

HEINRICH HEINE'S RELIGION.

BY MICHAEL MONAHAN.

A GREAT deal has been put forth by Heine's friends and foes alike on the subject of his religious belief or unbelief, and, as it seems to me, with small profit or edification. After the Heine-lovers and the Heine-haters have had their voluminous say, one has still to ask oneself the pertinent question—"What was Heine's religion?"

But ere we attempt to suggest an answer to the query, let it be noted *imprimis*, that the poet is himself mainly responsible for the confusion among his apologists and denounciators. Each and all, they are able to make a case out of his writings, public and private—an *c.r parte* case, to be sure—and still a candid reader may well feel that the truth has eluded them. For this we can only blame the extraordinary mental and spiritual elasticity of Heine—not his love of mockery, his inherent irreverence or ungodliness, as his censors would put it. Indeed, if Heine were the out-and-out mocker and desecrator that he has been painted, it would not be worth while to waste a page under the above heading. He has written abundantly both prose and verse which give the lie to such a character.

But there is, undeniably, a great difficulty in getting at the truth and doing him the measure of justice to which a writer of his high rank is entitled. And this difficulty arises from his possession of the most versatile and contradictory sympathies as regards religion—a condition, be it said, which offers certain advantages to the poet, but is fatal to the sectary or theologian.

Heine at times praised and admired all the creeds—even, though very rarely, the Creed of Infidelity—and then again at times mocked them all and branded them with the light iron of satire. He was born a Jew, and, as we shall see, he reverted in the end to his first belief in a personal God—the God of Israel. But yet he condemned

the Jews as "an accursed race who came from Egypt, the land of crocodiles and priestcraft, and brought with them, besides certain skin diseases and the vessels of gold and silver that they stole, a so-called positive religion and a so-called church."

This is giving the sword to the hilt; the satire of Heine has yielded nothing more deadly. And yet a man might write so and still believe in God.

He might even sketch this poetic picture of the Man-God and his Mission (by the way, no florid Chateaubriand, no Christian pietistic writer whatever, has come anywhere near it)—

"Then he poured wine to all the other gods from left to right, ladling the sweet nectar from the bowl, and laughter unquenchable arose amid the blessed gods to see Hephaistos bustling through the palace. So they feasted all day till the setting of the sun; nor was their soul aught stinted of the fair banquet, nor of the beauteous lyre that Apollo held and the Muses singing alternately with their sweet voices.—(The Iliad.)

"When suddenly a pale, breathless, blood-stained Jew entered, bearing a crown of thorns on his head, and on his shoulder a great cross of wood. And he threw this cross upon the gods' great banquet table! The golden goblets were shaken, the gods were stricken dumb, they grew pale and ever paler till at last they faded away into vapor."

This is mere literature, perhaps—a purple patch, if you will; but it could not have been written by a coarse mocker and hater of religion.

Heine angrily repudiated this character, which his enemies sought to fasten upon him, and declared that those who called him a second Voltaire did him too much honor. "I do not hate the altar," he said, "but I hate those serpents which lurk under the ruined stones of old altars." Again, he declared himself a friend of the State and of religion, but "I hate that abortion which is called State-religion—that object of derision born from the concubinage of temporal and spiritual power."

His hatred of State-religion is intelligible enough, remembering what he had to suffer from official intolerance in Germany. "Were there no State-religions," he affirms, "no privileges pertaining to a dogma and a cult, Germany would be united and strong, her sons would be great and free."

Again he asserts: "I honor the inner holiness of each religion. . . . If I have no special veneration for anthropomorphism, yet I believe in the omnipotence of God."

These quotations I have purposely made from writings of his prime, when his genius and intellectual activity were at flood-tide. Surely they afford small warrant for the judgment that writes him down as an atheist and a flouter of all things sacred.

I have spoken of his versatile sympathies in regard to different religions, which sprang no doubt in part from his great culture, but I believe mainly from the richness of his artistic endowment. Indeed, as proving his poetic sympathy with religious forms and beliefs otherwise alien to him, I may quote here his words regarding the Roman Catholic Church, written toward the end of his life. Treating of a rumor that he had turned Catholic (which arose from his having married Mathilde according to the Catholic rite¹), Heine says:

"I cannot be accused of fanatical hostility toward the Roman Catholic Church, for I always lacked the narrow-mindedness which is necessary for such animosity. I am too well acquainted with my own spiritual stature not to know that I could not do much harm to a colossus like St. Peter's by a crazy assault. . . . As a thinker and metaphysician I had even to pay my tribute of admiration to the consistency of the Roman Catholic dogma; and I can pride myself on never having fought either dogma or rites with wit and satire; I have been shown too much honor and dishonor in being called an intellectual kinsman of Voltaire. I have always been a poet, and therefore the poetry which flowers and glows in the symbolism of the Catholic dogma and worship, has been more profoundly revealed to me than to other people, and in my youth I was not infrequently overwhelmed by the infinite sweetness, the mysterious and holy sentimentality, and the strange deathlonging of that poetry. Often I was filled with enthusiasm for the blessed Queen of Heaven. I turned into stately rhymes the legends of her grace and goodness, and my first collected poems contain traces of that beautiful Madonna-period, which I expunged with such absurd care in later collections."

Certain it is that literature has been greatly enriched by Heine's versatile, even contrasted, moods in regard to religion.

¹ In regard to his marriage, after admitting that it had been performed in a Jesuit church (St. Sulpice), Heine says in his *Confessions*:

"I had my marriage solemnized there following the civil ceremony, because my wife, being of a Catholic family, believed that she would not be properly married, in the sight of God, without such a ceremony. Unbelief is, besides, very dangerous in marriage; however free-thinking I may have been, there could never be spoken in my house one frivolous word."

He has written elsewhere: "Beautiful women without any religion are like flowers without scent."

However the moods may have varied during his years of health and full activity, he seems not to have changed his practice—which was to have the least possible to do with churches and churchmen. He parted with Lutheranism immediately upon leaving the church where he had been baptized as a convert, and he left his newly taken Christian names behind him.²

But now we come to the story of the last years and the formal recantation of his religious heresies. It is not the least interesting and extraordinary phase of an unexampled career. The so-called "death-bed repentance" of Heine has been greatly exaggerated by those who regarded him as an arch-mocker and sinner against light, expiating his offenses under a signal act of Divine chastisement. The effect of such a moral lesson, even when in the fullest sense edifying, is rather doubtful in our modern eyes. After all, the man's life alone is conclusive; his death changes nothing. Napoleon teaching the Catechism at St. Helena does not approximate him to St. Francis of Assisi. On the other hand, Voltaire's alleged recantation of infidelity has not in the slightest degree altered his terrible role as the Hammer of Christianity. Nor have Heine's late concessions to the religious spirit and the moral change in him wrought by his "mattress-grave" reflections, much availed to change the purport of his life and work. It is true the world was startled to hear from *Eulenspiegel* a strain that seemed to belong to the Man of Uz; but the plagiarism was never very convincing—and *Eulenspiegel* had the last word.

But lest we ourselves sin against grace, it is beyond doubt that the terrible afflictions of Heine's last years moved him to sober thought and a sensible revision of his attitude toward the Eternal Truths. In all apparent earnestness he declares: "I owe the resurrection of my religious feeling to that holy book, the Bible; and it was for me as much a source of health as an occasion for pious admiration. Strange that, after having passed all my life in gliding about the dancing-floors of Philosophy and abandoning myself to all the orgies of intellect, and dallying with systems that never satisfied me—I have suddenly taken my stand on the Bible and knelt in devotion beside my black brother, Uncle Tom!"

To Julius Campe, his publisher, he writes in 1850—six years before the end:

² This is not strictly correct. At his Lutheran baptism he took the names of Christian Johann Heinrich. His parents had named him Harry, not Heinrich, after an English friend of his father. The change was a fortunate one, and so much credit at least should be allowed to his "conversion."

"I have not become a hypocrite, but I will not play tricks with God; as I deal honestly with men, so will I with God also, and in everything that was produced in my earlier period of blasphemy I have plucked out the fairest poisoned flowers with a firm hand, and in my physical blindness I have doubtless thrown many an innocent flower that grew side by side with them, into the fire."

In the same year he wrote (Preface to the *Romancero*):

"Yes, I have made my peace with the Creator, to the great distress of my enlightened friends, who reproached me with this backsliding into the old superstitions, as they preferred to call my return to God. I was overcome by Divine homesickness, and was driven by it through woods and valleys, over the dizziest mountain paths of dialectics. On my way I found the God of the pantheists, but I had no use for him, because he is not really a God—for the pantheists are only atheists ashamed. . . . But I must expressly contradict the rumor that my retrogression led me to the steps of any Church or to its bosom. . . . I have forsworn nothing—not even my old pagan gods, from whom I have indeed turned, though we parted in love and friendship."

To Campe in 1851 he writes, with painful significance:

"I suffer very, very much and endure the pangs of Prometheus, through the rancor of the gods who have a grudge against me because I have given men a few night-lights and farthing dips. I say 'the gods,' because I wish to say nothing about *the* God. I know *his* vultures now, and have every respect for them."

Half martyr, half mocker Heine remained even unto the end, and the cynical note constantly recurs to spoil what would have been otherwise no doubt a tremendously edifying "conversion." Good Christians will see in all this a visible contest between the poet's Good Angel and the Dark Enemy of mankind; Heine himself accounted for it characteristically enough in one of his imperfectly sanctified moods:

"A religious reaction has set in upon me for some time. God knows whether the morphine or the poultices have anything to do with it. I believe again in a personal God: to this we come when we are sick, sick to death and broken down. If the German people accept the King of Prussia in their need, why should not I accept a personal God? When health is used up, money used up also, and sound human senses destroyed, Christianity begins. . . . For the sick man it is a very good religion."

Heine's declaration of religious belief, in his Will, is of capital interest, because (as it seems to the present writer) of its essential

consistency, and also because of its deliberate character. It was not a hurried, death-bed avowal, as some have ignorantly supposed, but, on the contrary, a long-meditated, careful expression of the poet's thought and purpose. The dates put this beyond question. Heine's Will was attested in November, 1851; his death occurred in February, 1856.

Respecting religion he declares as follows in the Will:

"Although I belong to the Lutheran Confession by the act of baptism, I do not desire that the ministers of that Church should be invited to my burial; and I object to any other sort of priest officiating at my funeral. This objection does not spring from any kind of free-thinking prejudice. For the last four years I have renounced all pride of philosophy and returned to religious ideas and feelings: I die in faith in one God, the eternal Creator of the world, whose pity I beseech for my immortal soul. I regret having sometimes spoken of sacred things without due reverence in my writings, but I was led astray more by the spirit of the time than by my own inclination. If I have unwittingly offended against the good morals and the morality which is the true essence of all monotheistic doctrines of faith, I do ask pardon of God and man."

All these confessions and declarations were, I think, mainly uncalled for, and sprang from the conditions of Heine's terrible disease. Far greater sinners in kind than he have lived out man's allotted term and passed to their account without exemplary agonies. Heine's extreme self-consciousness, working with his spinal complaint, played him a sad trick; the pathological element in these tackings and veerings of conscience, this half-hearted repudiation of self, seems only too obvious. Behind it all, too, one detects the exaggerated egoism of the dying. What sick man does not view himself as the most important person in the world?—and here was one who had long occupied an intellectual throne!

A quicker or a kindlier death, and perhaps we should have had none of the edifying recantations referred to. And one can't help suspecting that in the event of a complete recovery, Heine would have ironically explained them away!

Finally, the poet deceived himself in his fever-bred fears of the old terrible Hebrew God without pity or humor; and he exaggerated the measure of his offending. Heine was not of the Titans who storm Heaven and aim their blows at the Thunder-bearer himself; and who beaten back, recoil upon their unconquerable pride.

I doubt if his writings have ever made a single infidel or caused any one to mock at the true sources of the religious sentiment. The clergy in our time have lost one of their privileges: because a man is witty they dare no longer impeach him as an enemy of God!

Charity is the most precious virtue of the Christian dispensation, and it is one which the world still receives and practises with reluctance: as we see from the memorable example of Heinrich Heine.

In the fulness of intellectual power Heine assumed various masks, at the caprice of his wonderful fantastic genius, and he has even peeped at us from behind the vizard of Mephistopheles. But he never entirely forgot that he was *a poet by the grace of God*: and the sum of his work proves him not unworthy of that divine title.