

## 14 New York / USA

### Sharing Heritage? Heinrich Heine in the Bronx

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Ich weiß nicht, was soll es bedeuten, dass ich  
so traurig bin.

I don't know what it can mean that I am so sad  
(*Heinrich Heine*)<sup>1</sup>

That heritage conservation is, as Alois Riegl put it, “largely a matter of feeling”,<sup>2</sup> is something that one understands best when abroad. For instance, when a visitor to New York, or more precisely, to a poorly planned and rather sprawling area of the Bronx, is surprised to stumble over a shining white fin-de-siècle monument, whose lines appear strangely familiar, and which on closer inspection is revealed to be a monument to someone extremely familiar: namely, to Heinrich Heine, unveiled here in 1899 as a somewhat belated commemoration of his hundredth birthday (fig. 1). At this point at the latest, a warm feeling sets in, especially when the visitor is from Germany, admires Heine and has lived for a while in Düsseldorf, making this a meeting of not just spiritual fellow travellers but of fellow citizens. A matter of feeling, to be sure, and as we will see, also a complex case of sharing heritage.

#### Sites, Traces. The Spaces of the Monument

The statue rises white above the fountain's pool, perched high above, the siren Lorelei combs her hair, while three naked mermaids, personifications of Poetry, Satire and Melancholy stretch out at her feet. The familiar fin-de-siècle lines, the monument's thoroughly European style generate a sudden shock of recognition that reverberates off the surrounding structures and in turn makes them seem quite alien. The extremely tidy park that has clearly been renovated very recently is still ringed by the large residential blocks that reveal their bourgeois history, even more so now that an even more hesitant gentrification is increasingly causing the traces of the ghetto to fade out of

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1 Heine, Song of the Lorelei, 2015 (1824).

2 Riegl, *Neue Strömungen*, 1995 (1905), 232.



Figure 1: The restored Lorelei Fountain near Yankee Stadium (Photo: J. Henderson 2010)

sight; opposite stands the monumental Bronx County Courthouse from 1931–34, recalling the architecture of Fascism in spite of itself. Behind that is visible the legendary Yankee Stadium, which gave the South Bronx a decisive development boost when it was opened in 1923 and remains a place of pilgrimage for fans of America's national pastime. And in the middle of all this: Heinrich Heine, or more precisely, the Lorelei Fountain that is dedicated to the poet's memory. Why here? What and who brought Heine to the Bronx – with what feelings was he received? And what was his fate in this foreign land? Some brief research reveals this site to be a kind of culmination of much that is characteristic of current debates surrounding monuments: alienness and rejection, appropriation and reinterpretation – and also the potential to arouse emotions and provoke conflict that is inherent to monuments and is possibly the most important source of their value.<sup>3</sup>

The history of this monument is certainly a story of feelings: love and admiration, but above all hatred and malice. The strange familiarity of the Lorelei Fountain may be put down to the fact that it was created by a German artist, the Berlin sculptor Ernst Gustav Herter.<sup>4</sup> It was originally supposed to stand in Düsseldorf, the poet's city of birth. A committee had already been formed to realize the monument in 1887, and early on, the project enjoyed the support of the city council and prominent admirers of Heine. The Austrian empress known to history only as 'Sissi' promised her financial support for the project and personally proposed the choice of sculptor.<sup>5</sup> But a hate campaign

3 Dolff-Bonekämper, *Gegenwartswerte*, 2010.

4 All statements concerning the history of the Heine monument are, where not otherwise indicated, drawn from: Schubert, *Kampf um das erste Heine-Denkmal*, 1990.

5 The Empress later withdrew from the project, supposedly for political reasons. In 1891, she had a monument to Heine erected on Corfu.



The original plan was to place the fountain in Manhattan's Central Park, with the inscription "IHREM GROSSEN DICHTER DIE DEUTSCHEN IN NEW YORK" (To their great poet, from the German community in New York).<sup>9</sup> Yet Heine's cause did not run entirely smoothly in the New World either. The prominent location could not be secured, supposedly on artistic grounds: *The New York Times* described the monument as an "example of academic mediocrity, worthy of erection, but not worthy of erection as our chief municipal ornament."<sup>10</sup> Anti-Semitic arguments may have played a role here, too.<sup>11</sup> In any case, Heine was banished to the periphery. In 1899, the "Lorelei Fountain" was somewhat belatedly unveiled "in a wasteland on the outskirts of the city, surrounded by swamps and desolate empty lots."<sup>12</sup> The first monograph on the monument called the remote location in the Bronx an "ingenious hiding-place".<sup>13</sup> Nonetheless, in the coming decades, with the construction of the Grand Concourse – modelled on Paris's Champs Elysees – a glamorous centre of Jewish life in New York would be constructed, centred – in the 1920s and 30s – on the Bronx.

## Sharing Heritage – Appropriation and Its Limits

The inauguration ceremony was a thoroughly emotional event. The sculptor, who was in attendance, wrote of an "imposing ceremony" attended by between four and six thousand people: "All the German societies with their flags stood around the monument to their best-known and best-loved poet and showed him their gratitude for his work. It must have been satisfying for his friends to see that it was he of all people, a man who had been branded as unpatriotic and un-German in the Fatherland, who was able to unite Germans abroad to a collective affirmation of their sentiments".<sup>14</sup>

*The New York Times* stressed that no German flags were to be seen, though American ones were in evidence.<sup>15</sup> Nonetheless, the reporter found the statue "disappointing" – and un-American: the main figure did not accord with the American image of Lorelei, he wrote, but was rather reminiscent of Brünhilde.<sup>16</sup> In his speech, Randolph Guggenheimer, President of the City Council, praised Heine as, among other things, a torch-bearer for modernity, and the erection of the monument in New York as an expression

9 Schubert, Kampf um das erste Heine-Denkmal, 1990, 267.

10 Quoted in: Gray, Sturm und Drang, 2007.

11 Yale Professor Jeffrey Sammons speculates on the possible role of anti-Semitism, cf. Website The Bronx Ink, Lorelei Fountain. Such suspicions are shared by Stefan Elfenbein, who wrote in the *Berliner Zeitung* newspaper, referring to "Aufbau", the newspaper of Jewish emigrants – though this was not established until 1934: "Naturally the anti-Semitic tendency was concealed out of shame [...]. The monument could only be erected following forceful protests by the Jewish intellectual Carl Schurz." Elfenbein, Die Lorelei in der Bronx, 1999.

12 Elfenbein, Die Lorelei in der Bronx, 1999.

13 Kahn, Rudolf, Der Kampf um das Heine Denkmal, Leipzig 1911, 39–40, quoted in: Schubert, Kampf um das erste Heine-Denkmal, 1990, 267.

14 Kahn, Rudolf, Der Kampf um das Heine Denkmal, Leipzig 1911, 39–40, quoted in: Schubert, Kampf um das erste Heine-Denkmal, 1990, 267.

15 Heine Monument Unveiled, *The New York Times*, 9 July 1899.

16 Heine Monument Unveiled, *The New York Times*, 9 July 1899.

of American values – namely of tolerance, liberty and warm cosmopolitanism, while narrow-minded Germany could not forget that Heine was a Jew.<sup>17</sup>

But the appropriation of Heine's commemoration in the form of the Lorelei Fountain came up against limits even in the 'free and cosmopolitan' New world, including some that had not existed in the German debate. In puritan New York, the monument posed less of a political than it did a moral problem. The 'obscene' nudes are said to have already played a role in the debate about where the monument should be erected.<sup>18</sup> Iconoclastic attempts at destruction soon targeted the memorial, and as early as January 1900, one of the female figures – Poetry – was beheaded. In the court case that followed, women belonging to the Christian Association of Abstinence described the monument as "indecent",<sup>19</sup> while the Christian Temperance Union called it a "pornographic spectacle".<sup>20</sup> Because of continuing vandalism, the monument had to be placed under police protection. In 1940, it was banished to the northern end of the park.



Figure 3: The mutilated Lorelei Fountain (Photo: Phyllis Cohen 1986)

17 Heine Monument Unveiled, *The New York Times*, 9 July 1899.

18 Elfenbein, *Die Lorelei in der Bronx*, 1999.

19 The New York Heine Memorial in Court, in: *Berliner Tageblatt*, no. 92, 20 February 1900, quoted in: Schubert, *Kampf um das erste Heine-Denkmal*, 1990, 268.

20 Reitter, *Heine in the Bronx*, 1999, 330.

Even after the South Bronx had become a slum, the fountain remained a favourite target for attacks and vandalism. Heads and arms were broken off, faces and breasts defaced. The motivations for such attacks – anti-German or anti-Semitic, hatred of high culture, of (white, naked?) women – can only be a matter of speculation. In 1975, the fountain, which was covered with layer upon layer of graffiti, was considered the monument most affected by vandalism and destructive rage in the entire city (fig. 3).<sup>21</sup> Yet – in terms of their potential to disturb and to destroy – these traces are also evidence of a kind of appropriation, albeit one that is thoroughly ambivalent. Photographs, probably taken sometimes in the 1990s, captured a completely new version of the Lorelei, transformed by unknown persons into a Black woman in a brilliant red dress.<sup>22</sup>

Where there is hate, there is also love: Hermann Klaas, a dentist from Düsseldorf made a name for himself as the “Heine scrubber” by regularly cleaning the monument of graffiti on his own initiative.<sup>23</sup> When the New York City Council launched the successful *Adopt-a-Monument Program* for 20 particularly at-risk monuments in 1987, the Lorelei Fountain was the only one not to find sponsors. Only after Johannes Rau, Minister President of the German state of North Rhine-Westphalia, became involved did it prove possible to raise 700,000 US dollars, mostly from private donors, and on July 8 1999, Heine’s monument – restored and partially rebuilt – was returned to its original site and ceremonially unveiled for a second time<sup>24</sup> – to surprise travellers with unexpected wanderlust, alienness and joy.

21 Schubert, Kampf um das erste Heine-Denkmal, 1990, 267–268.

22 This version and images of the restoration can be viewed at Website The Bronx Ink, Lorelei Fountain.

23 Ein Heine-Schrubber in New York, FOCUS Magazin, 16 September 1996.

24 See Sammons, Restoration of the Heine Monument, 1999.