
REVIEWS

Roger F. Cook. *By the Rivers of Babylon: Heinrich Heine's Late Songs and Reflections*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1998. 399p.

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As a major German poet who became influential in almost all the national literatures of Europe, yet resisted in his homeland until well into the post-World War II era, Heinrich Heine remains today, albeit in different ways, the quintessential outsider: despite his considerable presence in Western literatures, he is relatively unknown to the broader reading public. And although Heine has been the focus of considerable scholarly interest over the last thirty years, elements of his *oeuvre* remain barely investigated to date, most notably, his late-period post-1848 writings. In *By the Rivers of Babylon: Heinrich Heine's Late Songs and Reflections*, Roger Cook addresses these lacunae, providing material both novel and provocative: novel, because Cook's readings highlight a more consistent and coherent philosophical point of view behind the poet's enigmatic and often darkest poetry, and provocative, because his thesis regarding a key shift in Heine's views on history in the late works runs counter to the current of scholarship to date.

While some of the historical and biographical contextualization in Part I is not new, this portion of the investigation offers useful insight into the poet's crisis of 1848, and details how Heine's thinking on religion, philosophy, and poetry reflect a paradigmatic shift: namely, what has commonly and often only vaguely been referred to as Heine's "return." While there is general consensus that Heine repudiated certain former philosophical allegiances and acknowledged a personal God, the precise nature of this "return" remains a point of contention among scholars, particularly among those intent on portraying Heine as social critic and political revolutionary. By tracing the development of the young poet into a thinker who throughout his late writings warned against a philosophical tradition that legitimizes the intellect's preeminence over the body and over practical reason, Cook gives a lucid account of Heine's increasingly critical positioning vis-à-vis Marx; the radical socialists, particularly the Left Hegelians; Hegel; and Enlightenment notions of an objective idealism capable of absolute knowledge. Importantly for his thesis, Cook demonstrates how the poet reaffirmed his former skepticism in the late period and reset the limits he had overstepped earlier in accepting the

Hegelian scheme of history. In effect, the author argues for a more systematic, coherent reading of the late works, because, as he maintains, Heine's repositioning shows how the poet joined his diverse ideas on religion, philosophy, social injustice, political revolution and poetry into a more consonant system that privileged poetry, song, and myth over certain Enlightenment discourses. In the late works, there is a discernible shift in the author-persona constituted through Heine's literary narratives: the identity of the authorial subject here is increasingly informed by a diverse set of historical narratives and poetic discourses, which, while often critically juxtaposed to one another in radical fashion, insistently investigate questions of individual existence and how it assumes an identity in discourse. A significant strength of Cook's reading lies in his ability to draw out elements in Heine's elusive and often contradictory positioning to suggest how this poet's writing emerges from the gaps of cultural difference to resist totalizing discourses. While there exists a good measure of scholarship on Heine's participation in the cultural life of Restoration Germany, the author's knowledgeable contextualization of the poet's conflicted position in German-Jewish social and cultural history ventures on an important new avenue in Heine research, making reading of this dimension absorbing and informative to scholars interested in Heine's evolution as poet, historian, literary critic, and intellectual.

The second part of the study engages in close readings of the *Romancero* collection (1851) to illustrate the reflection of Heine's new ideas on religion, philosophy, and history in his poetics. Central themes in this compendium of sophisticated poetry include the tragedies of kings, heroes, and poets, as well as probing inquiries into God's indifference to evil in the world and religious views in conflict. Cook maintains that in *Romancero*, Heine returns to conceptions of poetry that had informed his poetics from his earliest writings, contending that after 1848, Heine attempts to resituate his poetry as subversive of authority, as a corrective force working at the margins of mainstream culture with respect to the dominant traditions of European literature and philosophy (47). It is one of the author's primary aims — very capably realized for the most part — to demonstrate how the metaphor for the poet's place in the history of narrative serves as a central topos for Heine's late poetics. The author is at his weakest, however, when he relies, almost exclusively in places, on Heine's comments in autobiographical and biographical materials to interpret intricate lyrical ballads. Hence, a complex poem like "Nächtliche Fahrt" (Night Voyage) is read as representing Heine's personal turn from the Romantic imagination that had sustained his vision until the crisis of 1848 (201-207). Rather than problematize in productive ways the fact that a vast majority of scholars have avoided offering *an* interpretation of the poem

(202), Cook is content to draw upon what he himself characterizes as “the context of various perplexing autobiographical and confessional assertions” (8) for his analysis. By deploying autobiographical “facts” to link Heine’s personal ambivalences and motivations to a *poem’s* poet-figure (as in the case of “Nächtliche Fahrt”), the author’s treatment glosses over Heine’s status as master of self-invention, overlooking how his poetry speaks to the significance of literature more generally and (post-) Romanticism in particular. Consequently, a letter composed by Heine to an editor is used in a manner that ignores this letter’s status as a tool of the poet’s own disingenuous posturing and self-promotion. Ultimately, Cook’s strategy detracts from the poem’s value as literary construct, fixing Heine’s literature to autobiography, rather than complicating and enriching it as text which insistently signals its fictional status by means of a variety of textual features, including irony, parody, self-reflexivity, the extended use of symbolic language and elaborate narrative structures.

In sum, this exceptional investigation provides vital stimulus to Heine scholarship, adding texture to contemporary understanding of the poet’s late “return” and revealing the layers of image construction that have shaped dominant perspectives on Heine to date. Here, in Cook’s lucid prose, Heine’s highly self-referential poetic discourse as a whole gains new import when viewed in a framework that emphasizes his poetry, in particular an anthology believed by many critics to rank among Heine’s finest. *By the Rivers of Babylon* offers compelling evidence that Heine’s image has been too long appropriated by a critical-scholarly focus on Heine as progressive champion of liberal causes, a focus in need of balance and amendment. ✱