

Theodor Fontane on German Sentiment during the War with France (August 5, 1870)

Abstract

Regarded by many as the most important German-language realist writer of the nineteenth century, Theodor Fontane (1819–1898) only became a novelist later in life. In 1848, he briefly participated in Germany’s revolutionary upheaval; later, he was a contributor to the Conservatives’ leading newspaper, the *Neue Preußische (Kreuz-) Zeitung*. The text below is an excerpt from a letter he sent to his wife, Emilie, on August 5, 1870, two weeks after France declared war on Prussia. The two had been married since 1850. On account of Fontane’s frequent travels, letters played an important role in their relationship. In this one, Fontane expresses his uneasiness about the war. He sees Germany and its people as being driven by the “dark forces” of the “Wild Hunt”—a figure from German mythology that conjures up an army of ghosts.

Source

To Emilie Fontane
August 5, 1870

[...]

The entire situation appears to me like a colossal vision, a Wild Hunt rushing past me; you find yourself standing there in amazement, without quite knowing what to make of it all. It is a *Völkerwanderung* [great migration of peoples] regulated by railways, organized masses, but *masses* all the same, ones within which you whirl around like an atom, not standing apart, not dominating; instead, you are entirely at the mercy of this great movement and have no will of your own. It is like being in a theater when someone shouts “Fire!”, you are swept toward an exit that is perhaps no exit at all, mercilessly squeezed, pushed, throttled, the victim of dark drives and forces. Some people love it because it means “excitement”—I am too artistically inclined to be able to feel comfortable under these circumstances.

[...]

Source: Theodor Fontane, letter to his wife Emilie Fontane, August 5, 1870; reprinted in Theodor Fontane, *Werke, Schriften und Briefe*, edited by Walter Keitel and Helmuth Nürnberger. Twenty-one volumes in four sections. Section IV, *Briefe*, vol. 2, 1860–1878. Munich: Carl Hanser Verlag, 1979, p. 326.

Translation: Erwin Fink

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