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# Simon von Geldern and the amulets of the Constant Prince

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Seltsame Grille des Volkes! Es verlangt seine Geschichte aus der Hand des Dichters und nicht aus der Hand des Historikers. Es verlangt nicht den treuen Bericht nackter Tatsachen, sondern jene Tatsachen wieder aufgelöst in die ursprüngliche Poesie, woraus sie hervorgegangen. Das wissen die Dichter, und nicht ohne geheime Schadenlust modeln sie willkürlich die Völkererinnerungen, vielleicht zur Verhöhnung stoltztrockner Historiographen und pergamentener Staatsarchivare [...].

Heinrich Heine, *Die Reise von München nach Genua*

## Hephaestus's attic

In the fabric of the diaspora's small and large stories in which identities and affinities are entrenched Heine also constructs his memories according to the tradition of the Jewish "family novel" in which the events of an individual's life become part of a "biography of an epoch"<sup>1</sup> and an imaginative structure of identity in a typically associative and uneven tableau.

The pages dedicated to the inhabitants of his grandparents' home in Düsseldorf are a testimony to such asymmetry. They offer the reader both truth and falsehood, the fragment of an anything but traditional *Bildung*, a portrait of the condition of a certain part of German Jewry and, additionally, patchy but suggestive details of a family much less orthodox than we have been led to believe.

Like protective deities of his eccentric education the poet Heine evokes two relatives with the same name (both called Simon von Geldern) but with different destinies: an uncle and a great-uncle. Rather similar characters, as the passionate scholar of Jewish life in Germany, David Kaufmann,<sup>2</sup> notes, these two passed through the

<sup>1</sup> Walter Robert-Tornow, *Goethe in Heines Werken* (Bremen: Europäischer Hochschulverlag, 2010), p. 6.

<sup>2</sup> David Kauffmann, *Aus Heinrich Heine's Abnensaal* (Breslau: Schlesische Buchdruckerei, 1896), p. 178.



richly emblematic years of emancipation between the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries and left profound traces in the young Heine's universe.

Proceeding backwards along the maternal line's family tree, which tradition would hold pious and orthodox,<sup>3</sup> after his mother who "sie that Alles mögliche, um Aberglauben und Poesie von mir zu entfernen".<sup>4</sup> and who established readings and a program of studies for the boy according to the spirit of the Enlightenment, Heine first remembers the rather picturesque figure of his uncle Simon, as the coarse references to the lines of his face and to his bearing emphasize.

Jetzt aber [...], will ich wieder zu meiner eigenen Mutter und ihrer Sippschaft zurückkehren, in weiterer Besprechung des Einflusses, der von dieser Seite auf meine geistige Bildung ausgeübt wurde. Nach meiner Mutter beschäftigte sich mit letzterer ganz besonders ihr Bruder, mein Oheim Simon de Geldern. Er ist todt seit zwanzig Jahren. Er war ein Sonderling von unscheinbarem, ja sogar närrischem Äußerem. Eine kleine, gehäbige Figur, mit einem bläßlichen, strengen Gesichte, dessen Nase zwar griechisch gradlinigt, aber gewiß um ein Drittel länger war, als die Griechen ihre Nasen zu tragen pflegten. [...] Er ging ganz altfränkisch gekleidet, trug kurze Beinkleider, weißseidne Strümpfe, Schnallenschuhe und nach der alten Mode einen ziemlich langen Zopf, der, wenn das kleine Mädchen durch die Straßen trippelte, von einer Schulter zur anderen flog, allerley Kapriolen schnitt und sich über seinen eignen Herrn hinter seinem Rücken zu mokiren schien.<sup>5</sup>

Beyond his nose, which vies with that of Gumpelino in *The Baths of Lucca*, and his bizarre appearance, in Simon there lurks a multi-colored weave of aristocratic and bourgeois values for Heine; Sieg-

<sup>3</sup> Adolf Strodtmann confirms this after having seen all of the von Geldern family's documents still available at the middle of the century (*Heinrich Heine's Leben und Werke*, Berlin: Franz Duncker, 1867), vol. 1, p. 4.

<sup>4</sup> Heinrich Heine, *Memoiren* (1854), in *Düsseldorfer Heine Ausgabe*, edited by Manfred Windfuhr im Auftrag der Landeshauptstadt Düsseldorf (Hamburg: Hoffmann u. Campe, 1973ss.), vol. 15, p. 65. Here and following indicated by DHA and followed by the number of the volume.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 67-68.



bert Salomon Praver even suggests a mixture of Hellenic and Jewish features.<sup>6</sup> Simon had a sense of honor and of extreme sobriety, and he led an idle and marginal life, which testifies to an existence not without contradictions that Jews had to face even in the age of liberty. The Jewish characteristics, which had been drawn in such irreverent ways, return idealized in the reference, certainly not new in Heine, to Spain and the identification of that odd uncle with Calderón's Constant Prince in a courageous and moving transfiguration. He was not a man who shed blood for pride or in the arrogant defense of his own dignity, like *The Surgeon of His Honor* – the poet, recalling another text by Calderón de la Barca, suggests – but knew how to resist all of the seductions of a world that had suddenly been opened up to him. “Nach weltlichen Begriffen war sein Leben ein verfehltes”,<sup>7</sup> he did not have a wife, children, nor even a job, and thus proved his life just as wasted as don Fernando's, the protagonist of Calderón's text; he too was alone, incapable of escaping his weaknesses, but not therefore any less steadfast against the arrogance of arms, the sirens of compromise and the enticements of “normality”. Furthermore, he remained faithful to his God and to a rigorous and sober idea of that which was good against the seductions of power and the reassurances of appearance.

War aber das Aeußere des Mannes nicht geeignet Respekt einzuflößen, so war sein Inneres, sein Herz desto respektabler, und es war das bravste und edelmütigste Herz, das ich hier auf Erden kennen lernte. Es war eine Ehrenhaftigkeit in dem Mann, die an den Rigorismus der Ehre in altspanischen Dramen erinnerte, und auch in der Treue glich er den Helden derselben: er hatte nie Gelegenheit, der ‘Arzt seiner Ehre’ zu werden, doch ein ‘standhafter Prinz’ war er, obgleich er nicht in vierfüßigen Trochäen deklamirte und gar nicht nach Todespalmen lechzte.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Siegbert Salomon Praver, *Heine's Jewish Comedy. A Study of his Portraits of Jews and Judaism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983), p. 676.

<sup>7</sup> Heinrich Heine, *Memoiren*, cit., p. ?.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*



It is uncertain just how much of this solemn fidelity Simon directed toward his nephew, but it is in his scant attention to the normal standards of propriety, the suggestion of a life lived within the margins of a dignified eccentricity and the familiarity with this impassioned and erudite bibliophile that Heine claims to have found the impulse to begin writing, both out of affection and out of objection:

So kümmerlich auch seine literarischen Bestrebungen waren, so regten sie doch vielleicht in mir die Lust zu schriftlichen Versuchen. Der Ohm schrieb einen alten steifen Kanzleystil [...] und konnte sich nicht leicht befreunden mit meiner Ausdrucksweise, die ihm zu leicht, zu spielend, zu irreverenziös vorkam, aber sein Eifer womit er mir die Hilfsmittel des geistigen Fortschritts zuwies, war für mich von größtem Nutzen. Er beschenkte schon den Knaben mit den schönsten, kostbarsten Werken, er stellte zu meiner Verfügung seine eigne Bibliothek, die an klassischen Büchern und wichtigen Tagesbröschuren so reich war, und er erlaubte mir sogar, auf dem Söller der Arche Noae in den Kisten herumzukramen, worin sich die alten Bücher und Skripturen des seligen Großvaters befanden.<sup>9</sup>

Awkward, trotting, irritable and with a nose at one time considered “Greeks”, in Heine’s description Simon assumes all of the characteristics of a divinity. He resembles the ugly, lame and irascible god Hephaestus and, like him, reigns over a secret space where he manipulates metals. As opposed to the bowels of the earth, however, von Geldern preferred an attic, a dusty space of memory where he could gather together relics of the gods’ glorious past along with what were by that point useless pieces of rubbish. Here Heine encounters a deviation from traditional Judaism evoked with an indifference that only the passing of time, baptism, process of assimilation and a carefully considered concealment had made possible. He recalls materials that have nothing to do with the reassuring bourgeois niceties that stand out in the notebooks of Moritz

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid*, p. 69.



Oppenheim, full of antique feelings and new values; instead he evokes the unsettling tools from the rather precise stage directions of *Der Doktor Faust's* first act that are frames of the “master wizard”’s work with “black magic”:<sup>10</sup> maps, phials and instruments for astrological and alchemical study along with prohibited books next to harmless volumes of medicine and philosophy. Here the boy ventures into 16<sup>th</sup> century occult texts and encounters a number of *Phantasten*, or at least this is how he defines them. He encounters Paracelsus, who in *Zur Geschichte der Religion und Philosophie in Deutschland* he would call a “charlatan”; as well as Agrippa von Nettesheim, whose book, *De occulta philosophia*, he writes (betraying an unanticipated familiarity) he saw then “for the first time”, a book which had also been dear to his grandfather who, according to Kaufmann, had dedicated all of his free time to just such reading and scientific research.<sup>11</sup> With an outrageous sense of triviality Heine lists proofs of heresy against his grandfather, Gottschalk von Geldern, the untarnished and impeccably religious physician who, according to Jewish historiography, “had been able to commendably combine German culture and fidelity to Judaism”,<sup>12</sup> drawing up a list of transgressions that goes well beyond the simple bibliographic curiosities of a man of science<sup>13</sup> and that sets new variables into Heine’s genealogy which are anything but expected.

Gottschalk von Geldern’s mature years (he had been born in 1724) fall in the period of the violent conflict between two respect-

<sup>10</sup> Heinrich Heine, *Der Doktor Faust, Ein Tanzpoem* (1851), DHA, vol. 9. On p. 11 of the Italian edition of *Der Doktor Faust* one reads: “Along the library walls there were astrological and alchemical instruments (map and planisphere, twisted planetary figures, and various alembics) [...]”.

<sup>11</sup> David Kauffmann, *Aus Heinrich Heine’s Abnensaal*, cit., p. 169.

<sup>12</sup> G. K., *Heinrich Heine*, in “Ost und West: Illustrierte Monatsschrift für das gesamte Judentum”, 1 (1906), coll. 23-28, here col. 26.

<sup>13</sup> In *Die Heimkehr (Der bleiche, herbstliche Halbmond)* Heine speaks of alchemy as scandalous to the hearts of the devoted: “Der Sohn bricht aus in Lachen:/Drei Jäger zechen im Stern,/Die machen Gold und lehren/Mir das Geheimnis gern.//Die Mutter wirft ihm die Bibel/Ins magre Gesicht hinein:/So willst du, Gottverfluchter,/Ein Straßenräuber sein!//Sie hören pochen ans Fenster,/Und sehn eine winkende Hand;/Der tote Vater steht draußen/Im schwarzen Pred’gergewand” (DHA, vol. 1/1, p. 238).



ed and rival rabbis, Jacob Embden and Jonathan Eybeschütz, which divided the central European community. This conflict revealed the persistence of the Sabbatai Zevi (1626-1676) heresy within the universe of the Ashkenazi Jews and helped to establish among the orthodox an attitude of closed-mindedness toward any form of transgression.

Eybeschütz, who did not at all hide his preference for kabbalistic theology to that of the Aggadah, in messianism saw a therapeutic means of treating the depression of exile and considered “theoretical Sabbatianism” healthy for Jewish life. In Emden in 1751 he was accused of fabricating and circulating amulets with references to Sabbatai Zevi<sup>14</sup> and of having inserted quotations from the texts of Judah Leib Prossnitz, a noted adept of the sect, into his works. The controversy split the Jewish world into accusers and apologists, while without any proof the charge of heresy was leveled against him and an immense caution spread among those who cultivated esoteric practices. Trials were initiated, books were published and evidence was accumulated. Eybeschütz however was reinstated because of the fear of rupture, the support of certain Gentiles and because the accusations did not seem sufficient. However, suspicion did not cease (even after his death in 1764 the factions continued to fight) and his adversaries found indirect but convincing confirmation of their suspicions when the youngest son of the great rabbi proclaimed himself a Sabbatian prophet and not a few of his followers joined Jacob Frank’s new sect.

Much is known of the von Geldern’s family riches, prestige, the liberties of the German *Hoffaktoren*, which had been earned by loaning notable sums at great risk and small profit margin to the Elector Palantine Johann Wilhelm in exchange for a residence permit (with house and synagogue in 1712) as well as a noble title of which no

<sup>14</sup> Sabbatai Zevi, who proclaimed himself messiah in 1624, had initiated the greatest hopes of “return” in the communities dispersed throughout the world only to later convert to Islam in 1666 after a preaching that liquidated the Law and used the Kaballah as a justification of antinomianism. See here Gershom Scholem, *Sabbatay Sevi - Il Messia mistico* (1626-1676), trans. by Caterina Ranchetti (Turin: Einaudi, 2000).



trace remains. Much is also known of the misadventures, trials, and inexorable decline of the family and its pious Judaism. “Whoever at the time defined themselves as Jewish lived according to rigid rules. There were not as of yet any reformatory movements”, Fritz Heyman writes in the most detailed of all research on Simon von Geldern.<sup>15</sup> And yet the secret letters, the grandfather’s instruments, the von Gelderns’ familiar relationships with Eybeschütz and his “school” – chosen precisely for Simon, the most promising of the children and destined to become a rabbi – and that thesis of the cousin Moyses Emanuel von Geldern on the medicinal use of antinomianism<sup>16</sup> (and in particular on the natural sulfur of antinomianism), object of the *Currus triumphalis antimonii* of the German alchemist Basilius Valentinus in 1646, all confirm the family’s interests in magical and esoteric practices.<sup>17</sup> All of this, combined with the attraction to Sabbatianism, which were most likely forgotten by the children (Heine’s rational mother with her enlightenment readings and the erudite uncle Simon concerned with accumulating consensus between provincial wise men), became reserves of experience for a “romantic” nephew who would soon return to the themes of magic and religious deviation with biting sarcasm<sup>18</sup> or, perhaps, even secret acceptance.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Fritz Heymann, *Der Chevalier von Geldern: eine Chronik vom Abendteuer der Juden* (Amsterdam: Querido Verlag, 1937), p. 257.

<sup>16</sup> Moyses Emanuel von Geldern’s doctoral thesis was defended in Duisburg in 1742; prior to him only Jacob Gompertz had received the title of doctor in 1737. See Monika Richarz, *Der Eintritt der Juden in die akademischen Berufe* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1974), p. 59.

<sup>17</sup> Johann Wilhelm, the creator of the family’s fortunes (and, prior to him, Karl Ludwig), had welcomed famous alchemists at court and had demonstrated a particular interest in occultism. His extremely religious successor, Karl Philipp, did not seem to follow in his brother’s footsteps, even if stories circulated telling of one of his gold pieces having been obtained with the transmutation of lead. See Annelise Stemper, *Die Medaillen der Pfalzgrafen und Kurfürsten bei Rhein: pfälzische Geschichte im Spiegel der Medaille* (Worms: Werner, 1979), vol. 1, p. XXXIII.

<sup>18</sup> See, for example, lyric poems like “Der weisse Elephant”, “Schlachtfeld bei Hastings” or “Freundschaft, Liebe, Stein der Weisen” (Zu Lyrisches Intermezzo, XL).

<sup>19</sup> On Heine’s “return” to kabbalistic themes at the completion of *Romanzero* see Ralf Häfner, *Die Weisheit des Silen: Heinrich Heine und die Kritik des Lebens* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2006), pp. 374-377.



## A cautious and unreliable narrator

Up in the attic there are also hidden traces of the adventurous and peripatetic existence of the great-uncle Simon, to whom Heine dedicated a portrait of singular accuracy among the fragments of his memoirs. The history of his “discovery” is an extraordinary strategic construction worthy of attention.

There are three sources that come together in a biographical fabric above all rich in gaps and imprecisions. The most important is the fascination of having to “narrate the family”, a prerogative, in this case, of the women of the house who give rise to old legends, ceaselessly varying stories of the “great champions of the mother’s side”, men of science respected and loved by the community, together with this eccentric great-uncle of whom no one however seems to be embarrassed, aware that a life dedicated to the kabbalah gave him mystique and distinction and a nobleman and poet to this bourgeois clan on its way to decline.

Heine then relates hidden and rediscovered documents: the notes conserved in two “notebooks” that he judges incomprehensible, obscure, or too manneristic to be taken into consideration if not for fragments and with an arbitrariness that at times borders on falsification; and a book that gives him the documentary comfort of a brief biographical introduction.

Trusting the memories of aunts and cousins, those “familial bards” who knew how to “sing and say many things” but certainly, as notes Karpeles, without much of a historical sense,<sup>20</sup> as well as documents that were so private or rare that they were unverifiable, Heine declares his story unreliable from the very beginning, more unreliable than the inevitable vagueness of autobiography, confined as it is by ambiguous material and subject to memory, allows one to imagine.

Once his credibility is compromised, without theorizing any narrative inauthenticity or a propensity for deception,<sup>21</sup> Heine manipu-

<sup>20</sup> See Gustav Karpeles, *Heinrich Heine. Aus seinem Leben und seiner Zeit* (Leipzig: Verlag Adolph Titze, 1899), p. 1.

<sup>21</sup> See Lezek Drong, *Masks and Icons. Subjectivity in Post-Nietzschean Autobiography* (Frankfurt: Lang, 2001), p. 90.



lates memories as he sees fit, claiming exclusive possession and suggesting to the reader a plea-bargain in the exchange between the enjoyment of the narration and the reticence of what is narrated. He is then able to suppress elements of reality between irony and errors, removing not unimportant traces of awareness and judgement<sup>22</sup> and leaving, in their place, an immense space to the partiality of his emotions with a “negotiated sociality” on the meaning of the past and the particular past of an assimilated Jew. A negotiated inequality that distinguishes between Gentiles and Jews and warily opens to those who “know” the wide and secret territories, inaccessible to those who have no memory of the hopes and the turmoil of Messianism between the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries.

“Meiner Großoheim, welcher ebenfalls Simon de Geldern hieß und auch der Chevalier und der Morgenländer genannt wurde, muß ein sonderbarer Heiliger gewesen seyn. Den Zunamen der ‘Morgenländer’ empfing er weil er große Reisen im Oriente gemacht und sich bey seiner Rückkehr immer in orientalische Tracht kleidete”.<sup>23</sup> The reconstruction is full of lacunae. Heine recalls his great-uncle having travelled through the maritime cities of northern Africa and Morocco, and that he had spent time in Jerusalem. He does not speak of the fact that his great-uncle had also followed in the footsteps of Moses Cordovero (1522-1570) and Issac Luria (1534-1572) on a pilgrimage to Safed on a quest for enlightenment, and lingers instead on the unsubstantiated story that would have him the head of a group of marauders in Morocco. Here, Heine adds not without a sense of irony and most likely alluding to the appellation of Cavalier which Simon had generously given himself (and that he does not deny him, preferring the aristocratic *de* to a *von* not evocative enough in its humble polyonymity), he must have learned that little bit about horses and knights that could serve him in order to both distinguish

<sup>22</sup> See Andreas Solbach, *Die Rolle des Erzählers in Heinrich Heines “Der Rabbi von Bacherach”*, in *Harry... Heinrich... Henri... Heine: Deutscher, Jude, Europäer*, edited by Dietmar Goltschnigg, Charlotte Grollegg-Edler and Peter Revers (Berlin: Erich Schmidt Verlag, 2008), pp. 78-86.

<sup>23</sup> Heinrich Heine, *Memoiren*, cit., p. 71.



and save himself once back in the Occident. In the end, however, his entry ticket into high society was not the noble pretensions, but that fantastical title, even if certified by esteemed rabbis, of doctor of science in kabbalistic sciences, which he had brought with him from Safed and which Heine does not mention; only an indirect allusion to Simon's alchemistic and kabbalistic activities in the courts of Europe, which dims in his derision of the gullibility of those in power. Heine prefers instead to focus on the pleasure-seeking life of the Cavalier – more Don Giovanni than Faust, to underline the passage from the age of spiritualism to that of sensuality theorized in the *Romantische Schule* (with the aunts who shake their heads at the amorous adventures and remain indifferent to his esoteric vocation):

An den verschiedenen Höfen wo er sich lange aufhielt glänzte er auch durch seine persönliche Schönheit und Stattlichkeit, so wie auch durch sein vergebliches Geheimwissen, und niemand wagte es ihn, bey seinen hohen Gönnern herabzusetzen. Der Geist der Intrigue fürchtete der Geist der Cabala. Nur sein eigener Übermuth konnte ihn ins Verderben stürzen und sonderbar geheimnisvoll schüttelten die alten Muhmen ihre greisen Köpfelein, wenn sie etwas von dem galanten Verhältniß munkelten worin der Morgenländer mit einer sehr erlauchten Dame stand und dessen Entdeckung ihn nöthigte aufs schleunigste den Hof und das Land zu verlassen. Nur durch die Flucht mit Hinterlassung aller seinen Habseligkeiten konnte er dem sichern Tode entgehen und eben seiner erprobten Reiterkunst verdankte er seine Rettung. Nach diesem Abentheuer scheint er in England einen sichern aber kümmerlichen Zufluchtsort gefunden zu haben.<sup>24</sup>

There are then the lost and rediscovered texts. The first, a manuscript hidden in the attic, contains Simon's travel diaries.<sup>25</sup> Fifty-two

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 71-72.

<sup>25</sup> Subsequently, the diary with part of its pages would be reintroduced, in Hebrew, by David Kauffmann in the appendix to the 1896 book; in German, by Paul Diamant in 1913 [*Die Memoiren des Simeon von Geldern, Heinrich Heines Grossbeim*, in "Archiv für jüdische Familienforschung, Kunstgeschichte und Museumswesen" 1 (1913), pp. 18-22; pp. 33-42] and Ludwig Rosental in 1978, *Heinrich Heines Grossbeim Simon von Geldern*



pages full of notes on expenditures and movements up until 1756 (beginning in 1750), most likely dedicated to the family and to his devout financiers, and twenty-one notebook pages with the names of those who could host him, citations from the Talmud, more often than not related to his name, and mysterious remedies, “alberne kabbalistische Rezepte” in Karpeles’ words,<sup>26</sup> for fever and seasickness with the design of related amulets.

These pages of life lived could have given concreteness to the boy’s fantasies if only he had been able to comprehend their meaning. Heine however was forced, he affirms, to retreat before the hieroglyphics of incomprehensible handwriting and to content himself with the French that at times emerged as familiar but that, in reality, seems to be limited to rare glimpses.

On the basis of the great-uncle’s notebook he manages to verify very little. Perhaps it had been written in Arabic, Syriac and Coptic characters out of caution, but what is quite unique is the recurrence of French quotations; for example, the line “Ou l’innocence perit, c’est un crime vivre”. Certain observations are also quite striking, they too written in a French that seems to have been the author’s habitual idiom.<sup>27</sup>

With the exception of a few words in Aramaic or Ladino, the book is written in the Jewish handwriting in use among Germans at that time. Hebrew was not unknown to Heine as he had attended the hedder for two years, had probably even celebrated his bar mitzvah<sup>28</sup> and

(Kastellaun: Aloys Henn Verlag). The most critically careful and culturally innovative source is Fritz Heymann’s book, *Der Chevalier von Geldern: eine Chronik vom Abenteuer der Juden*, cit.; in addition in the case of Simon von Geldern the extremely well-documented book of Ludwig Rosenthal, later incorporated in the 1978 collection of materials, *Heinrich Heine als Jude* (Frankfurt: Ullstein, 1973), in particular pp. 70-85.

<sup>26</sup> Gustav Karpeles, *Heinrich Heine*, cit., p. 7.

<sup>27</sup> Heinrich Heine, *Memoiren*, cit., p. 72. The line (with an inversion at the beginning) comes from *Iphigenie en Tauride* (1758) by Claude Guimond de la Touche. It does not appear in the conserved pages of Simon’s travel diary, but in a letter of 1762.

<sup>28</sup> Reconstructing Heine’s linguistic, cultural and religious expertise is controversial. In any case, Ruth L. Jacobi’s “classical” analysis – *Heinrich Heines jüdisches Erbe* (Bonn: Bouvier Verlag, 1978) –, which demonstrates (as does Myriam Bienenstock and Israel Tabak’s work before hers) a good knowledge of the Scripture and the rules, in addition to a certain familiarity with Hebrew, above all with that of the prayers. See also



did not dislike adorning his texts with words and expressions from the language of the elders.

The presumed illegibility of the notebook<sup>29</sup> accentuates the mystery of these cipher-like memories – “on account of caution” Heine writes, covering up his great-uncle’s ambiguous activities with both ignorance and irony. And it is precisely its more transgressive aspects that seem to be denied the nephew due to the confusion of languages and the presence of the mystery. He does not seem to know the relationships with those suspected of heresy (in London, Hayyim Samuel Jacob Falk, a famous kabbalist, on account of extraordinary powers; and in Germany, master and mentor, the same Eybeschütz),<sup>30</sup> he does not possess any notes on the magic formulas that protected him from fever and seasickness, nor of how much

Mark H. Gelber, *Heines jüdisches Wortschatz*, in Dietmar Golschnigg - Charlotte Grollegg-Edler - Peter Revers (edited by), *op. cit.*, pp. 101-121; see also Ludwig Rosenthal, *Heinrich Heine als Jude*, cit. It is also controversial to claim that Heine actually celebrated his bar mitzvah, but on this hypothesis see Mark H. Gelber, *Heinrich Heine und das Judentum gestern und heute*, in *Heinrich Heine und das Judentum*, edited by Walter Grab *et al.* (Augsburg: Presse Druck, 1994), pp. 8-13, here p. 10.

<sup>29</sup> Max Brod was the one who thought of deciphering them and, dedicating particular attention to these pages and getting to know the Kaufmann edition in the diaries of Simon von Geldern, demonstrated the similarity between certain of the great-uncle’s notes (in particular, the scene of the vision that Heine remembers) and the theme of the flying Dutchman in Schnabelewopski’s fragment. See Max Brod, *Heinrich Heine* (Amsterdam: Albert de Lange, 1935), p. 15.

<sup>30</sup> Lazarus chose, as it was said, the best student of Eybeschütz, Samuel Helmann, to be the boy’s master of the Talmud. Helmann, Hymann writes, taught him “gefährliche Kenntnisse” of which, he adds, Simon would never speak among his co-religionists (*Der Chevalier von Geldern...*, cit., p. 257). Nor are traces of a relationship of with the controversial rabbi of Hamburg missing, he who guided him with warm letters of recommendation, in the meetings which intimidated the Cavalier who was normally anything but timid and, above all, in the invitation to stop for the first time in Safed on pilgrimage to the tomb of Simeon bar Yohai in order to find the way of repentance and illumination (see David Kaufmann, *Aus Heinrich Heine’s Abnensaal*, cit., p. 142 and Ludwig Rosenthal, *Heinrich Heines Grossenheim Simon von Geldern*, cit., pp. 101, 187). In London in 1747 he was hosted by Falk, a magician and kabbalist with not a little of the odor of heresy about himself (and with whom he would fight in 1760) and among the letters of recommendation of his co-religionists we find that of another “suspicious” personality, the rabbi Moses Brandeis who belonged to a family that was close to the Frankist movement.



he used the Kabbalah to solve “practical problems” among respectable and influential Gentiles.<sup>31</sup> Yet, as Ralph Häfner has demonstrated,<sup>32</sup> Heine knew and quoted Moses ben Jacob Cordovero, a kabbalist of the mystical school of Safed, and was interested in the kabbalah and the amulets as certain scattered and private observations that accompany the reading of the pages of Schudt’s *Jüdische Merckwürdigkeiten*, which describe the magical practices (and their condemnation) in the German communities, reveal.<sup>33</sup>

Heine attributes the explanation of that which Simon’s “caution” forced him to hide and which he, in spite of his reticence, seems to grasp to another literary personality who shares the Constant Prince’s noble birth, disregard for danger and purity of heart. His great-uncle can be compared to Huon di Bordeaux “as the knight Huon di Bordeaux was once to the sultan of Babylon”, Heine writes, the knight who received the help of the elf Oberon and who on his long journeys carried magical objects that allow him to overcome any test.

We however are unable to know whether the nephew knew of the ridiculous details of Simon’s service to the princes who hired him in 1777 as a kabbalist of the “Von der strikter Observanz” Lodge, sending him to find a sixteen-year-old Master Gugomos – an adventurer on the run for debt after having made himself out to be a great initiate who had reached the most elevated levels of consciousness – and then nominating him “Hof Cabbalist, Geheimer Magischer Rath, öffentlich accreditierte Hoffactor und Agent des Landgrafen und Erbprinzen von Hessen Darmstad”,<sup>34</sup> a position that, without showing any particular powers, he comfortably held

<sup>31</sup> Ludwig Rosentahl, *Heinrich Heines Grosssoheim...*, cit., p. 85.

<sup>32</sup> Ralf Häfner, *Die Weisheit des Silen*, cit., p. 373.

<sup>33</sup> In the notes to *Der Rabbi von Bacherach* Windfuhr writes: “Ganz neu und sehr bedeutsam sind die Eintragungen über die Kabbala, die jüdische Mystik. Sie verweisen auf einen esoterischen Aspekt, den man bei Heines Verhältnis zum Judentum bisher kaum beachtet hat” (zu Schudt II/1, S. 71, 74, 205, 207, 208; IV/2, p. 19) (DHA, vol. 5, p. 730). See Johann Jakob Schudt, *Jüdische Merckwürdigkeiten, vorstellende sich Curieuses und Denckwürdiges in den neuern Zeiten bey einigen Jahrhunderten mit denen in alle IV. Theile der Welt, sonderlich durch Teutschland, zerstreuten Juden zugetragen* (Frankfurt: Hocker, 1714-1718).

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 62.



until the end of his life. However, Heine could not ignore as an unimportant element of identification in the constellation of propaganda and utopias<sup>35</sup> (and the Jewish press of the time remembered it with pride) that Simon von Gelder, who died in 1788,<sup>36</sup> had been the “suggestion-giver” of a book considered decisive in the question of Jewish emancipation in France and published in the same year as the storming of the Bastille, *Essai sur la régénération physique, morale et politique des Juifs* written by the priest Henri Grégoire, but already in circulation in Metz the previous year.<sup>37</sup>

The vagueness of the notes allows Heine space to entertain the fantastical identification of himself with that relative he never knew. The poet, who “never had any objectives outside of himself, only that which regarded his own personality, which never, or only rarely, goes beyond itself” as Moritz Veit writes regarding the *Reisebilder*,<sup>38</sup> on this occasion adventures in an apparent dismissal of his centrality, allowing the dreamlike and visionary book to get the better of the ironic and documentary one. At the eclipse of a writer always ready to manipulate, the invasion of fabulous images arrives with suggestive harmony, rich with references to experiences considered initiatory. It is then that Heine remembers having been able to speak unknown languages, to have travelled in unknown lands, to have seen his dreams materialize in a phantasmagoric perception of his double once he had allowed himself to be caught up in his great-uncle’s confused paths.

In diesen Träumen identifizirte ich mich gänzlich mit meinem Großohm und mit Grauem fühlte ich zugleich daß ich ein Anderer

<sup>35</sup> See Jacob Hessing, *Der Traum und der Tod: Heinrich Heines Poetik des Scheiterns* (Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2005), p. 140.

<sup>36</sup> Here we accept the date proposed by Heymann and Rosenthal on the basis of consistent evidence which changes the date of death suggested by Kaufmann by 14 years.

<sup>37</sup> In Claude Lamort’s edition (Metz 1789) on page 208 one reads: “J’ai pour garant un homme ben informé, et dont l’autorité n’est pas souspecte; c’est M. le doctor de Gueldres”.

<sup>38</sup> Moritz Veit’s review (“Gesellschafter”, 1820, Nr. 30) is cited in Michael Werner, *Rollenspiel oder Ichbezogenheit. Zum Problem der Selbstdarstellung in Heines Werk*, in “Heine Jahrbuch”, 18 (1979), pp. 99-117, here p. 103.



war und einer anderen Zeit angehörte und da gab es Oertlichkeiten, die ich nie vorher gesehen, da gab es Verhältnisse wovon ich früher keine Ahnung hatte, und doch wandelte ich dort mit sicherem Fuß und sicherem Verhalten. Da begegneten mir Menschen in brennend bunten, sonderbaren Trachten und mit abentheuerlich wüsten Physiognomien, und denen ich dennoch wie alten Bekannten die Hände drückte ihre wildfremde, niegehörte Sprache verstand ich, zu meiner Verwunderung antwortete ich ihnen sogar in derselben Sprache, während ich mit einer Heftigkeit gestikulirte, die mir nie eigen war und während ich sogar Dinge sagte, die mit meiner gewöhnlichen Denkweise widerwärtig kontrastirten. Dieser wunderliche Zustand dauerte wohl ein Jahr und obgleich ich wieder ganz zur Einheit des Selbstbewußtseins kam, blieben doch geheime Spuren in meiner Seele. Manche Idiosynchrasy, manche fatale Sympathien und Antipathien die gar nicht zu meinem Naturell passen, ja sogar manche Handlungen, die im Widerspruch mit meinen Denkweise sind, erkläre ich mir als Nachwirkungen aus jener Traumzeit, wo ich mein eigener Großoheim war. Wenn ich Fehler begehe, deren Entstehung mir unbegreiflich erscheint, schiebe ich sie gern auf Rechnung meines morgenländischen Doppeltgängers.<sup>39</sup>

The second printed testimonial is in a forgotten book on the highest shelf of the library, signaling the split between the great-uncle and the bourgeois universe in which Gottschalk von Geldern, doctor in medicine with honors in 1752, had successfully put down roots and which the children tried to resist: “es war ein Oratorium in französischen Versen, betitelt ‘Moses auf dem Horeb’, hatte vielleicht Bezug auf die erwähnte Vision, die Vorrede war aber in englischer Sprache geschrieben und von London datiert; die Verse, wie alle französische Verse, gereimtes lauwarmes Wasser, aber in der englischen Prosa der Vorrede verriet sich der Unmut eines stolzen Mannes, der sich in einer dürftigen Lage befindet?”<sup>40</sup>

<sup>39</sup> Heinrich Heine, *Memoiren*, cit., p. 73.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.* Simon von Geldern writes: “The author of this Performance is not known to the editor: he must therefore speak for itself. Yet will not impair, if it improve not,



Heine was wrong about the title; it was in fact called *The Israelites on Mount Horeb* and was dated 1773 (a text that at the time must have had a certain diffusion based on the fact that copies were to be found in Amsterdam, in London,<sup>41</sup> in Munich and in Paris), thus adding a new piece to the programmatic vagueness of his memories. He speaks of verses in French – while Simon’s text, signed “Dotto de Gueldre”, is composed in two languages – and uses this as a pretext for yet another criticism of the poetry of his adopted country. He therefore connects the oratorio to his great-uncle’s mystic vision of which stories were told at home (and which, according to the notebooks, seems to have been related, on the contrary, to love fantasies), while in reality the work re-elaborates the passage from Exodus (in particular XVII: 1-7), which narrates the “miracle” of the water that flows from the biblical Sinai.<sup>42</sup> And if Heine praises the meager introduction to the text in which, not without a bit of pride, the author’s precariousness is protagonist, it is only to emphasize yet again his identification – fruit even, Brintzer ventures, of a “biogenetischer Rohentwurf”<sup>43</sup> – with that strange figure.

Alles was man von ihm erzählte machte einen unauslöschlichen Eindruck auf mein junges Gemüth, und ich versenkte mich so tief in

the value of these verses that they offers to the Public at once a gratification of taste and an exercise of benevolence. For it must be owned, that the sole motive of printing them is relief to a gentleman in distress”, in Doctor de Gueldres, *The Israelites on Mount Horeb. An oratorio* (London: Cadell, 1773), p. 3.

<sup>41</sup> Here I refer to the only testimony of Carl Brintzer. *Heinrich Heine: Roman seines Lebens* (Hamburg: Hoffmann u. Campe, 1960), p. 29.

<sup>42</sup> Simon von Geldern allows himself a few liberties that are anything but simple, which Heine echoes with his incorrect title in which Moses appears; the Lord who in the Bible suggested (and guaranteed) the miracle is silent in the “modern” verses while it is Moses, similar to the wizard in Hofmannsthal’s *Traum von grosser Magie*, who with a strike of a cane causes the water to gush forth from the rock and slake the thirst of his people: “MOYSE: Grand Dieu, la foi la plus ardente/M’ordonne de tout espérer:/Tu ne peux tromper mon attente,/Ton peuple est tout près d’expirer:/Ranime sa force mourante/Pour te bénir et t’adorer./Moyse frappe le rocher: il en fort des torrents d’eau/LE CHOEUR: O prodige! O miracle! O puissance suprême!” (Doctor de Gueldres, *The Israelites on Mount Horeb*, cit., p. 11).

<sup>43</sup> Carl Brintzer, *Heinrich Heine: Roman seines Lebens*, cit., p. 27.



seine Irrfahrten und Schicksale, daß mich manchmal am hellen lichten Tage ein unheimliches Gefühl ergriff und es mir vorkam als sey ich selbst mein seliger Großoheim und als lebte ich nur eine Fortsetzung des Lebens jenes längst Verstorbenen! In der Nacht spiegelte sich dasselbe retrospektiv zurück in meine Träume. Mein Leben glich damals einem großen Journal, wo die obere Abtheilung die Gegenwart, den Tag mit seinen Tagesberichten und Tagesdebatten enthielt, während in der unteren Abtheilung, die poetische Vergangenheit, in fortlaufenden Nachträumen, wie eine Reihenfolge von Romanfeuilletons, sich phantastisch kundgab.<sup>44</sup>

Brod was the one responsible for drawing up a reasonable list of similarities between the poet and the great-uncle. Simon was the eldest, as was Heine; both of them fell in love with a cousin too unprepared to strike up a relationship; both of them demonstrated an obvious incapacity for mercantile activity and travelled in the hopes of receiving the help of wealthy relatives, Heine to Hamburg, Simon throughout the world, but not before having passed through London, Vienna, Munich and Italy and before having made French his second language.<sup>45</sup>

There are other characteristics that tie these two men together. Both risked their money and their lives without thinking much about the consequences, hoping to enjoy celestial pleasures while still on earth. Both of them did not shy away from defending the rights of the oppressed, and of the Jews in particular, while looking forward to the epoch of liberty which, in various ways and various moments, was connected to the French Revolution.

## How Jacob met Esau

The theatricality of identification, the programmatically ambiguous and elusive character of the story, the explication of new similarities between Jews and Gentiles and the magmatic character of

<sup>44</sup> Heinrich Heine, *Memoiren*, cit., p. 73.

<sup>45</sup> Max Brod, *Heinrich Heine*, cit., p. 13.



the epoch just passed all bring to a breaking point the “standard of normalcy”<sup>46</sup> which one expects from the description of an orthodox Jewish family in 18<sup>th</sup> century Germany and from the reasonable scanning of familial events connected in a precise historical sequence. Having undermined the reader’s expectations, the bewildering and provocative author is free to introduce a broader socio-communicative constellation into the multiple-perspective strategy of the *Memoiren* than the simple “telling-of-the-tale” and to suggest divergent perspectives on the phenomena that have been developed along the contrived timeline of the narration. Autobiographical memory becomes history, a knowledge resource for the social community, and manages to assemble, in the easily manipulable material of that which is personal, traces of renewal in European life: “The autobiography,” Fabrizio Cambi maintains, “becomes the protective hub for describing and explaining the dynamics of the historical process basing itself on the power of an I whose Romantic inheritance is transferred to the plane of ideological-political investigation”.<sup>47</sup>

In the few pages dedicated to the von Gelderns that are written from a dual perspective, personal-subjective and historical-objective, through a slice of family life Heine outlines the new affinity between Jews and Gentiles,<sup>48</sup> joined by values and mistakes in an age in which social mobility was beginning to be tolerated. The meeting point in reality is within these notes: it is not within culture, social integration or bourgeois vocation, but in transgression. As charlatans, magicians and travellers who knew about the omnipotence of dreams

<sup>46</sup> On the development of the by this point classical “figure” of the “unreliable narrator”, defined in long-ago 1961 by Wayne C. Booth in *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, see Ansgar Nünning, *Unreliable, Compared to What? Towards a Cognitive Theory of Unreliable Narration: Prolegomena and Hypotheses*, in *Grenzüberschreitungen: Narratologie im Kontext / Transcending Boundaries*, edited by Walter Grünzweig and Andreas Solbach (Tübingen: Narr, 1999), pp. 53-57, here p. 66.

<sup>47</sup> See Fabrizio Cambi, *La poetica del discontinuo negli scritti autobiografici di Heine tra memoria, cronaca e confessione*, in *Heinrich Heine. Ein Wegbereiter der Moderne*, edited by Paolo Chiarini and Walter Hinderer (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2009), pp. 145-153, here p. 150.

<sup>48</sup> Siegbert Salomon Praver, *Heine’s Jewish Comedy...*, cit., p. 677.



and the rough fabric of experience the Jews aligned themselves to the Christians and become allies, experts and older brothers in the founding of unusual and acrobatic esoteric, marginal and transgressive paradigms for an ever more restless world and its salvation. The path toward Esau (the Edom to whom Heine dedicated a poem in 1824), which the Jewish heretics and revolutionaries wanted to travel at the end of the Age of Enlightenment seeking a “synthesis” between Judaism and Christianity, is paved with magic, geometric calculations and prophecies of universal liberation.

Eine rätselhafte Erscheinung, schwer zu begreifen, war dieser Großoheim. Er führte eine jener wunderlichen Existenzen die nur im Anfang und in der Mitte des achtzehnten Jahrhunderts möglich gewesen; er war halb Schwärmer, der für kosmopolitische, weltbeglückende Utopien Propaganda machte, halb Glücksritter, der im Gefühl seiner individuellen Kraft die morschen Schranken einer morschen Gesellschaft durchbricht oder überspringt. Jedenfalls war er ganz ein Mensch. Sein Charlatanismus, den wir nicht in Abrede stellen, war nicht von gemeiner Sorte – er war kein gewöhnlicher Charlatan, der den Bauern auf den Märkten die Zähne ausreißt, sondern er drang muthig in die Paläste der Großen, denen er den stärksten Backzahn ausriß, wie weiland Ritter Hüon von Bordeaux dem Sultan von Babylon tat.<sup>49</sup>

In spite of doing business in both a licit and illicit manner with Gentiles, even seeking noble integration, as the adepts of Jacob Frank’s sect would actively do, the van Geldern’s loyalty to Judaism cannot be denied, let alone that of the troublesome great-uncle who did not seem to harbor any doubts as to his identity nor as to respecting (certain) laws. His existence was scandal-free, he scrupulously respected the Saturday Sabbath, he donated a portion of his income (and it mattered little that much of it was the fruit of gambling, “magical” operations, the selling of books or even amulets) and he had known how to live for months in a pious hermitage in Safed. His heart, Heine writes, maintained itself among multiple dis-

<sup>49</sup> Heinrich Heine, *Memoiren*, cit., p. 72.



tractions and many emotional and generous misfortunes,<sup>50</sup> while the metaphor of fidelity returns with force, making of this scandalous and questionable character another counter-figure to the extremely Christian Constant Prince: he stole nothing, he never threatened or hurt anyone, he tried to pay – years later as well – all of his debts and the 12 days of prison in Vienna, which had caused him to suffer, had been the fruit of error and slander.

The example of the van Gelderns is that of a radically diverse experience of integration with respect to that of other co-religionists, from Salomon Maimon to Moses Mendelssohn, who attached themselves to philosophy and to *Bildung*;<sup>51</sup> they loved Spinoza, as did Heine, but they would never have thought of conserving alembics and amulets in dusty attics. Moreover, their doctrine was more severe and elusive than the watered-down deism spreading around the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

Heine connects this doctrine to the trauma of equivalences and differences, alluding to new identities and unusual functions. The von Gelderns wanted to erase the traces of a life spent in the ghetto as well, but their history had made them different from the refugees thirsting for culture and German-ness arriving from the Orient and seeking advice from Kant in the harsh halls of the Berlin Academy. Their integration had proceeded in the shadow of the courts, as lenders or administrators and later brokers of that which in the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century became a sign of distinction and of power: the German nobles “had eyes only for the alchemists”,<sup>52</sup> Heymann writes. At that time they dreamed of discovering the myster-

<sup>50</sup> Simon speaks of his sensitive heart in the fragment of a letter written in French at the beginning of 1762 to a count whose name is unnoted while recounting one of his visits to the Comédie Française. It also contains the quotation of Claude Guimond de la Touche’s tragedy of which Heine speaks in his *Memoiren*. See David Kaufmann, *Aus Heinrich Heine’s Ahnensaal* (Breslau: Schottlaender, 1896), p. 121.

<sup>51</sup> These are the themes of which from the Christian part Christian Konrad Wilhelm Dohm dedicates a book in 1781 (the second part is in 1783) not without prejudice and mistrust, *Über die bürgerliche Verbesserung der Juden*, in which the “citizenship” in the States and in the German culture was considered an indispensable instrument of social growth and the fight against intolerance.

<sup>52</sup> Fritz Heymann, *Der Chevalier von Geldern...*, cit., p. 291.



ies of magic, they trusted in the effects of the practical Kabbalah and they saw in the promises of Masonry, above all that of the most markedly Rosicrucian kind, instruments of omnipotence, while their power was slowly but inexorably on the wane. And the physicians and charlatans were Gottschalk and Simon and they were admitted to the pleasantries of high society; in an age that was greedy for science and distractions, the young Simon wanted to be an aristocrat of the spirit while searching for an idealized social position with his bookish culture, innumerable articles for the local papers and the cultivation of an aristocratic and outdated *otium*. However, he was inevitably to be pushed toward marginality, until of this culture Heine made an instrument of knowledge stronger than his grandfather's arts, but not irreconcilable with them.

The historical perspective so dear to Heine happily drifted into a meta-temporal reference to many audiences that the author ideally courted, so far away in time and in convictions and yet so close in their common expectation of miracles. He thus recalls his great-uncle's audience that, in exchange for miracles, was willing to honor him and to guarantee him a comfortable life, together with the ancient populace of the Jews willing to trade faith for miracles and, in the end, to the readers of his memoirs, unorganized by an author who assembled imprecise notions and encouraged them to share in the stupor and the magic visions:

Und welcher bedeutende Mensch ist nicht ein bischen Charlatan? Der Zweck heiligt die Mittel. Hat doch der liebe Gott selbst als er auf dem Berg Sinai, sein Gesetz promulgierte nicht verschmäht bey dieser Gelegenheit tüchtig zu blitzen und zu donnern, obgleich das Gesetz so vortrefflich, so göttlich gut war, daß es füglich aller Zuthat von leuchtenden Kolophonium und donnernden Paukenschlägen entbehren konnte. Aber der Herr kannte sein Publikum, das mit seinen Ochsen und Schaafen und aufgesperrten Mäulern unten am Berge stand und welchem ein physikalisches Kunststück mehr Bewunderung einflößen konnte als alle Mirakel des ewigen Gedankens.<sup>53</sup>

<sup>53</sup> Heinrich Heine, *Memoiren*, cit., pp. 72-73.



In the irreverent comparison between Heine's great-uncle and the Lord one can see the metamorphosis of the figure of Simon van Gelder from charlatan to *Lebenskünstler*, or maybe in the modern age simply *Künstler*, when it is given only to the poet to become necromancer, to call forth and live the great adventure of creation and experience:

Muse, edle Nekromantin,  
Durch die Hexerey der Dichtkunst,  
Schaffe mir ein Zauberschiff  
Das mich bringt nach Bimini  
Dichterwünschen folgt Erfüllung  
Und vom Werfte des Gedankens  
Wird zu mir herabbuxirt  
Pfeilschnell das beehrte Schiff.<sup>54</sup>

<sup>54</sup> Heinrich Heine, *Zu 'Bimini'*, DHA, vol. 3/1, p. 387; see Hans-Georg Kemper, *Muse, edle Nekromantin. Zu Heines poetischer Magie in ihrem hermetischen Kontext*, in Dietmar Goltschnigg - Charlotte Grollegge-Edler - Peter Revers (edited by), *op. cit.*, pp. 173-180.