Richard Dehmel, “Sermon for the People of a Metropolis” (1906) and “The New Dignity” (1903)

Abstract

One of the most popular German poets of the Wilhelmine era, Richard Dehmel (1863–1920) offers a critical view of urban life in “Sermon for the People of a Metropolis.” The poem suggests that cities breed social disunity and political agitation, while nature offers a refuge from urban alienation, as well as a greater sense of integration. In “The New Dignity,” Dehmel presents man as the measure of all things.

Source

I. “Sermon for the People of a Metropolis” (1906)

Yes, the big city makes one small.
I look up with suffocated desire
through a thousand corporal fumes to the sun;
and even my father, who looks like a magician
between the giants of his pine and oak forest, is just a countrified
little old man between these swaggering walls.
O let yourselves be moved, you in the thousands!
Once I saw you on a starlit winter night
between the dreary rows of gas lit street lamps
like a gigantic army worm
seeking escape from your affliction;
but then you crept into a rented hall
and listened to words reverberating through smoke and beer stench
about freedom, equality, and the like.
Rather head out and watch the trees grow:
they are firmly rooted and allow themselves to be cultivated,
and each one leans differently to the light.
You, of course, have feet and fists,
for you no forester has to make space,
So head out, get yourselves land! Land! Move!
Forward march!—

Source: Richard Dehmel, “Predigt ans Großstadtvolk”, (1906), *Aber die Liebe: Meine Verse*. Berlin, 1906, p. 171; reprinted in Jürgen Schutte and Peter Sprengel, *Die Berliner Moderne 1885–1914*. Stuttgart, 1987, pp. 344–46.

Translation: Richard Pettit

II. “The New Dignity” (1903)

A Parable
An artist had become a German professor,
with the prospect of further offices, titles and decorations;
and because he was by nature a sculptor,

there appeared before him a whole horde
of great, greatest and greatest of all animals,
which he was accustomed to modeling,
in order to congratulate him most graciously.
A baboon growled: Mr. Professor,
I hope you are now chiseling better and better!
Yes, yelled a donkey: one should perform one's difficult duties,
Mr. Professor, more and more nobly.
An old plodding workhorse
whinnied with a contorted mouth:
Dear Mr. Professor, it is essential to carve in wood
with ever more truthfulness the suffering of existence.
A disciplined watchdog grumbled: bow wow—
A tom cat yowled in between: meow, meow—
Mr. Professor, the world is quite full of horror,
one must cut it clear to make it more beautiful.
Ugh! grunted a pig: I would like to plead,
Mr. Professor, for morals that are ever purer.
A few camels begged most strenuously:
Worthy Mr. Professor, kindly excuse us,
we recommend that you cast life's malice
ever more clearly in bronze.
An elephant sounded his trumpet:
Highly esteemed Mr. Professor, I represent
the old wisdom of the Brahmins;
allow yourself to anticipate the ever more profound!
Eeech—squeaked one of two rabbits:
we want to advance ourselves higher and higher!
Four amused hamsters, however, cowered in a circle,
they snuffled in their overfed fashion:
Dear Mr. Professor, need teaches us to pray,
learn to knead your clay ever more purposefully!
And—warned a gobbling turkey:
Be, of course, more and more orderly!
Just the opposite! screeched a bearded vulture:
Be, naturally, more and more free!
A lion bellowed: I recommend only that you
assume an ever more proud posture!
A kangaroo hopping mysteriously
Walzed by and whistled its advice:
Mr. Professor, they only want to confuse you,
You must elaborate the form ever more elegantly.
A clever stork gently raised its leg
and chattered quite deliberately: no, no,
Highly regarded Mr. Professor, what counts on earth
is just to become more and more simple.
And so the animals, large and small,
wild and tame all together,
gave Mr. Professor their gracious advice,
when suddenly from this congregation of well-wishers
a beautifully adorned bird of paradise

flew up and chuckled: as I have come to know you,
dear artist friend, you will now pretend to yourself,
that you should embellish our Goddess nature,
and you will resent your new dignity
and want to become ever more crusty.
And then Mr. Professor growled something into his beard
and looked genuinely determined
and stretched in dismay all four limbs.
There appeared at last in his quarters
the wildest and most tame of animals:
a woman. She spoke: dear husband, your dignity
is of course an artificial dignity.
But then we humans never really act
as naturally as the rest of the beasts;
even the naked bride wears on her finger
a little ring as a chaste vow.
Look, with all our clothes, adornments and medals
the old sorceress wants to trick nature
so that her earthly costume ball
does not seem even more bestial.
And so, artist, simply let yourself be glorified;
and to keep your worshippers from becoming rude,
learn how to conduct yourself as a worthy role model,
since man wants—always to become more human.
Then the new Mr. Professor laughed,
bowed to his wife adoringly
and clipped his heavenly hair.
Since this time the high professors
of the German art academies
are no longer denounced as beasts of burden.

Source: Richard Dehmel, „Die neue Würde“ (1903), in *Gesammelte Schriften in drei Bänden*. Berlin, 1913, vol. 1, pp. 106–09.

Translation: Richard Pettit

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