

Richard Dehmel, *Der Arbeitsmann* (1896 / Recording: 1959)

Abstract

The poet Richard Dehmel (1863-1920), who is little known today, was considered one of the most important German poets in the period before the First World War. The artistic influence of his works was evident not only in the admiration of the younger generation of Expressionist writers and artists, but also in the musical adaptations of his poems by leading composers such as Arnold Schoenberg, Richard Strauss, and Jean Sibelius. Dehmel's language and his frank treatment of sexual themes, however, were quite shocking for the time, and were by no means universally accepted in Wilhelmine society. In 1897, Dehmel was charged by the Prussian District Court with violating religious and moral sensibilities: in his poem "Venus Consolatrix" Dehmel compared the biblical figure of Mary Magdalene to Venus, the Roman goddess of love, beauty, and fertility. The offending poem, which had appeared in his 1896 volume of poetry *Weib und Welt* [Woman and the World] that had brought him his literary breakthrough, was censored and had to be removed from the volume's second edition. This literary scandal only enhanced Dehmel's reputation as an uncompromising artist, however. When war broke out in 1914, Dehmel supported the war effort and served until wounded in 1916. He continued to support the war effort up to the Armistice of 1918.

In his prewar poetry, Dehmel frequently dealt with social themes and wrote several poems about workers. One such poem can be heard here: *Der Arbeitsmann* [The Working Man] was also included in his 1896 collection *Weib und Welt*. The satirical magazine *Simplicissimus* reprinted it the same year with an illustration by Hans Anetsberger. The lament of the worker, whose family has work and a roof over their heads but who have little free time besides work and sleep, resonated strongly with the working class at the time. The reduction of working hours, especially in the industrial sector, was one of the main demands of the labor movement. In its Erfurt Program of 1891, for example, the SPD called for the introduction of the eight-hour workday. (The average working day at the end of the nineteenth century was 10 to 12 hours and could be even longer in factories.) Some employers met the unions' demands for shorter workdays, but the eight-hour day as state law was only introduced much later, in the Weimar Republic. Dehmel's line "We smell a storm coming, we common people" likely alludes to the labor movement, which in the long term would demand not only a reduction in working hours but also greater political participation. This recording, in which the actress Lotte Lenya, who became famous in the Weimar Republic through her work with Bertolt Brecht and Kurt Weill, recites the poem, dates from 1959.

Source

Translation:

The Working Man

We have a bed, we have a child,
my wife!

We also have work, both of us,
and we have the sun and rain and wind,
and we lack only one small thing
to be as free as the birds:

only time!
When we walk through the fields on Sundays,
my child,
and see the flock of blue swallows flashing by,
oh, then we don't lack the bit of clothing
needed to be as beautiful as the birds:
only time.
Only time! We smell a storm coming,
we common people,
only small eternity
we lack nothing, my wife, my child,
except all that flourishes through us,
to be as bold as the birds are —
only time!

Source: Richard Dehmel, *Der Arbeitsmann*, 1896. From: *Invitation to German Poetry*, ed. Gustave Mathieu and Guy Stern, read by Lotte Lenya. Dover, 1959.

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