

# Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism

TCLC

256



Volume 256

# Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism

**Criticism of the  
Works of Novelists, Poets, Playwrights,  
Short Story Writers, and Other Creative Writers  
Who Lived between 1900 and 1999,  
from the First Published Critical  
Appraisals to Current Evaluations**



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# Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism

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# Preface

Since its inception *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism* (TCLC) has been purchased and used by some 10,000 school, public, and college or university libraries. TCLC has covered more than 1000 authors, representing over 60 nationalities and nearly 50,000 titles. No other reference source has surveyed the critical response to twentieth-century authors and literature as thoroughly as TCLC. In the words of one reviewer, “there is nothing comparable available.” TCLC “is a gold mine of information—dates, pseudonyms, biographical information, and criticism from books and periodicals—which many librarians would have difficulty assembling on their own.”

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- The **Introduction** contains background information that introduces the reader to the author, work, or topic that is the subject of the entry.
- The list of **Principal Works** is ordered chronologically by date of first publication and lists the most important works by the author. The genre and publication date of each work is given. In the case of foreign authors whose

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# Gottfried Benn

## 1886-1956

German poet, short story writer, essayist, playwright, and autobiographer.

The following entry provides an overview of Benn's life and works. For additional information on his career, see *TCLC*, Volume 3.

### INTRODUCTION

Benn is considered one of the most influential and controversial authors of modern German literature. Although he wrote in multiple genres, Benn is most often remembered for his expressionist poems, collected in such volumes as *Morgue und andere Gedichte* (1912), which address themes related to death, decay, and suffering, as well as existential questions faced by the modern individual. With the introduction of his unique poetic style, characterized by its formal invention and use of vernacular language, Benn exemplified the avant-garde that challenged German literary tradition in the first decades of the twentieth century. Later in his career, he also produced significant works of fiction that investigate the intricacies of human thought and experience, as well as progressive critical works that explore the nuances of the creative process and anticipate the concerns of subsequent literary trends. During the 1930s and 1940s, Benn's writings fell out of favor in Europe and America as a result of his brief, initial support of Adolf Hitler's Nazi regime. The author was rediscovered during the 1950s, however, and has since come to be regarded as one of Germany's most significant twentieth-century poets and literary theorists. Writing in 1953, Edgar Lohner described Benn as "the greatest lyrical power since Rilke" and argued that he represents "the most valuable rediscovery" in the field of European letters.

### BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

The son of a Lutheran clergyman, Benn was born May 2, 1886, in Mansfeld, Germany. He attended the Gymnasium at Frankfurt an der Oder from 1896 to 1903, after which he enrolled in the University of Marbach and studied philosophy and theology. A year later, he enrolled at the University of Berlin and began studying medicine at the Kaiser Wilhelm Akademie. During his years as a student, Benn composed poetry, as well as

scientific essays that contributed to the debates on the development of modern science, psychiatry, and brain physiology. In 1912, he completed his doctorate, began military service, and produced his first work, a poem-cycle entitled *Morgue und andere Gedichte*. Benn was discharged from the military for health reasons, and for several months he worked as an assistant at the Pathological Institute of the Westend Hospital, later serving as an assistant in psychiatry at the hospital under Karl Bonhoeffer. Benn's second volume of poetry, *Söhne*, appeared in 1913. The following year, he met and married actress Edith Brosin. On August 1, 1914, however, Benn was required to report for military service in World War I, during which he served in the medical corps and received an Iron Cross for his participation in the conquest of Antwerp. Benn lived in Brussels as a military doctor until 1917 and produced *Gehirne* (1916), a collection of short fiction, which was followed by the short novel *Diesterweg* in 1918.

In the summer of 1917, Benn returned to Berlin and opened a largely unsuccessful private practice. He suffered further financial and emotional loss in 1922, when his wife died after an operation. During the mid-1920s, Benn produced additional volumes of poetry, including *Schutt* (1924) and *Spaltung* (1925), and expanded his study of paleontology and anthropology, as well as Carl Jung's theories of the collective unconscious. These studies resulted in the composition of several essays that addressed both aesthetic and scientific issues. Benn became fully embroiled in controversy in 1933, when he initially embraced the Nazi party under Adolf Hitler. During this time, he rejoined the army medical corps, serving in Hanover and Berlin, until he was excluded from active duty in the late 1930s. As a result, he was not directly involved when World War II broke out in September of 1939, but maintained an office in Berlin where he wrote creative works and guidelines for compensation of medical disabilities. He and his second wife, Herta, were relocated to Landsberg an der Warthe in 1943 but were forced to flee separately shortly before the Russian army invaded in 1945. After a brief reunion in Berlin, Herta traveled to a village occupied by American soldiers, but when the Americans turned the village over to Russian control, leaving Herta behind, she committed suicide, and Benn fell into a deep depression. After years of censure, the author's literary reputation was restored during the late 1940s. Benn continued to



write, received several honors, and participated in a lecture tour. His health had deteriorated, however, and he died on July 7, 1956, in Berlin, of advanced spinal cancer.

## MAJOR WORKS

Benn is primarily remembered as an expressionist poet. In his debut work, *Morgue und andere Gedichte*, the author introduced a unique poetic style and his bleak worldview. Composed after an exhaustive autopsy course, the poem-cycle combines crude naturalistic images and gruesome juxtapositions, with Berlin slang and cynical medical jargon. The poems themselves are written in either free verse or loosely rhymed lines and address questions related to mortality and human suffering. Although it was initially received as a detached and nihilistic treatment of existence, some scholars noted a discernable and intense sympathy for humanity in the volume. Benn's second collection of expressionist poems, *Söhne*, which translates as "Sons," was dedicated to Else Lasker-Schüler, an expressionist poet, with whom he had a brief affair. Poems written during this period, including "Pastorensohn," are thought to express the tension Benn experienced with his father. In later poetry collections, including *Spaltung* and *Schutt*, Benn largely abandoned the avant-garde formal techniques that characterized his earlier works, using traditional classic forms instead, which relied heavily on rhyme and meter. In terms of subject matter, the poems of these works addressed mythical and visionary themes. In several poems, the author portrayed primitive societies conjuring visions through rhythmic dance, drugs, and participation in ritual. Other poems are concerned with the modern individual's attempt to awaken primeval and archetypal elements hidden within the self.

In addition to poetry, Benn produced significant works of fiction. His first prose works, also known as the "Rönne novellas," are collected in *Gehirne*. The stories of this work feature a common protagonist, Dr. Rönne, a former pathologist suffering from depersonalization, a mental disorder in which an individual experiences remoteness from feelings, the body, and the surrounding world. Loosely inspired by Benn's own experience of the disorder, the stories depict Dr. Rönne's attempt to cope with his ailment, as well as his efforts to become a whole person and reestablish his connection with the community. Scholars have regarded the protagonist as an exemplary figure of the post-World War I generation, connecting his struggle with larger existential issues that characterized German society. The author addressed similar themes in his next work of fiction, *Diesterweg*. In this volume, the titular protagonist is an army doctor who experiences the disintegration of his personality

and is sent back to Berlin on medical discharge. Benn explores the idea of the stratified psyche in this work and depicts situations in which the rational and archetypal elements of the mind interact. Benn's later work, *Der Ptölemäer* (1949), is comprised of three novellas: the titular story, "Roman des Phänotyp," and "Weinhaus Wolf." "Der Ptölemäer" is a postwar novella that employs gruesome imagery from the author's experience of bombed-out Berlin and the breakdown of civilian order. "Roman des Phänotyp," which Benn described as an "anti-novel," has no central character but rather seeks to identify "points of interaction" between humankind and history, in an effort to reveal essential insights into the human condition. "Weinhaus Wolf" is based on the author's experience of Hanover during World War II and discusses the existence of two spheres: "Geist," or spirit, which encompasses art and imagination, and "Leben," or life, which includes politics and history. In this work, Benn postulates that humankind alone can choose between the two spheres. In his privileging of the "Geist" sphere, the author definitively expressed his own retreat from political involvement.

Besides prose and poetry, Benn produced significant and influential essays, in which he addressed political, scientific, and aesthetic concerns. In *Das moderne Ich* (1920), the author repudiates the image of humanity presented in positivist thought and rejects both the Hegelian and Marxist theories of the historical process, promoting instead Hans Driesch's concept of "cumulative" history, in which accidental events replace the idea of an inevitable and predetermined fate. In *Nach dem Nihilismus*, produced in 1932, the author introduced a new theory regarding the creative process, which he termed "the constructive spirit." In this theory, Benn describes a complementary relationship between creativity and rational thought, which results in a new reality that prevails over existing principles confronting the modern individual, namely, nihilism and "progressive cerebration." In another crucial essay, *Probleme der Lyrik* (1951), originally delivered as a speech, Benn discusses modern poetics, offering definitions and descriptions of present-day poetry that are firmly planted in the Western modernist tradition. In this work, the author also reflects on the monologue poem and details its identifying characteristics. Among both critics and poets, *Probleme der Lyrik* came to be regarded as a definitive text for a new generation of poets.

## CRITICAL RECEPTION

Benn first garnered critical attention with the publication of *Morgue und andere Gedichte* in 1912. Although many readers condemned the brutal nature of the work, some detected sympathetic nuances in the author's bleak perspective and praised its poetic force. These poems

were fully embraced by the avant-garde in Germany, who had already begun to challenge romantic conventions of poetry. Over the next few years, the author produced poetry and plays but received the most attention for his fiction. *Gehirne*, in particular, was lauded for its timely themes, as well as its use of the avant-garde concept of "absolute prose," a method of writing that favors visionary and associative elements over purely descriptive and psychologically constructed narratives. Benn's reputation grew during the 1920s, and although he struggled financially, he was among the most widely discussed German expressionist poets during this time. While he was, at times, the subject of political controversy, the author continued to gain recognition, and in 1932 he was elected to the Prussian Academy of Art. The following year, when the Nazis rose to power, Benn offered public support of the new regime. He quickly became disillusioned, however, and repudiated his earlier position, for which he was subsequently denounced by Nazi literary critics. But because of his early allegiance with the party, Benn's work fell out of favor for the duration of World War II. With the publication of *Statische Gedichte* in 1948, however, the author experienced a literary revival, and he continued to garner praise throughout the remaining years of his life. After his death in 1956, Benn was eulogized as one of Germany's greatest twentieth-century poets.

Scholars have continued to study Benn's poetry, fiction, and essays since the first half of the twentieth century. In the years immediately before and after the author's death, Edgar Lohner, Joachim H. Seyppel [see Further Reading], and Hunter G. Hannum examined his poetry, addressing issues with regard to theme, form, and the creative process. For Seyppel, Benn's poems reveal that poetic creation "is more than just a number of beautiful rhymes," but rather "a return to phenomena usually forgotten or covered by human history." Benn's fiction, particularly *Gehirne*, has inspired a number of studies, including those by Augustinus P. Dierick [see Further Reading] and Peter Uwe Hohendahl, while other commentators, such as Gerhard Loose, M. Kent Casper [see Further Reading], and Christoph Eykman, traced overarching themes and motifs that permeate the author's canon. Loose noted Friedrich Nietzsche's influence on Benn's aesthetics, while Casper stressed the "primitivist" nature of his works and identified the "centered" society or individual as a recurring symbol in his writings. Eykman, however, emphasized the importance of the ocean in Benn's writings, arguing that the image carries "an enlarged encoded meaning" that "places it close to the theme of the unconscious." The issue of Benn's politics, especially his brief affiliation with the Nazi party, has also received attention from some critics. Reinhard Alter maintained that, despite his misguided political endeavors, Benn viewed art as "an unconditional and autonomous quality and thus subject to no extraneous empirical, social or political determinants

whatever" [see Further Reading]. On the other hand, Crystal Mazur Ockenfuss argued that whereas the author's writings on eugenics can be regarded as "fascist" ideology, he stands apart from the Nazi program because he considered "regression" and a return to the primitive the ultimate goal of human progress. Since the 1950s, Benn has been firmly established as one of the foremost writers of twentieth-century European letters, but for a few scholars, who view his contributions as visionary and groundbreaking, his importance extends beyond his participation in the ideas of his time. Susan Ray, writing in 2003, asserted that his theories "anticipate and parallel a number of the assumptions now underlying many recent trends in literary criticism," adding that his aesthetic ideas "do not represent the end of an epoch, but rather the beginning of the present postmodernist period, with all its fascinations, tensions, contradictions, paradoxes, and problems."

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## PRINCIPAL WORKS

- Morgue und andere Gedichte* (poetry) 1912
- Söhne* (poetry) 1913
- Gehirne* (short stories) 1916
- Fleisch* (poetry) 1917
- Diesterweg* (novella) 1918
- Etappe* (dramatic sketch) 1919
- Ithaka* (dramatic sketch) 1919
- Das moderne Ich* (essay) 1920
- Schutt* (poetry) 1924
- Betäubung* (poetry) 1925
- Spaltung* (poetry) 1925
- Fazit der Perspektiven* (essays) 1930
- Das Unaufhörliche* [with Paul Hindemith] (oratorio) 1931
- Nach dem Nihilismus* (essays) 1932
- Der neue Staat und die Intellektuellen* (essays) 1933
- Kunst und Macht* (essays) 1934
- Statische Gedichte* (poetry) 1948
- Drei alte Männer* (dramatic sketches) 1949
- Der Ptolemäer* (novellas) 1949
- Doppelleben [Double Life]* (autobiography) 1950
- Fragmente* (poetry) 1951
- Probleme der Lyrik* (essays) 1951
- Die Stimme hinter dem Vorhang [The Voice Behind the Screen]* (dramatic sketches) 1952
- Destillationen* (poetry) 1953
- Après-lude* (poetry) 1955
- Gesammelte Gedichte 1912-1956* (poetry) 1956
- Gesammelte Werke in vier Bänden*. 4 vols. (poetry, short stories, dramatic sketches, essays, and autobiography) 1958-1961

*Primal Vision: Selected Writings of Gottfried Benn*  
(poetry, essays, dramatic sketches, and short stories)  
1960

*Selected Poems* (poetry) 1970

*Poems, 1937-1947* (poetry) 1991

## CRITICISM

Edgar Lohner (essay date October 1953)

SOURCE: Lohner, Edgar. "A Critical Interpretation of Gottfried Benn's Poem 'Spät.'" *Monatshefte für Deutschen Unterricht* 45, no. 5 (October 1953): 308-16.

[In the following essay, Lohner offers a detailed reading of Benn's post-World War II poem "Spät," describing the work as "a dirge on the illusions of life and life's meaninglessness" in light of "the inescapable fact of death."]

Simultaneously with the announcement in *Das Literarische Deutschland* (October 20, 1951) of Benn's being awarded the *Georg Büchner Preis*, one of Benn's most ambitious poems, "Spät," appeared for the first time. The three volumes of the poet's previous poems published since the war (*Trunkene Flut*, 1949; *Statische Gedichte*, 1949; *Fragmente*, 1951) reflect his nihilistic orientation. They expose the breakdown of European pseudo-idealistic creeds and the failure of modern man to cope with his environment. It seems appropriate and useful to consider "Spät" as evidence of Benn's poetic powers, since it marks both a recapitulation and an advance in the poet's work.

"Spät" takes a special place in the whole work of the writer, not only for its unconcern with myth, intellectuality, and art (usually at the center of Benn's poetry), but also for its structural diversity and the extraordinary variety of styles.

As with many interpretations of modern poems, it is difficult to grasp parts of the poem until we have first roughly understood the whole of it. I shall, therefore, sketch at once what I believe the poem to be mainly about. "Spät" is a poem about the failure of certain key illusions, presented in a causative sequence in which various situations are developed, opening up broadly and finally focusing, with distinct dramatic force, on a personal vision of the essential quality of life. The first section deals with the close observation, broadly speaking, of an autumnal scene, behind which lie reminiscences of life and its great and unrelieved disillusionment. Section II goes back to trace certain illusions in

childhood and youth, culminating in the futility of love. The third section reveals the wish to turn back, to live the moment, to erase the illusions, while developing the failure and the background of love in very detailed terms. In the next section, the fourth, we have again the motif of failure. Here the poet resorts to an image from the plutocratic strata of modern society typified in Hearst and Marion Davies—the end of a civilization with its superficiality and levelling of all values. We move from the generalized individual "I" to the specific objective correlative in the persons of Marion Davies and Hearst. In the fifth and sixth sections the personal experience, which stands for the common experience, is summed up, beginning with an open appeal to the reader to understand the essential quality of life and ending in a specific, somewhat surrealistic image of shadows walking out of life. The poem, therefore, might be called a disillusioned summing-up of the individual's failures in life and his realization of its futility in view of the inescapable fact of death; it is a dirge on the illusions of life and life's meaninglessness, expressed by the contemporary sensibility of an artist in whom a personal experience, seen in mature perspective, and a clear view of his time are one.

Actually much of this is intimated in the title. "Spät" is a highly suggestive term with a great many possible connotations. Mostly it refers to something much advanced in time (*späte Stunde*, *Spätherbst*, *späte Welt*, etc.). But often it suggests "in vain," or "too late," or "recent." Often, though not necessarily, it carries an overtone of either fulfilment or ripeness, of either regret or grief, and it sometimes suggests nearness to death. All these shades of meanings are drawn into the title of Benn's poem and thus hint at once at the essence of the poem as such. More than that, the title of "Spät" has for Benn a kind of inexorable quality. It suggests, viewed from the whole of his work, the autumn of life, a lateness with an air of futility and a feeling of death; it implies the point of no return.

The poem opens leisurely and straightforwardly, in a natural flow, with the autumn image of a park, very much in the tone of either Stefan George's "Komm in den totgesagten park" or Rilke's "Herbstgedicht" (Herr, es ist Zeit . . .). Two pairs of modifiers (*alt*, *schwer*) are emphatically placed at the beginning and at the end (*feucht*, *verwirrt*) of the first stanza. They immediately pick up the theme of advanced time, which, along with the autumn image, is again taken up in the first line of the second stanza (*Herbstliche Süße*). This expression not only intensifies and narrows the vagueness of the park image, but also sums up the preceding stanza and serves as a transitional line leading to the more detailed scene that follows, in which the speaker of the poem (the ideal subject—not necessarily Benn) indulges in autumnal impressions of the Lüneburger Heath. It is late in the year and a scent of dying is in the air. The

image of actual or approaching death, so distinct at the end of the poem, is already suggested here. The autumn image is now drawn in denser lines: the purple colors of heather that border the highway through which the speaker is clearly driving. While he drives along the heath, his awareness of the autumnal beauty of the scene merges with his reflections:

Versonnenheiten,<sup>3</sup> die zu Nichts führen . . .

*Versonnenheiten* is the pivotal word in this stanza. In its ambiguity (the idea of thought and of light) it contains the turn from the objective to the reflective, from the description of landscape to the opening up of an all-absorbing, abysmal nothingness—a process that is strongly stressed four times (“zu Nichts führen,” “in sich gekehrtes Kraut,” “hinabbräunt,” “ins Nieerblühte”), thus adding futility and disillusion to the theme of lateness. For this is, after all, the season that is supposed to be fruitful, and yet it is not.

The process of disillusionment, first experienced in nature, is repeated in the contrasted image of complex urban society. The shift is briefly indicated in the first two lines of the third stanza:

Dies die Natur.  
Und durch die City . . .

The abrupt verbless brevity of the line makes us expect a shift. It also carries a slightly ironic concluding overtone suggesting: that's what nature really has to offer—nothing. The new image is again first depicted with an aura of pleasantness. The beertrucks move through the city. The play on *Bierwagen*, with the various overtones this word carries in German, first suggests an image of past gaiety, the friendly atmosphere of an older world, a past way of living. The pivotal word in this stanza is *Durst*. Its ambiguity, carrying meaning on two levels, the physical and the spiritual, is played on by the poet and is taken up and emphasized in the question “was stillt sich nicht?” *Bierwagen*, the symbol of a relaxed past and, at the same time, the symbol of an appeased and saturated society where masses wallow in excess, is the focal point of this image; it is immediately contrasted with the unappeased and intellectually restless “smaller circles,” the distinguished individual who does not look for an easy way out and is not sunk in passivity.

The second section starts with the now familiar technical device of summing up in the first line of the first stanza in a tone of some finality what has been previously said:<sup>4</sup>

So enden die Blicke, die Blicke zurück.

From looking at the immediate environment the poet is prompted to turn back and reexamine his own past. His withdrawal into the world of early days brings forth in

warm friendly images reminiscences of a harmonious childhood and the first disillusioning experiences in a vein of nostalgia;<sup>5</sup> the second stanza concentrates on the disappointments of youth. Both stanzas are brief straightforward statements. Benn, with his syntactical originality, adds in the second stanza details which strengthen the thematic unity of the poem. It has here a staccato effect so that the reader is made painfully aware of the disillusionment carried through the syntax into the rhythm (“Begegnungen der Seele! Jugend! . . . Treubruch, Verfehlen, Verfall”). The third stanza again opens with an exclamation (“Und Liebe!”). Here the single instance is offered as dramatic evidence: the particular concrete experience against the more or less abstract statements in the first two stanzas. And as the stanza opens in more prose-like quotations, we find the versification freer: a long line, followed, as if in retraction, by a short line:

Ich glaube dir, daß du gern bei mir geblieben wärest,  
aber es nicht konntest . . .

The line is thrown out and pulled back so that the reader gets the feeling of resigned disbelief. There is also youthful pathos, but the poet tries to make it deliberately objective. He tries to repress the feeling. This is quite typical of Benn, who often expresses an emotion freely and then represses it. He tries to give the impression that he is unconcerned, that he is cold and objective about life, while actually he is very much concerned. Finally, the meaninglessness of all these youthful sentiments is clinched in the passivity of the nature image:

So enden die Rosen,  
Blatt um Blatt

which also resumes the image of fruitless vegetation and the “*Versonnenheiten, die zu Nichts führen*” of the first section and demonstrates the recognition of failure and the finality of death. The sincerity with which the speaker believed in happiness amounted to nothing: he now seems to tell himself that this is the way of life, that this must be faced. Here again is the temporality of existence which harks back to the title and the general theme.

Structurally section II and III belong together, insofar as III deals with “*Hintergründe der Glücke*,”<sup>6</sup> only briefly indicated in the love-idyll of II. The background, the What?, now becomes all-absorbing. It is a more intense evocation or invocation of a past where all the potentialities were lost. From the awareness of death in the previous section there is the inevitable reaction—not to want to be aware of the end.

In the first stanza of III a number of the more or less fundamental terms the poet has used before are significantly repeated. “Unverantwortlich und nicht das Ende