That winter passed very quickly and happily for me, and at the end of the legislative session I had acquitted myself so much to the satisfaction of one of the newspapers which I wrote for that I was offered a place on it. I was asked to be city editor, as it was called in that day, and I was to have charge of the local reporting. It was a great temptation, and for a while I thought it the greatest piece of good fortune. I went down to Cincinnati to acquaint myself with the details of the work, and to fit myself for it by beginning as reporter myself. One night's round of the police stations with the other reporters satisfied me that I was not meant for that work, and I attempted it no farther. I have often been sorry since, for it would have made known to me many phases of life that I have always remained ignorant of, but I did not know then that life was supremely interesting and important. I fancied that literature, that poetry was so; and it was humiliation and anguish indescribable to think of myself torn from my high ideals by labors like those of the reporter. I would not consent even to do the office work of the department, and the proprietor and editor who was more especially my friend tried to make some other place for me. All the departments were full but the one I would have nothing to do with, and after a few weeks of sufferance and suffering I turned my back on a thousand dollars a year, and for the second time returned to the printing-office.

I was glad to get home, for I had been all the time tormented by my old malady of homesickness. But otherwise the situation was not cheerful for me, and I now began trying to write something for publication that I could sell. I sent off poems and they came back; I offered little translations from the Spanish that nobody wanted. At the same time I took up the study of German, which I must have already played with, at such odd times as I could find. My father knew something of it, and that friend of mine among the printers was already reading it and trying to speak it. I had their help with the first steps so far as the recitations from Ollendorff were concerned, but I was impatient to read German, or rather to read one German poet who had seized my fancy from the first line of his I had seen.

This poet was Heinrich Heine, who dominated me longer than any one author that I have known. Where or when I first acquainted myself with his most fascinating genius, I cannot be sure, but I think it was in some article of the Westminster Review, where several poems of his were given in English and German; and their singular beauty and grace at once possessed my soul. I was in a fever to know more of him, and it was my great good luck to fall in with a German in the village who had his books. He was a bookbinder, one of those educated artisans whom the revolutions of 1848 sent to us in great numbers. He was a Hanoverian, and his accent was then, I believe, the standard, though the Berlinese is now the accepted pronunciation. But I cared very little for accent; my wish was to get at Heine with as little delay as possible; and I began to cultivate the friendship of that bookbinder in every way. I dare say he was glad of mine, for he was otherwise quite alone in the village, or had no companionship outside of his own family. I clothed him in all the romantic interest I began to feel for his race and language, which now took the place of the Spaniards and Spanish in my affections. He was a very quick and gay intelligence, with more sympathy for my love of our author's humor than for my love of his sentiment, and I can remember very well the twinkle of his little sharp black eyes, with their Tartar slant, and the twitching of his keenly pointed, sensitive nose, when we came to some passage of biting
We began to read Heine together when my vocabulary had to be dug almost word by word out of the dictionary, for the bookbinder's English was rather scanty at the best, and was not literary. As for the grammar, I was getting that up as fast as I could from Ollendorff, and from other sources, but I was enjoying Heine before I well knew a declension or a conjugation. As soon as my task was done at the office, I went home to the books, and worked away at them until supper. Then my bookbinder and I met in my father's editorial room, and with a couple of candles on the table between us, and our Heine and the dictionary before us, we read till we were both tired out.

The candles were tallow, and they lopped at different angles in the flat candlesticks heavily loaded with lead, which compositors once used. It seems to have been summer when our readings began, and they are associated in my memory with the smell of the neighboring gardens, which came in at the open doors and windows, and with the fluttering of moths, and the bumbling of the dorbugs, that stole in along with the odors. I can see the perspiration on the shining forehead of the bookbinder as he looks up from some brilliant passage, to exchange a smile of triumph with me at having made out the meaning with the meagre facilities we had for the purpose; he had beautiful red pouting lips, and a stiff little branching mustache above them, that went to the making of his smile. Sometimes, in the truce we made with the text, he told a little story of his life at home, or some anecdote relevant to our reading, or quoted a passage from some other author. It seemed to me the make of a high intellectual banquet, and I should be glad if I could enjoy anything as much now.

We walked home as far as his house, or rather his apartment over one of the village stores; and as he mounted to it by an outside staircase, we exchanged a joyous "Gute Nacht," and I kept on homeward through the dark and silent village street, which was really not that street, but some other, where Heine had been, some street out of the Reisebilder, of his knowledge, or of his dream. When I reached home it was useless to go to bed. I shut myself into my little study, and went over what we had read, till my brain was so full of it that when I crept up to my room at last, it was to lie down to slumbers which were often a mere phantasmagory of those witching Pictures of Travel.

I was awake at my father's call in the morning, and before my mother had breakfast ready I had recited my lesson in Ollendorff to him. To tell the truth, I hated those grammatical studies, and nothing but the love of literature, and the hope of getting at it, could ever have made me go through them. Naturally, I never got any scholarly use of the languages I was worrying at, and though I could once write a passable literary German, it has all gone from me now, except for the purposes of reading. It cost me so much trouble, however, to dig the sense out of the grammar and lexicon, as I went on with the authors I was impatient to read, that I remember the words very well in all their forms and inflections, and I have still what I think I may call a fair German vocabulary.

The German of Heine, when once you are in the joke of his capricious genius, is very simple, and in his poetry it is simple from the first, so that he was, perhaps, the best author I could have fallen in with if I wanted to go fast rather than far. I found this out later, when I attempted other German authors without the glitter of his wit or the lambent glow of his fancy to light me on my hard way. I should find it hard to say just why his peculiar genius had such an absolute fascination for me from the very first, and perhaps I had better content myself with saying simply that my literary liberation began with almost the earliest word from him; for if he chained me to himself he freed me from all other bondage. I had been at infinite pains from time to time, now upon one model and now upon another, to literarify myself, if I may make a word which does not quite say the thing for me. What I mean is that I had supposed, with the sense at times that I was all wrong, that the expression of literature must be different from the expression of life; that it must be this style, and not that; that it must be like that sort of acting which you know is acting when you see it and never mistake for reality. There are a great many children, apparently grown-up, and largely accepted as critical authorities, who are still of this youthful opinion of mine. But Heine at once showed me that this ideal of literature was false; that the life of literature was from the springs of the best common speech and that the nearer it could be made to conform, in voice, look and gait, to graceful, easy, picturesque and humorous or impassioned talk, the better it was.

He did not impart these truths without imparting certain tricks with them, which I was careful to imitate as soon as I
began to write in his manner, that is to say instantly. His tricks he had mostly at second-hand, and mainly from Sterne, whom I did not know well enough then to know their origin. But in all essentials he was himself, and my final lesson from him, or the final effect of all my lessons from him, was to find myself, and to be for good or evil whatsoever I really was.

I kept on writing as much like Heine as I could for several years, though, and for a much longer time than I should have done if I had ever become equally impassioned of any other author.

Some traces of his method lingered so long in my work that nearly ten years afterwards Mr. Lowell wrote me about something of mine that he had been reading: "You must sweat the Heine out of your bones as men do mercury," and his kindness for me would not be content with less than the entire expulsion of the poison that had in its good time saved my life. I dare say it was all well enough not to have it in my bones after it had done its office, but it did do its office. It was in some prose sketch of mine that his keen analysis had found the Heine, but the foreign property had been so prevalent in my earlier work in verse that he kept the first contribution he accepted from me for the Atlantic Monthly a long time, or long enough to make sure that it was not a translation of Heine. Then he printed it, and I am bound to say that the poem now justifies his doubt to me, in so much that I do not see why Heine should not have had the name of writing it if he had wanted. His potent spirit became immediately so wholly my "control," as the mediums say, that my poems might as well have been communications from him so far as any authority of my own was concerned; and they were quite like other inspirations from the other world in being so inferior to the work of the spirit before it had the misfortune to be disembodied and obliged to use a medium. But I do not think that either Heine or I had much lasting harm from it, and I am sure that the good, in my case at least, was one that can only end with me. He undid my hands, which had taken so much pains to tie behind my back, and he forever persuaded me that though it may be ingenious and surprising to dance in chains, it is neither pretty nor useful.

By William Dean Howells