



# **Smiling in the mattress grave**



**English  
podcast transcript**

# Smiling in the mattress grave

Heinrich Heine`s wise way of living and dying

English transcript

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*ES: Hello and welcome to Wisdom Talks, the podcast accompanying the METIS project, the internet portal for intercultural wisdom literature and wisdom practices to be found on [www.metis.ethz.ch](http://www.metis.ethz.ch). My name is Eliane Schmid, and I will be hosting today's conversation with philosopher Willi Goetschel.*

*At first, the general topic for this Wisdom Talk may appear rather somber. We will discuss mortality and death. Yet with humorous German poet, Heinrich Heine taking center stage, we can hopefully find a more lighthearted approach. But as a starting point, I would like to introduce a recurring trope used in Western poetry and philosophy, memento mori, remember you must die. This trope caused many a thinker to ponder and write about the fleetingness and fragility of life.*

*One such thinker, which I would like to later put in relation to Heinrich Heine, was the French Renaissance philosopher Michel de Montaigne. He famously said that to philosophize is to learn to die. It made sense for Montaigne to think about one's own death early on and not to shy away from something imminent.*

*In the Netherlands, half a century later, philosopher Baruch de Spinoza put forward the idea that people who are truly free hardly reflect on death, but rather reflect on life. This appears somewhat contradictory.*

*What did these two philosophers mean exactly? And, in general, how should or can we think and talk about illnesses, dying and death without falling into downward spiral and losing our grasp on the life we're actually living? Heinrich Heine, our witty 19<sup>th</sup> century poet, might provide an alternative way of looking at imminent death. At least that is what I would like to find out by talking to Willi Goetschel. Willi Goetschel is Professor of Philosophy and German Studies at the University of Toronto and very familiar with Heine's writings.*

*Mr. Goetschel, welcome and thank you for being with me here today.*

WG: Thank you for having me.

*ES: So, Heinrich Heine appears to have found a humor of sorts to deal with mortality, and Montaigne was not exactly, or not actually a morbid philosopher. What is more, his memento mori is not meant to cause people to torment themselves with thoughts about imminent death. Would you agree with this? Or how can we better interpret the quote: "To philosophize is to learn to die"?*

WG: I totally agree with you. Also, I've been reading the last few years, Montaigne, for another project and there is also the idea in Montaigne that he actually might have been writing that in an ironic mode, as he writes everything, every page is interlaced with irony. And one could also argue that he argues precisely that philosophy is, by too many people, misunderstood as a lethal, deadly, boring thing. But that in fact actually, really, thinking is anything but thinking about death. And that is something that connects him with Heine. So, Montaigne is also a hypochondriac in a way, he talks a thousand pages mainly about his body, his failure, and his problems. But he does always with a joie de vivre, with a joy, and it's not with a moribund attitude. And that is something that I think is connected with the way also Heine moves, and also the way Spinoza says the wise man thinks about nothing less than life and not about death.

And it's interesting that I was never thinking about the death motive really that much in Heine, it's you, who pushed me to think about it. It is true that even long before he has his real illness, that he's buried in the 'mattress grave', as he calls it himself, he has an early motive of a memento mori that comes back again in different writings. And so, he is somebody who is celebrating something of a dance of death, which is precisely a celebration of life. It's not about an anxiety. It's about mocking even death, in a way. That is his way to not just to deal with death, but with, one could say, with the paradoxes and the absurdity of life.

*ES: So a bit like Spinoza, rather than look at death, you should look at life.*

WG: Right, right. That's also an interesting moment that's happening in Spinoza, that death and life are continual, that they basically are also interconnected, and that one can gradually go from one into the other. It's a very unusual way to think in Spinoza and that is something that is in some way in a different mode, I would say, in a different register, not in a minor key, but in a major key, in a cheerful key, played out in Heine.

*ES: You mentioned before this talk, when we discussed the mattress grave, that you did not immediately think about Heine in connection to death. What would your first association with Heine be?*

WG: My first association would be with mockery, joy. He's the person who flaunts his sexuality in a sometimes even odd way for today. And he's at the same time not somebody who represses death, but it's something that is part of life, so he does embrace it in a particular way. And when he's then in the mattress grave, when he's really for many, many years ill, and he needs heavy medication of morphines, he struggles. He fights death. He writes about death. He has sort of an intimate strange affair with death where he pushes death back, where he mocks death.

*ES: Would you say in that case that Heine has different kinds of humor to deal with different kinds of situations? Because before you said that he was very witty, joyful, also very explicitly*

*sexual in his writings. But then I'm assuming that he uses a different kind of humor when he talks about death. Or does he, as you say, also maybe mock death?*

WG: No, I think it's the same wit. And I think what is the one theme that goes through Heine is irreverence. That is what we would call today anti-authoritarian emancipatory struggle for liberation on all levels. Politically, he's interestingly an early human rights advocate in a very sophisticated key, also very critical of the abuse of human rights. And he is anti-establishment. And so for him, I think the main problem with death is, then again, social political... All his writing has a social political key. For him, it's like what death is used for, the function it's given in our society to establish anxiety, questions of immortality, that if you are not following the script of theological commitments, you are going to rot in hell forever. And so that's what he makes fun of. And at the same time, he never makes fun of actual deaths or actual suffering. He's in an interesting way also a writer who becomes an expert rhetorician, if you want, of human pain. And he gives voice to the human pain always as an accusation of, again, not death in itself, but what human society has done with death.

*ES: He was bedridden for the last eight years of his life. And it seems that he could also twist this time and this writing in connection to death to make claims politically and as you said, also to criticize society. Do you think though that there is some difference to be noticed between his bedridden years of writing and the years before?*

WG: That is an interesting question. And there are generally, through the decades, changes. The main change is medical, because the last years he did write with a heavy dosage of morphines. So, he had hallucinatory moments under which he wrote. And at the same time, he sort of wrestles sanity in these moments.

So, it is the question, sometimes like with Nietzsche, when he became ill. At what point is it? And it's almost impossible to say, because the texts don't tell us: "Now here I'm nuts," or "Here I'm not." I don't see, from my readings, a significant change. I think you may indicate little things, but I feel the strength, the thrust of his writing, the point is that even when he's really sick and on a medication, he still is Heine. He still does his thing. I think that is what was also for

himself very important, to prove himself. He wrote day and night. He, at some point, during his sick years, he had secretaries writing for him. He would dictate, and it became part of his regime to sort of feel alive to just wrestle those moments away from sickness and death.

*ES: Would you say that while he was dealing with this very uncomfortable position and he was writing nonstop, did he have an active audience then as well? Did he write to be received immediately by people and would that also make him help feel more alive or more connected to society, or was it really just writing for himself?*

WG: No, absolutely. He was writing for the press. He was writing for readers. And so, the secretaries, his friends, who came visiting, a stream of friends coming through, there was a constant feedback. He was constantly at the end also negotiating with his publisher, because he wanted to establish enough of an estate for his soon-to-be widow. In that way, he was constantly marketing, because his output was not huge. So early on already he was a master of arrangements. He rearranges his poetry like a musician. They have different flavors in different arrangements. So, he was thinking constantly about reception. He was writing for the press. A lot of his poetry appeared here and there in newspapers. He didn't write first of himself, but he wrote maybe first also for giving a report of, even maybe a report of he's still alive, his voice is not going to go so fast.

*ES: And how was his writing received?*

WG: His writing was received towards the end of the life, not always that well. He was a wunderkind early on. His first publication, *Buch der Lieder*, the *Book of Songs*, was a bestseller, absolutely. And so that was hard to repeat. He wrote a lot of poetry. He was, when he lived in Paris – he early on immigrated there in 1831 or 1830 – from that moment, he made his living also just as a reporter. He wrote numerous reports from Germany. He wrote essays, he wrote lots of prose, and then he wrote again poetry. He was extremely well-known. He was also persecuted as the main culprit of the left. So, when Marx went to Paris, they became friends because Heine was the older generation, he was the master irreverent voice of the exile, so he was well known. The climate had changed politically back and forth in Germany after the pre-

March, after 1848, after the revolution was botched. But he had all the time sympathizers and readers, and his publisher always stood by him. So he was an unbeatable presence – you could put it that way – even when he didn't sell that much, the persecution and censorship made sure that people will buy it because they were repressed, his printings, and so they were distributed in hiding.

*ES: So this was the broad societal reception, in that case. But I'm wondering, did he also write for his wife? You said that he made preparations for his soon-to-be widowed wife. And so, I was wondering if he tried to maybe not only help himself with his writings, but also help the people immediately around him.*

WG: His writing was really for the German press, for the German readers. His wife didn't speak German. She was a French woman. And he sometimes made fun of the fact that she would be surprised: "Oh, my husband, Heinrich Heine, he seems to be a famous writer." So it was sort of an unusual relationship in that way that she wasn't able to share it. So the writing was for her, he wrote about her, many poems, also including one, like when she goes to the cemetery soon, she shouldn't walk back, she should actually hire a coach to drive back to her house. There's enough money. So he wrote in this, again, irreverent tone, but she wouldn't be able to read the German. And she was not a highly sophisticated person. She came from a different class. And so for her reading, she did read, but other types of novels. We don't know actually how much she knew from his friends that he was amusing, that this guy she was married to who was a nice guy, but also jealous once in a while and whatever, that he was apparently this famous German poet.

*ES: That seems to be very befitting of Heine, being a bit unconventional and having a fun kind of – well, at least that's what I took from this – a fun kind of relationship. But to circle back to the reception point before, you gave us a little of the historical context this was all playing in, and I would like to go deeper into this literary historical aspect. Heinrich Heine is often considered today to be an author who wrote world literature, and he did so at a time of rising German nationalism. And thus, in a time where a strong emphasis lay on so-called old national*

*literature. How would you contextualize Heine in this sense? Would you say this is a writer of world literature, or not particularly?*

WG: Yeah. No, that's a very good question. There's a big discourse around what is world literature, especially currently also in the States. And the discourse that is going on always returns to Goethe as the origin narrative of world literature and what world literature is. Heine is actually the first one who, within a year of that Goethe uses that and that usage of world literature, of that word even, is published. He adds in his impish, mischievous, irreverent way, well, what he introduces his term in a footnote that he later takes back, the concept of supplementary world literature. And so while for Goethe, it is really primarily fiction novels, highbrow literature, that is world literature, for Heine, it is precisely something like the technical scientific exchange of literature, the scientific medical journals. That is what, for him, is the universal literature that goes back and forth. Having said that, Heine is actually a representative of, maybe even in the Goethean sense of world literature, because he was one of the most distributed writers. He and Brecht, for instance, would be famous in Latin America in the 20<sup>th</sup> century up to maybe even the present in revolutionary circles as well as in Asia. Because they would be the political writers that would provide the ammunition. And so in that way, Heine's writing early on made the rounds beyond Europe. And what is hard to imagine, but the first edition of Heine's work in German was published in Pennsylvania in the mid of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. He was there present as a German writer, and then the first English translation of the almost complete works, minus maybe one work, we have in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. And then it goes on. In that way, what I think is interesting, again, sort of in the face of the Goethe cult, you have actually a representative who does world literature, but in a very different mode, in a very different way, and who has his idea of this, which I like very much, this, he calls it '*Welthilfsliteratur*', it's hard to translate this, 'supplementary world literature' that is precisely not this highbrow... Is it just poetry? Is it just fiction? What would it be? But it's everything that is actually traveling across borders.

*ES: Why do you think it is that Heine's works traveled across the borders? Why do you think it got translated so quickly also in America or northern America?*



WG: Yes, this is an important question, especially for a poet because, as you know, poetry is very hard to translate. Poetry in a foreign language is very hard to appreciate for people if they're not sort of raised almost in that culture. For Heine, there are two things. One is he's the German composer most set to music, which it's like by now the counts are between six and 10,000 compositions for his songs. It's just stunning. And so musicians, music historians, for them, Heine is very present. I think that is one reason. And the other one is his philosophical prose, if you want to call it, which is very subversive in many ways. It traveled through different channels. And I don't know which one is the more important one, probably the music part is really what caught it. And so you get songs, one of the most famous ones is even known as *Song Without Words* composed by Mendelssohn. In German it's *Auf Flügeln des Gesanges*. It's like everybody knows it, even if they don't know the poetry. It also hasn't received much of interpretation. It's a very interesting lyrical text, actually. But that's how it traveled. And this lightness, it's almost a lightness of being, in a very progressive way, that Heine celebrates. I think that makes him very accessible for many, many readers.

*ES: Didn't Heine also write in other languages? Or was it German that he focused on?*

WG: I'm not a hundred percent sure how it works. His texts were published in French. He knew French to a certain extent, but he mainly wrote in German and had the text then translated. So, he had very good translators, well-known French poets who did translate. And he was familiar in the language, but he never got into the...he tried actually very hard to become a French intellectual, just like Hannah Arendt tried at some point really to get into the New York intellectual scene, and it didn't happen fully with him. The funny thing is he was always seen as the German bear who stands in the salons, discusses Spinoza they say actually, with his hands in his pockets, which for the Parisians is of course this Germanic wild animal that is not domesticated in the French salons. Heine was very chic, so it's not...you can see there's this national and whatever, it's the Parisians versus the universe. In that way, he was very present there, he was friends with George Sand, with Liszt, with...he had a mussel eating competition with Balzac that Balzac won by a few mussels. There were around 80 mussels each. Heine was a

good sport. He was very competitive. So, they knew him and for Baudelaire he became a very important writer. But he didn't become a French...the dream to be actually a French writer.

*ES: But was maybe Heine also a bit self-ironic? We talked in the beginning about these different kinds of humor that he applied. And do you think that if he noticed that he didn't quite fit in, that he would also have, in a way, appreciated the irony of this situation?*

WG: Oh, absolutely. And I mean, in a way he was also too fresh to fit in. And he didn't... It's not that he suffered from that. He was also... His descriptions of Paris are fantastic and very sharp and very precise. And so, for him it was just... his mission was to be a German writer, but the other part of your question is very important because he was also one of the first European intellectuals. He was certainly the first German intellectual, a public intellectual, but also for many others throughout Europe he became sort of a representative. In that way he did transcend very early on the different cultures and languages within Europe, and reaching all the United States.

*ES: And since METIS is the Wisdom Talk, I will ask you a question concerning wisdom. Maybe this is a bit too broad a question to answer in an easy way, but still, do you think there is a kind of wisdom that we can find in his texts specifically also from the time when, to go back to the bit more sad topic, but do you think there's an approach to death that we can take from his texts and some other 'wisdomness' quotes we can take from Heine?*

WG: I think there's definitely something that transcends also death in a narrow sense. And that is, Adorno called it: "Bange machen gilt nicht." It's a German proverb he liked to cite. In English you would translate it: "Intimidation won't count." And that is very much Heine, the idea of just stay, stick to your guns, don't be intimidated, and make fun because the fun, by laughing about it, you expose the authoritarian moments in it, the repressive moments, and that will set you free. That is a motive that goes through all his writings again and again in all types of different keys, registers. And that is tightly connected to this other part,...you could call it a political agenda of what he calls the universal struggle of emancipation that goes around the globe and doesn't distinguish between colors, genders, and so forth. But it's really, wherever you can't

laugh, you could put it that way, there's something wrong, because there are then authoritarian regimes that try to hold on to power.

*ES: This is very interesting to me that he uses humor and laughter as a kind of bar to measure how free a person is. And it's actually also a very positive and nice way to look at it. But in a sense also surprises me in the sense that it's a very serious topic. And before we thought that Heine would be just a very happy-go-lucky man. But now I would also like to ask if you could perhaps recommend to our listeners one or two pieces by Heine as an introduction to his writings.*

WG: Yes. I mean, there's the poetry. And the poetry, there are many different poems, so I don't want to point out particular ones, but any poem you read by Heine, you just have to always see or appreciate the grain of salt that comes with it. Heine is a person that if you haven't laughed, you probably have to go back a few lines to see where you missed something. The prose piece that I think is philosophically, or in terms of wisdom, the most coherent, most important part of his writing is the, it's called *On the History of Religion and Philosophy in Germany*. And it's in English, interestingly now translated and edited in this Cambridge series of the history of philosophy texts. So, Heine has actually arrived in the high circles of philosophy. And it's an interesting text that basically is an early, it's the first intellectual history of philosophy, or sorry, the first intellectual history period, actually. It has a fantastic reflection on secularization narratives and how secularization works, in an extremely funny, entertaining way. It's sort of a little history of German philosophy where you can go through with a fantastic middle section on Spinoza. But it's all written in this light tone to sort of reflect on that thinking is also just an exercise of human beings, and that's also very pioneering in Heine. It's always historically contextually dependent.

*ES: Do you think that it's easy to understand Heine's text in that case? If we don't know the historical context, is it easy for us to just take his texts and read them and gain something from them? Or should we also engage with the context, the historical context it was written in?*

WG: In his case, the strange thing happens that you can just read it. He gives you very funny tongue in cheek descriptions of the philosophers, and research has also confirmed that they're actually accurate. They're witty. They're a little bit irreverent. But they're theoretically, philosophically correct, actually. They hit always the nail. In that way, actually, it's one of those texts you can just read.

*ES: This sounds wonderful. I would maybe at this point like to invite our listeners to grab a Heine book, whichever one you choose, if it's poetry or if it's a more contextually laden book, and maybe if the weather's still nice, go outside and have a good laugh. And I would, at this point, also thank you very much, Willi Goetschel, for expanding on Heine's writings and humor.*

WG: Thank you so much.

*ES: At this point, I would also like to invite our listeners to follow further Wisdom Talks, as well as to curiously plunge into the multitude of texts and further podcasts that can be found on our website, [www.metis.ethz.ch](http://www.metis.ethz.ch), the internet portal for intercultural wisdom literature and wisdom practices. If you would like to share your own wisdom thoughts on the METIS portal, we encourage you to do so. We have an open call for contributions and welcome your texts or creative contributions on any topic connected to wisdom that you would like to share with the METIS community. You can find more information about this and about today's podcast in the show notes below. Thank you for listening and goodbye.*

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