

# Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism

TCLC 328

Volume 328

# 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**

**Lawrence J. Trudeau**  
*Editor*

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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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Volumes 1 through 87 of TCLC featured authors who died between 1900 and 1959; beginning with Volume 88, the series expanded to include authors who died between 1900 and 1999. Beginning with Volume 26, every fourth volume of TCLC was devoted to literary topics. These topics widen the focus of the series from the individual authors to such broader subjects as literary movements, prominent themes in twentieth-century literature, literary reaction to political and historical events, significant eras in literary history, prominent literary anniversaries, and the literatures of cultures that are often overlooked by English-speaking readers. With TCLC 285, the series returned to a standard author approach, with some entries devoted to a single important work of world literature and others devoted to literary topics.

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# Hans Henny Jahnn

## 1894-1959

German playwright, novelist, essayist, and nonfiction writer.

### INTRODUCTION

The plays and novels of Hans Henny Jahnn combine a Gothic sensibility with a rejection of bourgeois life and conventional ideas about sexuality and social organization. He was a member of the Expressionist movement in German theater, which focused on the suffering of individuals as the result of the shortcomings of bourgeois social values. A lifelong pacifist, Jahnn was appalled by the barbarism of the world wars, and he advocated a universal love of mankind based on antimaterialism, antiutilitarianism, and the need for pure artistic expression. Contemporary audiences were shocked by the highly sexualized nature of his work, which features homosexuality, bestiality, necrophilia, incest, self-mutilation, and sadomasochism. Jahnn has received limited critical attention outside the German-speaking world.

### BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Jahnn was born on 17 December 1894 in Stellingen—near Hamburg, Germany—to William Jahnn, a ship's carpenter, and Elise Petersen Jahnn. His childhood education in mathematics and engineering was central to his later work in architecture, music, and the construction and repair of church organs. As a youth, Jahnn was intense, obsessive, and extremely pious, carrying the New Testament with him wherever he went. He was deeply concerned about the future of humanity, animals, and the Earth. He identified himself as a socialist, a pacifist, and a rebel against the established social and political orders. Jahnn was also known to engage in masochistic practices, including self-asphyxiation with chloroform—which he claimed to have undertaken as an experiment to determine whether he would lose consciousness or his sensitivity to pain first.

While attending secondary school in Hamburg, Jahnn began a relationship with the musician Gottlieb Harms, who became a lifelong friend and partner. At the start of World War I, Jahnn and Harms successfully applied for conscientious-objector status and left Germany for Norway. Jahnn was captivated by the primitive elements of

Norway's culture and landscape, and he made a study of its sacred architecture. During this time, he lost his Christian faith, a process recorded in the play *Pastor Ephraim Magnus* (1919).

Jahnn returned to Hamburg at the end of the war, working as a renovator and builder of church organs. A highly skilled organist and craftsman, he considered the organ to be a version of the ancient pagan god Pan's musical pipes, which he believed could be used to access a lost primitive world. In 1920, Jahnn, Harms, and artist Franz Buse founded a utopian society near Hamburg called Ugrino, which sought to combat the degradations of mass production and to reform the world through art. Among their accomplishments was the preservation of music by composers Dietrich Buxtehude, Samuel Scheidt, and Vincent Lübeck. They also made the works of the madrigalist Carlo Gesualdo and Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's *Die Gärtnerin aus Liebe* (1780) available to the public. In 1922, Jahnn married Ellinor Philips, with whom he had a daughter named Signe. Their relationship was unconventional: both Ellinor and Jahnn were bisexual, and they lived with Harms and his wife, Ellinor's half-sister. When the Nazis gained control of Germany in 1933, Jahnn spent several months in Switzerland before settling on a farm on the Danish island of Bornholm, where he bred horses and cultivated grain in seclusion and relative peace. At the end of the war, Danish authorities confiscated the farm because of Jahnn's German nationality. He returned to Hamburg, working as an organ builder until his death in 1959. Jahnn's awards include the 1954 Literary Prize of Lower Saxony and the 1955 Lessing Prize of the City of Hamburg.

### MAJOR WORKS

Despite winning the prestigious Kleist Prize in 1920, *Pastor Ephraim Magnus* was unpopular among critics and the general public. The play follows the increasingly disturbing attempts of the title character's three children—Ephraim, Jakob, and Johanna—to comply with their father's dying wish that they emulate Christ's suffering. Jakob murders his girlfriend during childbirth and later kills and dissects another girl in an attempt to find her soul, for which he is executed. Johanna and Ephraim develop an incestuous relationship involving self-mutilation, which leads to

Ephraim's blinding and castration and, eventually, to Johanna's death at Ephraim's hands. The play ends with Ephraim, who has succeeded his father as pastor, planning to enlarge the church building to include a tomb for himself and his siblings that will prevent their bodies from decomposing.

Jahnn's plays of the 1920s—including *Die Krönung Richards III* (1921; The Coronation of Richard III), *Der Arzt, sein Weib, sein Sohn* (1922; The Doctor, His Wife, His Son), *Der gestohlene Gott* (1924; The Stolen God), and *Medea* (1926)—depict characters searching for inner peace and knowledge through forbidden sex and violence. Probably his most successful play, *Medea* is a rewriting of the classical myth of Medea, a sorceress who kills her two young sons after learning of the infidelity of their father, Jason. In Jahnn's play, Medea is black, and her children are of mixed race, a change to the original myth that provoked outrage in interwar Germany. After Jason reveals his plans to marry Kreusa, Medea sends her a robe that causes her flesh to rot before his eyes, as a test of his love for her. When Jason turns from Kreusa in disgust, proving that his love is not absolute, she is lost to him forever. Medea kills her sons not out of vengeance, but to keep them from being corrupted by the evils of the world.

Jahnn's first novel, *Perrudja* (1929), is the first installment of a projected trilogy about the eponymous antihero, who grows up alone in the mountains of Norway. After a mysterious man visits him, Perrudja comes into possession of an unlimited fortune. The story focuses on Perrudja's troubled love affair with the beautiful Signe, his attempts to come to terms with his status as the wealthiest man in the world, and his efforts to use his wealth to foment a war that will inaugurate a period of utopian peace. Jahnn intended for the remaining volumes to describe the development of Perrudja's efforts to promote love, altruism, and equality, but the second volume exists only in fragments and the third was never written.

The play *Armut, Reichtum, Mensch und Tier* (1948; Poverty, Wealth, Man and Animal) concerns a love triangle between Norwegian farmer Vinje and two women in a small mountain village. It was not well received, and audiences took exception to Vinje's sexual relationship with his horse, Falada. Jahnn's final play, *Der staubige Regenbogen* (1961; The Dusty Rainbow) was among the first literary works to express fear that nuclear weapons would eventually destroy mankind.

*Die Nacht aus Blei* (1956; *The Night of Lead*) has been described as Jahnn's darkest novel. It follows Mathieu's vivid and uncanny experiences, often involving sex and

violence, while lost in a strange city of people whose skin is black because they lack life. *Fluß ohne Ufer* (River without Banks) is an unfinished novel cycle that comprises *Das Holzschiff* (1949; *The Ship*), *Die Niederschrift des Gustav Anias Horn nachdem er 49 Jahre alt geworden war* (1949–50; The Notes of Gustav Anias Horn at Age Forty-Nine), and the fragment *Epilog* (1961). Written while Jahnn was in Bornholm, the work details the thirty-year friendship between Gustav Anias Horn and Alfred Tutein, who meet shortly after the death of Horn's young fiancée, Ellena. When Tutein confesses that he killed Ellena and offers his own life as atonement, the men become inseparable. They sail to South America and Africa before settling in Scandinavia, where they live together for years in a remote village.

## CRITICAL RECEPTION

Jahnn's interest in violence and sexual taboo has limited his general audience, and some scholars have suggested that his portrayal of violence aligns him with the National Socialist values that he abhorred. In his monograph on Jahnn, Thomas P. Freeman (2001) provided an overview of Jahnn criticism. He addressed, among other approaches, mythic and Jungian interpretations from the 1960s and 1970s, the anti-Freudian approach of Manfred Maurenbrecher in the late 1970s and 1980s, and the work of gay-studies scholars in the 1980s and 1990s. Breon Mitchell (1971) read *Perrudja* in the context of James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922) as part of her study of the latter work's influence on the German novel. Through an analysis of the manuscript and published versions of Jahnn's novel, Mitchell showed that many of its experimental elements—including interior monolog, leitmotifs, and poetic and musical interludes—were added during the process of revision “under the direct influence of *Ulysses*.” Robert F. Bell (1981) addressed Jahnn's decision to make the title character of *Medea* black. He argued that by racializing the ostracism faced by Medea, Jahnn presents a vision of a modern world where “hypocrisy, bigotry, callous exploitation, and loveless rationalism hold sway.” Heike Bartel (2013) pointed out that Jahnn's decision was more radical in Germany than it would have been in other countries—particularly because he was writing in the context of race debates taking place during the period of the Weimar Republic, when the Rhineland was occupied by French colonial troops, some of whom were black. Richard Detsch (1974) also addressed race in Jahnn's works, describing his movement from “deep sympathy for the oppressed, to a feeling of adulation and awe before the superior attributes of the black race” and, finally, to an “appraisal of the black man



as neither inferior nor superior to the white man.” Detsch argued that Jahn saw miscegenation as the solution to racial antagonisms. Harry Louis Roddy (2015) analyzed the character Perrudja from the perspective of trauma theory. Roddy concluded that Perrudja’s continual bids to see himself as an outsider result from a “repetition compulsion” rooted in a traumatic childhood experience related to his homosocial longings. Roddy asserted that Perrudja’s interactions with animals help him transcend his compulsion and see his weaknesses as evidence of his humanity.

Jenny Ludwig

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- \*Die Niederschrift des Gustav Anias Horn nachdem er 49 Jahre alt geworden war* [The Notes of Gustav Anias Horn at Age Forty-Nine]. 2 vols. Munich: Weismann, 1949-50. Print. (Novel)
- Spur des dunklen Engels* [Path of the Dark Angel]. Hamburg: Ugrino, 1952. Print. Städtische Bühnen, Münster. 12 Dec. 1969. Performance. (Play)
- Klopstocks 150. Todestag am 14. März 1953* [On the 150th Anniversary of Klopstock’s Death, 14 March 1953]. Mainz: Akademie der Wissenschaften und der Literatur, 1953. Print. (Essay)
- Thomas Chatterton*. Deutsches Schauspielhaus, Hamburg. 26 Apr. 1954. Performance. Pub. as *Thomas Chatterton: Eine Tragödie* [Thomas Chatterton: A Tragedy]. Berlin: Suhrkamp, 1955. Print. (Play)
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- Über den Anlaß: Vortrag* [About the Occasion: Lecture]. Munich: Weismann, 1954. Print. (Essay)
- Die Nacht aus Blei: Roman* [The Night of Lead]. Hamburg: Wegner, 1956. Print. (Novel)
- Aufzeichnungen eines Einzelgängers: Eine Auswahl aus dem Werk* [Notes of a Loner: A Selection from the Work]. Ed. Rolf Italiaander. Munich: List, 1959. Print. (Essays, plays, and prose)
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*Thirteen Uncanny Stories*. Trans. Gerda Jordan. Bern: Lang, 1984. Print. Trans. of *13 nicht geheure Geschichten*.

*The Night of Lead*. Trans. Malcolm Green. London: Atlas, 1994. Print. Trans. of *Die Nacht aus Blei*.

\*These novels make up the *Fluß ohne Ufer* [River without Banks] trilogy.

## CRITICISM

### Edward P. Hauch (review date 1950)

SOURCE: Hauch, Edward P. Rev. of *Armut, Reichtum, Mensch und Tier*, by Hans Henny Jahn. *Books Abroad* 24.1 (1950): 65. Print.

[In the following review, Hauch asserts that Jahn's drama *Armut, Reichtum, Mensch und Tier* shows the influence of such contemporary writers as James Joyce.]

The jacket reminds us that the author was the winner of the 1920 Kleist Prize with the drama *Pastor Ephraim Magnus*, and that the present work goes back in its origin to the early thirties. Affinities with the techniques of expression of Joyce, Wilder, Sartre, O'Neill are sufficiently evident even without benefit of prompting from the jacket. It is a *Bauernballade* whose classical diction is concerned with the psychic overtones of the situation rather than with dialectical verisimilitudes. Expressionistic, surrealist tricks are employed for highlighting the theme, not for fatuous mystification, but for clarity. The theme itself: one good and sorely tried human being's triumph over existential accursedness without prejudice to his integrity. Rather trite, isn't it? But what is there that is genuine and not a little trite—until poetry renews it?

### Edgar Lohner (essay date 1952)

SOURCE: Lohner, Edgar. "Hans Henny Jahn: A Note on His Latest Novels." *Symposium* 6.1 (1952): 375-79. Print.

[In the following essay, Lohner laments critics' neglect of Jahn's work and cites *The Ship* as evidence of the author's experiments in "breaking new paths for modern prose-writing" in German.]

Of all authors who achieved literary significance in the twenties and were silenced by Nazism in the thirties, Hans Henny Jahn is least known to the average German reader. Today there are still people, even in literary circles, who are completely unfamiliar with his dramas, like "*Die Krönung Richards III*," "*Medea*," or "*Armut Reichtum Mensch und Tier*" and his novels "*Ugrino und Ingrabanien*" and "*Perrudja*," and who have known Jahn himself only by name. This is regrettable and incomprehensible. The cause of this failure may be found

less in the work of the author than in the lack of tradition and direction in the modern reading public in general. Such neglect seems unjust to a writer who as early as 1920 received the Kleist Preis for his first play "**Pastor Ephraim Magnus**," and whose powerful novel "**Perrudja**" (1930) represents the first attempt in Germany, aside from a few prose works by Albrecht Schaeffer, to encompass our complex world by employing a new narrative method and by reshaping the German language for artistic purposes much as James Joyce did in English. "**Perrudja**," which still waits for a thorough analysis, is a pioneer novel in German literature, written in a way that had long been familiar to French and Anglo-American literature as practised by Valéry Larbaud, Proust, Joyce, Virginia Wolfe, and a number of modern American writers. This novel is an attempt to expose the confused modern consciousness and to transform the spontaneous, untouched flow of images, impressions, hidden perceptions and memories into the mind of Perrudja, the central character, who possesses many human qualities but not those usually required of a hero. The perception of a new kind of human being, which is only suggested here, is continued and emphasized in his latest novel. Unfortunately, this valuable experiment of breaking new paths for modern prose-writing remained nearly unnoticed in Germany.

During the thirties Jahn was exiled on the island of Bornholm in Denmark. Shortly after his return to Germany in 1947 a two volume novel of a trilogy, "**FLUSS OHNE UFER**" (**Bankless river**), written in Denmark, appeared. Both novels evidence but little relationship in structure and language with "**Perrudja**." This is even more true of "**Das Holzschiff**" (**The wooden ship**) than of "**Die Niederschrift des Gustav Anias Horn**" [**Die Niederschrift des Gustav Anias Horn nachdem er 49 Jahre alt geworden war**] (**The memoirs of Gustav Anias Horn**). Here the structure has become simpler and the style clearer; the passionate, fiery expressions, the fevered haste, the short staccato sentences have disappeared; yet in both cases there is still the same tendency to descend into the abyss of the human soul, to raise the unknown, the hidden, the unuttered into consciousness and to dissect and display it in order to reveal the inconstant, tumultuous and demonic qualities of the human heart and mind.

An elaborately wrought three-masted ship with some thousand square yards of red sails is loaded with an unnamed cargo in an unknown harbor. Even during the loading strange incidents occur which become more frequent when the ship has left the harbor. Ship and characters are surrounded by mystery. No one knows the nature of the cargo, no one knows the destination. During the voyage weird things happen: conversations are strangely over-

heard and unexpected events occur as though a centrally operated mechanism were opening and closing mysterious doors. Chasms open, traps are set, hiding places come to light. Secrets everywhere. The central figure of the action is Gustav, the fiancé of Ellena, the captain's daughter. He had come on board as a stowaway. All puzzling events are concentrated around him. He, with Ellena, the captain, and the supercargo, an important and a ponderous man who gets orders from anonymous headquarters and seems to be charting the course of the ghost ship, are entangled in a mesh of evergrowing mutual distrust. Presentiments, fears and anxieties are uttered, as the destination becomes more and more uncertain. Danger is in the air. The crew of the ship gets restless. Cruel, murderous thoughts and sexual phantasies take hold of them. A rumor that the ship is loaded with dynamite drives the bravest into the hold in order to learn the secret of the cargo. One day Ellena is missing. The entire ship is searched. Both investigations prove unsuccessful; together they lead to the sinking of the ship. Technically the novel offers nothing new. The story is told by the omniscient author. From his elevated post of observation he describes scenes and situations. He tells them as he sees them, he introduces and disposes of characters at will, he arranges dialogue and monologue and packs reflections, reports, and philosophical argumentation into the action. By using his omniscience, Jahn takes the simple and easy way of story-telling. He dives into the minds of his characters for an explanation instead of making them so act that no such explanation is needed.

At first sight the title of the book may mislead the critical reader to place the novel in the tradition of the "sea-novel" of Smollett, Cooper, Melville, Conrad, or Loti. Yet after the first pages he is compelled to correct his judgment. The sea, as it is understood in this book, is not considered the last crucial element for man's heroic struggle with fate, or with moral evil. "**The wooden ship**" is not even a sea-novel. It is nothing but a stage, a precisely working automaton, a rational framework, on which the subject, "man," with all his imponderabilities and anxieties, is, with inexorable logic, variously considered. Not the "why," not the "whither," but the "how" of the human being, his condition, is the theme of the book. In this respect there is a seeming similarity with Kafka: the insight in the obviously meaningless ramifications of the world, the denial of both past and future, and the lost condition of man amidst all this. The main characters of "**The wooden ship**" do not have a past, nor do they know anything about their future. Everything is unknown. Josef K. in Kafka's "Trial," being incarcerated in the present, does not have a past either, neither in the meaning of a tradition nor in the sense of a guilt. K. lacks orientation and, therefore, all his ways are

without direction: he moves in a circle. It is the same with the characters in **"The wooden ship."** There is no orientation, and as there is no awareness of a past in either one of these figures there can also be no orientation towards the future, an orientation traced out of their past. The future, however, of which K. in the **"Trial"** and the characters in **"The wooden ship"** are afraid, but which they cannot grasp, becomes in both novels something **"in space"**—an element that comprises staircases, attics, holds, and infinite distances. It is neither predicted nor explained. The distances, to which K., for instance, is exposed in the courts of justice, without his being able to enter them entirely, remain inscrutable and hidden. The ways before him seem, like the future, without end, dark, and impenetrable. And the characters of **"The wooden ship"** experience the same thing. But only seemingly so. With Kafka only the finality is destroyed, but not the ratio; with Jahn timer is both finality and rationality that is dethroned. This becomes all the more obvious, when the ship, the symbol of the ratio, has sunk and man is extradited to the eternal flow of life, that bankless river. And **"Bankless river"** means that the world is not only void of finality but also of rationality; it means that the lofty standpoint of the observer, which stipulates the dualism between solid position and eternal flow, between spirit and matter, between subject and object, has been given up.

**"The wooden ship"** has all the elements of an exposition, the characteristic opening for dramatic action, because everything is unknown in that first book but is cleared up later: unknown is the mission of the supercargo, unknown is the cargo, the destination of the ship; one does not know whether the owner of the ship is on board or not, one is left in the dark about the intimate relationship of Ellena and her fiancé, one does not know who killed Ellena—in short, everything is left open and one is completely at sea. All this drives the reader to the second book which solves the problem of the first and negates the rationalized structure. The hero of the first novel, Gustav, has now become the chronicler of the second. At a place and time not indicated Gustav writes down all his adventures and experiences. It is an Odyssey of perversion. He writes them on a wooden box in which lies embalmed the corpse of the murderer friend. The motif of decay, of putrefaction, which is displayed here, is not new; it is apparent in Faulkner's **"A rose for Emily"** as well as in Emily Brontë's **"Wuthering Heights,"** to name only two examples. The awareness of putrefaction in the midst of life, in the midst of a rich pulsating life, both masochism and fetishism, the brutal and perverted passion—all this is formed by Jahn timer into the realm of unexpected horror. The motif of decay begins with the putrefaction of his beloved and it drives with constant rep-

etition towards putrefaction. Although the particular circumstances and the purpose of the report in the first person singular are not mentioned, we shall have to imagine it as a sort of great re-view, a retrospect. The reader is taken into the realm of the memory of the chronicler, who by explaining, illuminating, and commenting continues the narrative where it left off in the previous novel. Thus the chronicle itself, despite an exact listing of places and time, has in some way or other the character of something timeless and spaceless. And what is also remarkable with this novel, beside this technical feature, is the way Jahn timer uses new, very often extraordinary images and metaphors, neologisms, and partly justified, partly even unintelligible orthographical innovations. The mastery of a colorful and rhythmically balanced prose as well as the literary passion for exact wording and phrasing places him beside the masters of modern German prose: Thomas Mann, Hermann Hesse, and Ernst Jünger.

Finally now the disappearance of Ellena finds its explanation. Tutein, an ordinary sailor, was the murderer. After the ship has sunk he became Gustav's companion and inseparable friend on his way all over the world. Both of them have to pay off a debt of guilt. The extradition to the tribunal of life begins. Gustav and Tutein act of their own will, and their action is perfect freedom; yet at the same time they are figures in a tragedy whose terms and ends are ordained by the illogical and causeless events of life itself. Driven by a common fate they both wander restlessly over the world, through South-American harbors and along African coasts, across seas and continents, over thousands of streets which run as one street with perceptible changes of scene, until one day the street, the journey, ends in Norway where they finally stay. Behind them now is the past—a long road, filled with hope and failures, with sin and lust, interwoven with joy and happiness, a road paved with vice and smoothed out by love, at the end of which a superhuman effort melts into exhaustion; a road very much like the seemingly endless road on which the tragic figure of Joe Christmas in Faulkner's **"Light in August"** moves. The rich melody of the earth itself is seized and grasped and represented: the rustle of leaves, the murmuring of fountains, and the purling of small brooks, the scorching heat of southern countries and the icy chill of the north. And all this, the copious and abundant riches of the earth, is set into music by Gustav.

The world bursts open before them to reveal its scum, the dregs of society, its wickedness, and its riches. The usual limits of expression are here amplified to include subject matter and technique unfamiliar in the literary tradition of Germany. This is a book in which sodomy, incest,