

Arno Holz, Naturalist Poet, on German Technological Progress (1885)

Abstract

Arno Holz (1863–1929) was an important representative of naturalism in German poetry.

Beginning in 1881, Holz worked first as a journalist in Berlin, then as an author. He joined “Durch,” a Berlin naturalist society, where he met the dramatist Gerhart Hauptmann (1862–1946). In 1885, he published a collection of poems, *Das Buch der Zeit. Lieder eines Modernen*. For political reasons, the book had to be published in Switzerland. In 1889, Holz co-founded the theater association *Freie Bühne*, and one year later he started working as the editor of the association’s eponymous journal. The following excerpt from *Das Buch der Zeit* offers an example of Holz’s critique of the social consequences of industrialization, urbanization, and technological advancement.

Source

Excerpt from *Das Buch der Zeit* [*The Book of the Times*] (1885)

The time for amorous adventures,
Is long gone for me by now!

No, only in the midst of crowds,
When catching sight of big cities,
And at the sound of telegraph wires,
Do my feelings pour forth into words.

Then my ear believes it hears the footsteps
Of forward marching columns
And soon I see a battle won,
Such as no general has ever secured.

But it aims not at any dynasty
Nor fights with sword and club –
Galvani’s wire and the voltaic pile
Are spraying sparks, directed by a genius.

Thus, to you, who bore me in pain,
To you, new age of blood and iron,
I lay down my heart and its melody
Wordlessly at your high altar!

You, too, are looking toward the dawning
And dreaming of some undiscovered worlds;
Will you requite to me that love for you
That burns so deeply in my heart?

Yet no matter if steam and coal dust
May blur the strokes of this writing;

No transient happiness I wish to steal,
It is you I love and not your favor!

Pride swells my breast, my heart beats faster
And my eyes begin to water,
When I hear your hammering and knocking
On steel and iron, stone and ore.

For sweet, to me, is the melody
Issuing from these sounds of promise;
The hammers descend and roar:
Look here, this is poetry as well!

Advancing, it stops not only
In forests and at inns,
It also descends into the coal mines
And sits down at the joiner's bench.

It harps, not as an evening breeze,
Merely whizzing through crumbling ruins,
Humming, it also drives those machines
And pounds and hammers, sews and spins.

It rocks as a slender barge
In reed-wreathed ponds so blue,
It shrouds its head in steam
And rushes forth as a railway train.

Swelled by never dreamt-of power,
It has cast off its old crutches,
Building brick tunnels and wooden bridges
And whistling around the world as a steamer.

Thus, to all you men who are real men,
Shatter your illusory idols
And pass on the rallying cry:
Good luck, good luck, the new time has come!

Source: Arno Holz, *Werke*, edited by Wilhelm Emrich and Anita Holz, 7 vols. Neuwied, 1961–64, vol. 5, *Das Buch der Zeit* (originally published in 1885), pp. 21–28; reprinted in Gerhard A. Ritter and Jürgen Kocka, eds., *Deutsche Sozialgeschichte 1870-1914. Dokumente und Skizzen*. Munich: Beck, 1982, pp. 24–26.

Translation: Erwin Fink

Recommended Citation: Arno Holz, Naturalist Poet, on German Technological Progress (1885), published in: German History in Documents and Images, <<https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/forging-an-empire-bismarckian-germany-1866-1890/ghdi:document-1747>> [March 23, 2025].