Mouche

The Last Days of Heinrich Heine

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The Last Days of Heinrich Heine

Camille Selden

Translated and annotated
by Richard Stokes

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TRANSLATOR'S NOTE

Whenever a translation is followed by a cross-reference in square brackets, this refers to the relevant original text contained in Appendix 9. My thanks to Eleonora Gallenzi for checking the manuscript with such care and making many crucial amendments.

PREFACE

In the final year of his life, Heinrich Heine met Elise Krinitz, who, on official documents, signed herself "Camille Selden". On the morning of 19th June 1855, she turned up at the door of Heine's fifth-floor Paris apartment at 3 avenue Matignon, a residential road just off the Champs-Élysées. There were 105 steps to climb, as Adolph Stahr remarked when he visited Heine shortly after the poet had moved to the new address; the shaded balcony faced the Place de la Concorde and the Jardin des Tuileries. In her reminiscences (*Les derniers jours de Henri Heine*), Krinitz states that she had come to Paris to give Heine a few sheets of music from an admirer of his poetry. Aged twenty-seven, she was welcomed by the sick, paralysed and half-blind poet, and in the final year of his life became devoted to him. Heine called her "Mouche" because she wore a seal that was embellished with a fly. She visited him almost daily, read aloud to him, translated some of his poems into French and acted as his amanuensis. Mathilde, Heine's wife, tolerated the relationship but avoided contact with her. Heine loved his Mouche passionately, but was unable to consummate the relationship, as we learn in the final stanza of 'Lotosblume' and the whole of 'Worte! Worte! keine Taten!'[1] Not only did she brighten his final days: she inspired the most tender love poems that Heine ever penned and wrote down some of his last poems, to Heine's own dictation. She later became the lover of Hippolyte Taine, and when he left her settled in Rouen, where she earned a living as a teacher and translator.

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1 *the final stanza of 'Lotosblume'… keine Taten!'*: See 'Lotus Flower', p. 144, and 'Words! Words! But Never Action!', p. 145.

HEINE'S ILLNESS AND HIS "MATTRESS GRAVE"

Heine coined the word "Matratzengruft" ("mattress grave") in the Afterword of *Romanzero*, the last volume of his poems to be published (1851). There we read:

> No green leaves rustle their way into my mattress grave here in Paris, where all I hear from morning till evening is the clatter of carriages, hammering noises, nagging voices and pianos being strummed. A grave without peace, a death without the privileges of the dead, who have no need to spend money, write letters or even books – a sad state of affairs. My coffin has been measured, my obituary written; but I am dying so slowly that it is becoming downright tedious for both me and my friends. [1]

As a student, Heine had suffered from debilitating headaches – the result, according to some experts, of a hereditary ailment; in 1837 his vision deteriorated to such a degree that he feared imminent blindness; in 1843 he suffered a left facial paralysis and numbness down the left side of his body, suggesting that he might have suffered a stroke. Despite sporadic remissions, he fell seriously ill at the end of 1844 and sought a cure at a spa in the Pyrenees during 1846, but by the spring of 1848 he was confined to his mattress grave, suffering, according to recent research, not from syphilis, multiple sclerosis, muscular dystrophy, congenital neuropathy, tuberculosis or opium abuse, but from lead poisoning.[1] Heine himself, like Schumann before him, was convinced,

1 *from lead poisoning*: See 'Der Verdacht einer Bleivergiftung' by Christoph auf der Horst and Alfons Labisch in the *Heine-Jahrbuch 1999*.

however, that he had contracted a venereal infection. Schumann's diary entry for 20th June 1831 reads: "Ich sinke, ich sinke in den alten Schlamm zurück." ("I sink, I sink back into the old mire.") Heine, in a letter to Heinrich Laube of 25th January 1850, writes (the italics are mine):

> I have lain in bed now for one and three quarter years, writhing night and day in the most appalling agony, paralysed in all my limbs. Constant cramps, the most abhorrent contractions, almost total blindness – in short, a misfortune that has rarely been matched in the annals of human existence, an unprecedented, horrific, horrendous misfortune! The most dreadful hopelessness, *accompanied by moral torment*, which I nonetheless bear – as I do the physical pain – with a calm of which I would never have thought myself capable. [2]

And there is a relevant passage in his *Lutezia* (1854), that extensive anthology of his journalistic writings, in which, writing about the musical scene in the Paris of 1847, he refers tangentially to Donizetti's syphilis, implying that he was suffering from something similar:

> All music has, since that time, ceased to exist for me, and I had no idea, when I described Donizetti's suffering, that I was to be afflicted with a similar but far more painful condition. [3]

In September 1847, he wrote to Princess Belgiojoso:

> My illness has become unbearable, I am now paralysed in the feet, the legs and the lower torso – which means I have not been able to walk for the past fortnight. [4]

There was a partial recovery, but during February, March and April 1848 he spent much time in the hospital in rue de Lourcine, run by Louis-Grégoire Faultrier. From mid-May he was never to walk again. The final collapse occurred in the Louvre before the Venus

of Milo, as Heine relates in another passage from the Afterword to *Romanzero*:

> It was during May 1848 – the day on which I left the house for the last outing of my life and said farewell to all those charming idols that I had worshipped in the days of my happiness. Only with difficulty was I able to drag myself to the Louvre, and I almost collapsed when I entered the majestic hall where the very blessed Goddess of Beauty, our beloved Venus of Milo, stood on her pedestal. I lay for a long time at her feet and wept so violently that a stone would have taken pity on me. And the Goddess herself looked down at me so compassionately and yet with such despair, as if she wished to say: "Can you not see that I have no arms and therefore cannot help you?" [5]

Whatever the nature of his crippling illness, the agony that he suffered leaps from every line of this letter he wrote to his brother Maximilian on 11th September 1848:

> I shall in the near future describe for you in some detail my illness, on which you, as a doctor, might be able to throw some light. Neither I nor my doctors can make head or tail of it. But this I do know: I have in the past three months suffered greater torture than the Spanish Inquisition could ever have devised. This living death cannot be called life, especially with all the pain. Last winter, thanks to a Hungarian charlatan, I harboured great hopes of recovery, but all his miraculous infusion achieved was to rob me of my remaining strength. Enough. Even if I do not immediately die, life for me is forever lost, and yet I love life with such fervour! I shall climb no more beautiful mountain peaks, I shall not kiss a woman's lips, nor even enjoy a good roast beef in merrily feasting company; my lips are paralysed, like my feet; I can no longer eat solids and I no longer secrete. I can neither chew nor sh[it]… I am fed like a little bird. [6]

He sought help from a variety of physicians, most of whom were banished unceremoniously by Mathilde. One of the best who suffered this fate was Leopold Wertheim (1810–90). Mortified at how Mathilde had treated him (she had given him a black eye), Heine expressed his embarrassment in a letter to the doctor of 5th April 1849:

> It is only in recent days that I have acquired another German secretary, otherwise I would have already sounded off many times about the cause of my unhappiness, which has filled me so often with bitterness. I refer of course to the *madness* of a beloved creature which erupts every so often and which is as unaccountable as it is incurable. Nothing can be done, and there is no point in complaining. All one can do is to be calm, patient and merciful. [7]

One doctor who was not given his marching orders by Mathilde was a Hungarian – David Gruby (1810–98) – who, despite Heine's reservations (see above), did his best to alleviate the poet's agony. Wounds on his spine were kept open, so that morphine could be dripped directly into them. Heine's condition gradually worsened, and eventually his vital functions failed him. To Alexandre Dumas, in a long letter of 8th February 1855, he wrote:

> [...] cramps in my throat and chest, which threaten to suffocate me at any moment, do not allow me to prolong this dictation much longer; my doctor has even ordered me not to speak at all. [8]

Karl Hillebrand, Heine's secretary around 1850, in a letter to Hermann Hüffer of 7th January 1876, has left us a fascinating account of how the poet dictated and revised poems such as 'Laß die heil'gen Parabolen'[1] during the *Matratzengruft* years:

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1 *'Laß die heil'gen Parabolen'*: See 'Supplement to *Lazarus* (1)', p. 165.

> He had become hard of hearing, his eyes were closed, and it was only with difficulty that his emaciated finger could prize open the weary eyelids whenever he desired to see something. His legs were paralysed, his whole body shrivelled, and each morning he was lifted up onto a chair by a woman – he could not abide a man doing such a thing – while the bed was made. He could not tolerate even the slightest noise. His suffering was so violent that, to get a little rest (mostly four hours' sleep), he had to take morphine in three different ways. It was during these sleepless nights that he would compose his most wonderful poems. He dictated to me the entire *Romanzero*.[1] Every poem was utterly complete by the morning. But then began a process of polishing which lasted for hours, during which I served as a whetstone, or rather he used my inexperienced youth much as Molière had used Louison's ignorance by asking me about melody, tone, clarity and so on. Every present and past tense was carefully weighed, the suitability of every obsolete or unusual word tested, every elision resolved, every redundant adjective struck out, and here and there corrections were made whose purpose was to give the appearance of nonchalance. [9]

The end finally came on 17th February 1856 at five o'clock in the morning. He was fifty-eight years old. The funeral took place on 20th February – a simple ceremony at Montmartre Cemetery. About a hundred people followed the funeral procession – among them Alexandre Dumas, Théophile Gautier and Camille Selden.

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1 *Romanzero*: The third of Heine's published collections, though outlawed in Austria and Prussia (where an arrest warrant had been issued against him for his anti-German political verse of *Deutschland. Ein Wintermärchen*, published earlier in the year), went into four editions between October and December 1851, selling 21,000 copies. It brought him much-needed financial relief: he had lost a substantial portion of his savings following the financial crisis that accompanied the February revolution, and the pension that he had drawn since 1840 from the French government had been discontinued with the formation of the Republic in 1848.