

Die Harzreise

H.Heine

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In 1824 the young Heine (he was not yet 27) left Göttingen and embarked on a four week long trip by foot through the Harz down to Weimar, where he met Goethe, and then back to Göttingen via Erfurt and Kassel. Only a part of that trip was written down, namely the first five days in Oberharz involving Goslar and Brocken. A continuation was planned, but Heine lost interest. To historians of literature this is a great shame, how much would they have not given to have a first-hand account of Heines audience with the ageing Goethe? (As it turned out the meeting of minds, as most such meetings, was a mutual disappointment. Heine was aghast at the discrepancy between the literary institution and the vain old man himself, and this certainly did not endear the young, probably quite arrogant man, to the old sage.)

The introductory words of the short travel account in which he sarcastically characterizes Göttingen (famous for its sausages and university) have become classical setting the frivolous tone to follow. Heines attitude to the university and learning was mixed. This is not unusual. The year after this trip he defended a doctoral thesis in law and converted to Protestantism changing his first name by substituting Christian from the more plebeian Harry. The conversion to Protestantism was unashamedly opportunistic, providing, in his words, his ticket to Europe. The Harzreise was published the following year.

The text is very short, intermittently interrupted by lengthy poems. On one hand it is a straightforward reportage, Heine lets the reader know where he is, where he is heading. He gives a running commentary on the beauties of the landscape, which must have been rather exotic, a piece of wilderness thrown into the middle of a German densely populated 'Kulturlandschaft'. He does his best, but the evocation of nature is not really Heines forte and after a few more youthful attempts he would soon abandon such ambitions. What he is better at, and this shows already in this early work, is to reveal the pomposity of exalted nature-worship. The longest and the most central section concerns Brocken, the highest peak of Harz, immortalized by Goethe in Faust, and of course long before that being veiled in myth about consorting witches, still providing to this day spice for the tourist trade. Heine climbs the peak, not without effort, describing to the reader how the forest of tall trees shrivels as the altitude increases and the heat is being dissipated. How individual trees struggle to get a foothold in the stony ground and when they finally succeed being rewarded by a firm hold on the same (Heine cannot resist the obvious metaphor of how the same thing holds for people who have to struggle against obstacles in life). I did the same climb almost two hundred years later, on bicycle, on an uneven asphalted road, leading straight up to the bald top. And just as Heine I did not encounter a deserted place but a mass of people and solid buildings. Heine was spared the full extent of the mass-tourism of today, as well as the huge bulidings and erections that now mar the place, but even at his time there was a Brockenhaus providing lodging and meals and a lot of enthusiastic tourists. Heine is in particular intrigued by a pretty young lady traveling with her mother

and an indelible gentleman of a taciturn disposition. Heine, not indifferent to the opposite sex, and confident of the mutuality, pays her court, and manages a lengthy conversation with the two ladies, the inanities of their thoughts and opinions just about balanced by the fair charms of the the young lady, still unmarried although in her very bloom. (Not an unusual position for very pretty women to find themselves in Heine remarks.) At the sunset the entire party of people are summoned by the host of Brockenhaus to admire the sublimity of *der Sonnenuntergang* (a procedure to be repeated in the morning by the same party now rather hung-over). Heine makes some sarcastic comments as to the exalted expressions. To a modern reader this reads strangely familiar. The sunset ritual is followed by a roaring party where everybody gets thoroughly plastered. As usual Heine recounts in detail his dreams during the night. Are those dreams for real, or has he only made them up? The vehicle of an imaginary dream is an excellent one in order to convey things past the censor, a state-appointed demon with whom Heine had to contend with in all his writing.

The walking on foot does not differ that much from the riding of a bike, the same kind of freedom and the same kind of intimacy with the trip. The routines are strikingly similar, the finding of a *Gaststätte* in the evening, to find lodging and board. The deep sleep during the night (in the case of Heine vivid with dream) and then the expectant mood in the morning. Heine peppers his account with philosophical reflections and humorous remarks, some trite, some interesting and occasionally even profound, but almost always funny. At his first morning he looks at the pictures on the wall showing the execution of Louis XVI and similar scenes, remarking that at such times it is nice to be drinking hot coffee and being assured that your own head is firmly attached to its body. He remarks during his stay in Goslar that you are particularly susceptible to the horrors of a ghost story when you are sleeping in a strange place in a strange room, not knowing what kind of atrocities may have been committed there in the past. And sure enough he has a nightmare. More thoughtful are his remarks that as we grow up and extend our knowledge, we also become more discriminating and lose that immediate touch with our surroundings that characterize the child. What we gain in extension of experience we lose in its depth. Those ruminations are provoked by him encountering an old lady confined to her kitchen for the past quarter-century. He speculates that to her this limited environment must be endowed with a deep meaning. Every little implement must be equipped with a soul, just as in the fairy tales for Children (and he is here clearly thinking of those recently published by Grimm) even the inanimate objects think and speak.

The pomposity of learning versus the innocence and immediacy of ignorance are pitted against each other, and surely Heine tended to idolize the latter (maybe this is why he was so charmed by that illiterate shopgirl in Paris, whom he subsequently married, to the consternation of his friends.) At Brocken he flips through the pages of the guest book and turns his nose down at all the inanities which you can find expressed there. Surely a somewhat cheap source of entertainment. I am not sure it would have been so pleasant to meet him in the flesh and be the victim of his scorn. But that would go for most historical personages, who after all are never to be your personal acquaintances, but play roles more similar to those of fairy tale people.

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