

Kitty Millet

San Francisco State University

USA

Heretics of Innovation

In his discussion of the history of the Jewish community of Bohemia, Vaclav Zacek describes how an obscure eighteenth – century figure, Jonas Wehle, exemplifies “the modern Bohemian.” The leader of the Prague Frankists, a practicing Sabbatean, Wehle remains within the Jewish community, although he no longer adheres to traditional Judaism. That lack of adherence motivates Wehle’s continuous conflict with rabbinic authorities. For Zacek, Wehle’s conflict with Prague’s “religious orthodoxy” turns “the Bohemian countries” into “the scene of a persistent and bitter struggle between rabbinical orthodoxy” and the promotion of heresies by “Jewish mystics and messianists, addicted to innovation.” While Zacek elevates a dispute between Judaism’s gatekeepers – the rabbinate – and what would appear to be a minor sect within the Jewish community – a Jewish false messianic movement — to the status of a controversy preoccupying all of Bohemia, he takes as a given nonetheless the pervasiveness of kabbalistic ideas circulating within a social milieu beyond the control of Judaic authority. Zacek implies that Jewish mystical content saturates Czech culture. His use of “innovation,” precisely the German word, *Neuerung*, suggests that Czech and German readers understand the German word to refer to the esoteric practices of “Jewish mystics and messianists.” By reproducing the term his sources use, he also reveals that the practice is recognizable to non – Jews too. Several years later, Heinrich Heine adopts the term, “*Neuerung*,” in his last works as he attempts to position his writing in relation to his Jewish identity so that he transforms “innovation” from a signifier of apostasy to a signifier of the modern Jewish subject’s redemption. This paper explores the implications of “heresies of innovation” and German Jewry’s reimagining of such heresies in the registers of German idealism in order to discuss how kabbalah becomes a literary phenomenon of modernity.