

Classic Poetry Series

Ernst Toller
- poems -

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Ernst Toller(1 December 1893 – 22 May 1939)

Ernst Toller was a left-wing German playwright, best known for his Expressionist plays and serving as President of the short-lived Bavarian Soviet Republic, for six days.

Biography

Ernst Toller was born in Samotschin, Poland, on 1st December 1893. His father was a successful Jewish wholesale merchant. He was schooled in Bromberg where despite describing it as a "school of miseducation and militarization", he was able to begin his literary career with the publication of a number of articles in the local newspaper and then poetry.

In 1914 Toller moved to France in order to study law at the University of Grenoble. However, within six months the onset of the First World War meant he had returned home and signed up for the German army. Within a year he was fighting on the front lines, but by 1916 he was taken ill, suffering from "physical exhaustion and a complete nervous breakdown". In January 1917, now lacking his initial enthusiasm for the war and instead shocked by the high level of carnage, he was discharged from the army.

Following this, Toller moved to Munich to return to his studies at Heidelberg University. Here he became friends with sociologist Max Weber. In May 1917 the pair took part in the first "Lauensteiner conference", where they cordially disagreed about the course of the war. Whilst Weber argued for the continuation of the war, Toller favoured a negotiated peace.

Following his discharge from the army, Toller also returned to writing poetry. His works took on an overtly political tone and he became increasingly regarded as a dangerous political revolutionary. Now a socialist and a pacifist he formed the Cultural and Political League of German Youth and demanded an end to the war. Expelled from University on political grounds, Toller moved to Munich where he helped organise a strike amongst munitions workers and later supported the German revolution of 1918 when sailors at Kiel refused to obey orders and engage in battle with the British Navy.

In 1919 Toller was sentenced to five years in prison for his support of Kurt Eisner's declaration of a Bavarian Socialist Republic. While imprisoned, he completed work on Transformation, which premiered in Berlin under the direction of Karlheinz Martin in September 1919. At the time of Transformation's

hundredth performance, the Bavarian government offered Toller a pardon, which the writer refused out of solidarity with other political prisoners. Toller would go on to write some of his most celebrated works in prison, including the dramas *Masses Man* (*Masse Mensch*), *The Machine Breakers* (*Die Maschinenstürmer*), *Hinkemann, the German* (*Der deutsche Hinkemann*), and many poems.

On his release from prison in 1924 Toller continued to publish further works, including *Once a Bourgeois Always a Bourgeois* (1927) and became a prominent figure within the League for Human Rights and the Group of Revolutionary Pacifists.

Unfortunately, with the ascent to power of the Nazis in the 1930s, Toller's background meant that he was made to feel increasingly alienated and he was included on a list of banned author's published by Goebbels. When Toller also saw that communists and socialists were being persecuted in the concentration camps, he was persuaded to leave Germany. He first sought exile in Britain and later in the United States, where he had a short lived career and screen play writer.

He went on a lecture tour of the United States and Canada in 1936 and 1937, before settling in California, where he worked on screenplays which remained unproduced. Toller moved to New York City in 1936, where he lived with a group of artists and writers in exile, including Klaus Mann, Erika Mann and Therese Giehse.

On 22nd May 1939, depressed by the rise of Fascism in Europe and aware that his brother and sister had both been sent to concentration camps, Toller committed suicide in his hotel room.

Corpses In The Woods

A dung heap of rotting corpses:
Glazed eyes, bloodshot,
Brains split, guts spewed out
The air poisoned by the stink of corpses
A single awful cry of madness.

Oh, women in France,
Women of Germany
Regard your menfolk!
They fumble with torn hands
For the swollen bodies of their enemies,
Gestures, stiff in death, become the touch of brotherhood,
Yes, they embrace each other,
Oh, horrible embrace!

I see and see and am struck dumb
Am I a beast, a murderous dog?
Men violated
Murdered.

Ernst Toller

Deutschland

Through the grill of my cell
I see children playing.
Pinned there, shrinking there,
prison-years... torture-years...

Germany,
your sons will
no longer play
as children.

Ernst Toller

Factory Smokestacks At Dawn

They chisel their force into the dawning sky.
They forge their steeled selves on the precipice.
They split through the fog like axes
so that each breath shatters around them.
Morning announces itself with purple laughter.
The sky floods deep blue.
They keep watch,
barbed and shaven and grey,
naked there and as lost
in the ether. God is born.

Ernst Toller

For The Dead Of The Revolution

Death-prone, the bodies
 forked in mutiny
against the collar
 of the uncooked plague,
your destiny cleansed
 with the dark gesture.
By whom the paths are prepared,
 to sink upon the grill,
death pitches forward still
 before him, in reverence.

Ernst Toller

Nightmare

The people's conscience squats
on a worm-eaten pole.
Around the pole dance the bones of three children.
From the young mother's belly it ruptures forth:
the sheep's pulse bleats baa baa.

Ernst Toller

November

Cities are so far away, humans live there.
The knot chokes at your throat, a gray
horror caresses your limbs. Who will freedom behold?
When, at last, will the grubs rise up?

Ernst Toller

Sentry

Starry sky.
To restrain the beast
my rifle glows,
to fix the black barrel
to the milky moon.
The cry of the Snowy Owl.
A baby whimpers in the village.
The bullet,
treacherous wolf,
bursts into the sleeping house.
The night smells of lime-tree blossoms.

Ernst Toller

Spring

In spring I go to war
To sing or to die.
What do I care for my own troubles?
Today I shatter them, laughing in pieces.

Oh, Brothers, know that young spring came
In a whirlwind.
Quickly throw off tired grief
And follow her in a host.

I have never felt so strongly
How much I love you, Oh, Germany,
As the magic of spring surrounds you
Amidst the bustle of war.

Ernst Toller

The Visitor

The walls shriek with the eyes
of mangled pigeons, the weasel's glittering teeth,
the aimless thrashing of the terrified.
The heart clings to the prisoner's hand.
Forever it beats, song of the deserted,
as snipers circle about him.
And still he emerges from the crush of frozen cells.
Absorbed in the spirals of a choked life,
he looks to the interior, drinks from God's spring—

And the visitor shivers. He comes for nothing.

Ernst Toller

To The Trench

Through shell-holes,
puddles of mud,
they trudge.
Over frozen
men in foxholes
they stumble.

Rats dart whistling across the distances.
Dead fingers rain down
& tap on rotting doors.
Signal-rockets,
corpse-lanterns...

To the ditch, to the ditch.

Ernst Toller

Twilight

In early evening the cell flares up.
Thin shadows slide down the gray walls.
He who cries out in mutiny exhausts into a dream.
The brown stillness sweeps over like a gentle wave.

And often a frosted light fills the choked room.
Figures beckon you to the spiritless circle
where the dance of the heavy coats dissolves into silence,
where dawn breaks into a ringing of bells.

Ernst Toller