learn, as we seem to stand at his tomb, a lesson from his career—the lesson of compassion, chastening admiration, towards him—and for ourselves, humility and self-distrust.”

MARY BRADFORD WHITING.