

Otto Reutter, “Michel Has Been Dreaming Again” (1908)

Abstract

Otto Reutter (1870-1931), a singer and writer of humorous cabaret songs known as *couplets*, had emerged as one of Germany's leading comedic artists of the stage by the end of the nineteenth century. His songs, many of which survive as recordings, often commented on the social and political developments of the time. This recording of a song titled “Michel hat schon wieder mal geträumt” [Michel Has Been Dreaming Again] was made in 1908. It describes Germany, personified as “Michel,” a figure representing Germany's national character as a slow and dreamy student, “honest and harmless,” who lags behind his international fellow students (other European nations) in subjects such as colonial expansion, capital investment, and foreign policy. Reutter's lyrics echo the characteristics usually ascribed to “Michel,” namely that of an innocent, somewhat simple and yet physically strong figure whose unsuspecting nature often leads to his being exploited by scheming foreign powers. A creation of early nineteenth-century nationalism, the figure of “German Michel” was often used to illustrate the decency (and sleepy physical strength) of Germany in contrast to the more worldly and scheming nature of nations like France or Britain. This recording includes four of the song's original six verses, which seem to be urging Germany towards greater competition in the colonial realm. The characterization of Germany as too “sleepy” to compete in imperial expansion, however, was decades out-of-date by 1908, given the strident new *Weltpolitik* [policy of global expansion] enacted by German chancellors such as Bernhard von Bülow at the behest of Wilhelm II in the years just before the turn of the century (1898-1900). So perhaps Reutter is actually making fun of that nationalistic stridency here.

Lyrics:

1.

I am a jack-of-all-trades professor,
I can do and teach many things,
I have students from all over the world,
From Germany to Turkey!
My favorite student is called Michel,
I give him free lessons,
Because, although he comes from the German Reich,
This German is not very rich.
But he is kind and harmless –
And he is honest – unfortunately far too honest,
He just likes to dream all day long,
So I often wake him up and say:
“Michel has been dreaming again!
Michel has missed something again,
Michel waits until the last minute to do his work
Next Easter you won't make the next grade!”

2.

Recently I taught a geography lesson,
I said to my students:
“Name a foreign country
That you particularly like.”
A Belgian pointed to the Congo,
A Frenchman pointed to Morocco,

And then a student from England
Couldn't take his eyes off the entire globe.
Surprised, I said to the Englishman:
“Stop it, what do you want with so many countries?”
Only Michel dreams in sweet peace.
Then I woke him up and called out to him:
“Michel has been dreaming again!
Michel has missed something again.”
He woke up and pointed his finger
at a tiny bit of Africa.

3.
Michel knows everything about art,
He got a B in religion,
He speaks six languages—German the worst,
When he reads, he gets into a torrent of words.
He also spells more correctly than the others,
“to earn” in lowercase and “Taxes” in uppercase,
Only the others are better at arithmetic—
Michel has no talent for that.
Recently I asked him, “If 5 billion
were yours in 1870,
how much would that be today?”
The guy fell asleep while calculating!
Michel has been dreaming again!
The guy missed 5 billion,
he finally calculates and what was the end result?
He has a 5 billion deficit!

4.
He is very agile in gymnastics,
He often does more than is asked of him,
When bending over and bending his knees,
Only the upswing he can't do.
When Michel makes a grave mistake
He lets out a loud cry,
But when the worst is over,
He slowly falls asleep again.
I've scheduled the final exams soon,
Now everyone is sticking together,
One helps the other,
Only Michel waits until the last minute.
Michel has been dreaming again,
Michel is lagging behind again,
Look, there's Michel sitting all alone,
And in his dreams he's singing “Die Wacht am Rhein”.

For the complete lyrics, please see the link included under “further reading.”

Source

Source: Otto Reutter, *Michel hat schon wieder mal geträumt*, 1908.

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