

Henrik Ibsen's "Balloon Letter to a Swedish Lady" Expresses Fear of German Militarism (December 1870)

Abstract

In early December 1870, three months after the French defeat at the Battle of Sedan (September 1–2), Paris was under siege, encircled by German forces determined to bring the Franco-Prussian War of 1870/71 to a formal end as quickly as possible. At the end of December, Bismarck ordered the bombardment of the city—a decision that helped turn world opinion against the Prussians. The view that Prussian brutality against Paris revealed the true nature of the “German system” was expressed in the “Balloon Letter” reproduced below. (Note: for propaganda purposes, the poem was translated from the original Danish (“Ballongbrev til en svensk dame”) into English and published in *The English Review* in its August–November 1914 issue—the first to appear after the outbreak of World War I.) The poem—whose title refers to the Parisians who left their besieged city in hot air balloons—was written in December 1870 by Henrik Ibsen (1828–1906), the Norwegian writer best known for his Naturalist dramas *Peer Gynt* (1876), *Nora* (1879), and *Ghosts* (1881). At the time, he was living in the Saxon capital city of Dresden. Ibsen’s rhymed epistle takes the form of a “letter” addressed to a Mrs. Frederika Limnell in Stockholm. In his opinion, the siege of Paris epitomized the distinction between the German people, for whom he had high regard, and the “German system,” which he regarded as not only brutal in war but also responsible for killing personality and murdering poetry and song. The following passages reveal Ibsen’s reaction to German press reports from faraway France: they “serve me up a dish,” he writes, as delightful as “a French ragout of rats.” Ibsen’s outrage predates Friedrich Nietzsche’s “untimely meditations” on bourgeois philistines’ misunderstanding of the meaning of Germany’s martial victories in 1870, but his sentiments almost exactly match those of the German philosopher—a similarity seen, for example, in his words: “Just in victory lies defeat; Prussia’s sword proves Prussia’s scourge. Ne’er poetic inspiration springs from problems that they solve.”

Source

To Frau [Mrs.] Frederika Limnell, Stockholm

[...]

Here I’m living, you might say,
as they’re living now in Paris.
German heroes big and boastful,
who would overturn the world;
show and bluster, flags a-flying,
“Wacht am Rhein” (that they call song),
are the lines that here surround me.
Oftentimes, be sure, I find,
that these quarters cramp me sore.
Politics and beer-house talk,
are my cursteak’s garnishings;
and the public press’s columns,
where the German verse-art halts,
serve me up a dish delightful,
as a French ragout of rats.

[...]

Such then, madam, truth to tell,
is the motive that compelled me,
to dispatch to you these lines,
and I let fly my balloon.
Doves I have none (more's the pity!),
doves, for they are birds of hope,
and in this dark clammy grave,
only owls and ravens nest.
But to send per owl, per raven,
ladies' letters ne'er will do.

[...]

Aye, most truly great it is,
great, so that the world stands gaping;
yet anon an "aber" quivers,
in the midst of mouths agape.
Doubt is slow to win a hearing:
"Is it truly great, this greatness?"
Ah, what proves a work's true greatness?
Not mere greatness in results,
but the person strong and clear,
as with soul the work endowing.

Good, but now the German hordes,
that are storming Parisward?
Who stands whole and clear in the danger;
singly who bears off the palm?
When stood out the person splendid,
so that mouths of millions bore,
round their homes his name in song?
Now the regiment, the squadron,
now the staff, or else the spy,
all the leash of dogs let loose,
track the game upon its way.

[...]

Then think of our own day's heroes,
of these Blumenthals and Fritzes,
of the Herren Generale,
number this and number that!
Under Prussia's ghastly colours,
sorrow's clout of black and white,
ne'er burst forth achievement's larva,
as the butterfly of song.
They perhaps their silk may spin,
for a time, but die therein.

Just in victory lies defeat;

Prussia's sword proves Prussia's scourge.
Ne'er poetic inspiration,
springs from problems that they solve.
Deeds win no response in song,
if a people noble, free,
beauty-loving, are transformed,
into staff-machinery,
bristling with the dirks of cunning,
from the time that Herr von Moltke,
murdered battle's poesy.

So demonic is the power,
that received our world to rule:
and the Sphinx, her wisdom guarding,
when her riddle's solved, is slain.

Cipher-victories are doomed.
Soon the moment's blast will veer;
like a storm on desert-plain,
it will fell the false gods' race.

[...]

Source: "Ibsen's 'Balloon Letter,' 1870," in *The English Review* 18 (August–November 1914), pp. 501–12. Translated (from the Danish) by Andrew Runni Anderson.

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