

Theodor Fontane, “On the Cologne Cathedral Festivities” (October 15, 1880)

Abstract

Theodor Fontane (1819–1898) is regarded by many as the most important German-language realist writer of the nineteenth century. But before he turned to writing novels—which he did only relatively late in life—he chronicled the three Wars of Unification leading up to the founding of the German Empire. Fontane was also an accomplished poet, and in this poem—not among his most famous—he pays homage to the Cologne Cathedral as a symbol of German unification. After 632 years of construction, the cathedral was finally completed in 1880. For those eager to foster a sense of German national identity, the cathedral’s dedication ceremony on October 15, 1880, represented an opportunity to voice a desire for unity. The event, however, took place amidst the *Kulturkampf* [cultural struggle] between the Prussian state and the Catholic Church. (The Archbishop of Cologne was conspicuously absent from the celebration.) Hence, Fontane, always willing to call a spade a spade, uses this poem to point out that the conflict between Protestants and Catholics makes unity something to be striven for, as opposed to something already attained: its prerequisites are reconciliation and peace.

Source

O, long-awaited day! Amidst the brightest splendor,
Rise the forest of pillars and aisles and chancel,
From the enclosure of a ring of towers,
The capital now soars up to eternity;
Parts incomplete became a single entity at last,
And fear succumbed and the obsession with doubt lost out,
And together with the towers rises up to the heavens,
A song of praise: So let us praise the Lord!

To those who hearken, it never sounded more jubilant,
At any hour or in any place on earth before.
Then all hearts beat more joyfully and stronger:
An ideal then, it has become our idol now;
United were both Hohenstaufen and Hohenzollern,
And symbol of that feat has this cathedral become to us,
And just as measurement and beauty without compare,
It came to represent a sign of our unity as well.

A sign of unity indeed! But divided *nonetheless*,
So varied still is our people’s heart and mind —
O, long-awaited day, in the folds of your mantle,
Do carry off, before you part, our discord once and for all!
Allow instead concord to arise out of current unity,
From it the greater benefit blooms for all of us,
And when you ring today, o lofty emperor’s bell,
Let reconciliation and peace be what you toll first!

Source: Theodor Fontane, “Zum Kölner Domfest (15. Oktober 1880)” (published in 1880); reprinted in Theodor Fontane, *Werke*, edited by Mathias Bertram, Digital Library, vol. 6, CD-ROM. Berlin: Directmedia, 1998.

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