

Poetry

CRITICISM

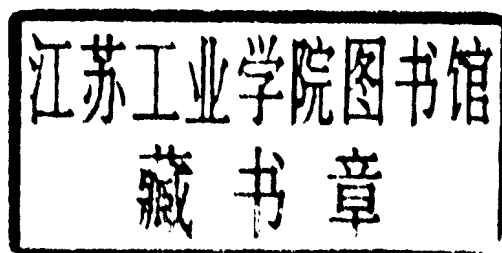
VOLUME

35

Poetry Criticism

*Excerpts from Criticism of the Works
of the Most Significant and Widely
Studied Poets of World Literature*

Volume 35



Elisabeth Gellert
Editor

GALE GROUP



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Preface

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Each PC entry consists of the following elements:

- The **Author Heading** cites the name under which the author most commonly wrote, followed by birth and death dates. Also located here are any name variations under which an author wrote, including transliterated forms for authors whose native languages use nonroman alphabets. If the author wrote consistently under a pseudonym, the pseudonym will be listed in the author heading and the author's actual name given in parenthesis on the first line of the biographical and critical introduction. Uncertain birth or death dates are indicated by question marks. Single-work entries are preceded by the title of the work and its date of publication.
- The **Introduction** contains background information that introduces the reader to the author and the critical debates surrounding his or her work.
- A **Portrait of the Author** is included when available.
- The list of **Principal Works** is ordered chronologically by date of first publication and lists the most important works by the author. The first section comprises poetry collections and book-length poems. The second section gives information on other major works by the author. For foreign authors, the editors have provided original foreign-language publication information and have selected what are considered the best and most complete English-language editions of their works.
- Reprinted **Criticism** is arranged chronologically in each entry to provide a useful perspective on changes in critical evaluation over time. All individual titles of poems and poetry collections by the author featured in the entry are printed in boldface type. The critic's name and the date of composition or publication of the critical work are given

at the beginning of each piece of criticism. Unsigned criticism is preceded by the title of the source in which it appeared. Footnotes are reprinted at the end of each essay or excerpt. In the case of excerpted criticism, only those footnotes that pertain to the excerpted texts are included.

- Critical essays are prefaced by brief **Annotations** explicating each piece.
- A complete **Bibliographical Citation** of the original essay or book precedes each piece of criticism.
- An annotated bibliography of **Further Reading** appears at the end of each entry and suggests resources for additional study. In some cases, significant essays for which the editors could not obtain reprint rights are included here. Boxed material following the further reading list provides references to other biographical and critical sources on the author in series published by Gale.

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Linden Peach, "Man, Nature and Wordsworth: American Versions," *British Influence on the Birth of American Literature*, (Macmillan Press Ltd., 1982), 29-57; reprinted in *Poetry Criticism*, vol. 20, ed. Ellen McGeagh (Detroit: The Gale Group), 37-40.

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Gottfried Benn

1886-1956

German poet, essayist, and novelist.

INTRODUCTION

One of the major poets of German Expressionist movement, Benn is widely considered one of the most important German poets of the twentieth century. Benn's poetry frequently draws from his experiences as a physician, evoking imagery of disease and decay. His early volumes of poetry, *Morgue* (1912) and *Fleisch* (1917) draw from his clinical association with death and the human body. Benn was a controversial figure in terms of his political sympathies, and throughout his life was simultaneously accused by Nazis of being anti-German and accused by others of being a Nazi sympathizer.

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Benn was born in Mansfeld, Westprignitz, Germany, on May 2, 1886. His father was a German and a Lutheran minister, and his mother was from French-speaking Switzerland. From 1905 to 1912, Benn studied medicine at the Kaiser Wilhelm Akademie, which trained physicians for the armed forces. In 1914, he married the actress Edith Brosin, Belgium and later adopted her son from a previous marriage. Their daughter, Benn's only child, was born in 1915. During World War I Benn served as an army physician in a hospital for prostitutes located in Brussels. In 1917, after the War, Benn set up a private practice in Berlin, specializing in skin and venereal diseases. The first of a series of tragic deaths of his close female companions occurred in 1931, when a friend committed suicide by jumping out of a window, immediately following a telephone conversation in which Benn had attempted to talk her out of killing herself. When Hitler rose to power in 1933, Benn was initially in favor of Nazism. In 1934, however, upon becoming aware of violent acts perpetrated by high-ranking members of the Nazi party, he became an outspoken critic of Nazism. Accordingly, Benn was criticized by the government and his works banned from publication. Upon being proclaimed a Jew, Benn did not hesitate to prove his non-Jewish identity through official documentation. However, because of ongoing suspicions that he was Jewish, Benn's medical practice suffered, and in 1935 he chose to rejoin the armed forces as an army physician. Nonetheless, he remained embroiled in political controversy throughout the 1930s. In 1938, his first wife having died, Benn married Herta von Wedemeyer, who was twenty-one years younger than he. In 1945, shortly



after the German surrender to the Allies, she committed suicide. In 1946, he married Dr. Ilse Kaul, a dentist, who was also considerably younger than he. He retired from medical practice in 1953. On July 7, 1956, at the age of seventy, Benn died of spine cancer. Since his death, critics and biographers have striven to make sense of the complicated evolution of Benn's political sympathies, resulting in ongoing disagreement over the implications of the poet's relationship to Nazism.

MAJOR WORKS

Benn's first volume of poetry, *Morgue und andere gedichte* (*Morgue and Other Poems*) was written in response to his experiences in an autopsy course, where he dissected cadavers. It includes clinical descriptions of flesh in various stages of decomposition, as well as local Berlin slang mixed with medical jargon, written in unrhymed or loosely rhymed free verse. As its title indicates, Benn's second volume, *Fleisch*, continues in this vein. Benn's next three poetry volumes were *Schutt* (1924), *Betäubung*

(1925), and *Spaltung* (1925). The poems of this series are characterized by themes of mystical visions and the primordial human condition. Unlike the earlier volumes, these poems are written in classical rhymed verse. In 1936, in honor of Benn's fiftieth birthday, a collection of his poetry, *Ausgewählte gedichte, 1911-1936* was published. *Statische Gedichte* (1948) includes works written between 1936-1947. In 1949, *Trunkene Flut*, a collection of his more recent poems, was published. Benn's next two poetry volumes were *Fragmente* (1951) and *Destillationen* (1953). The last volume of Benn's poetry to be published during his lifetime was *Aprèslude*, in 1955. Collections of his poetry in English translation include *Primal Vision* (1960), *Selected Poems* (1970), and *Prose, Essays, Poems* (1987). In addition to poetry, Benn wrote numerous essays and several novellas. His autobiography, *Doppelleben*, was published in 1950.

CRITICAL RECEPTION

Throughout his literary career, and for half a century after his death, Benn has been considered one of the most important German poets of the twentieth century and a major poet of German Expressionism. However, although Benn was never a staunchly political person, his literary reputation, both during his lifetime and since his death, has always been embroiled in controversy over his political sympathies. He was attacked from all sides of the political spectrum. John Mander quotes Benn as stating that he had been "publicly labeled a swine by the Nazis, an imbecile by the Communists, an intellectual prostitute by the deomocrates, a renegade by the emigrants, and a pathological nihilist by the religious." Critics generally agree that, although there is some development in his style, Benn's poetry remained essentially uniform and static during some forty years of publication. His early poetry, such as the first volume, *Morgue*, was immediately embraced by the avant-garde and German Expressionists. It was also, however, harshly criticized as offensive to the predominantly romantic literary sensibilities of the time. During the inter-war years, Benn was often banned and frequently discouraged from publication, due to hostilities toward his poetry on the part of Nazi authorities. After World War II, he received renewed recognition as a great poet but was also compelled to defend himself against charges of being a Nazi-sympathizer based on his early pro-Nazi statements (made during the years 1933-34). By the time of his death in 1956, however, Benn was recognized internationally as one of the greatest German poets of the twentieth century, and an important figure in the German Expressionist movement.

PRINCIPAL WORKS

Poetry

Morgue 1912
Fleisch 1917

Schutt 1924
Betäubung 1925
Spaltung 1925
Ausgewählte gedichte, 1911-1936 1936
Statische gedichte 1948
Trunkene flut 1949
Fragmente 1951
Destillationen 1953
Aprèslude 1955
Primal Vision 1960
Gesammelte werke [eight vols.] 1970
Selected Poems 1970
Prose, Essays, Poems 1987

Other Major Works

Doppelleben (autobiography) 1950

CRITICISM

Joachim H. Seyppel (essay date 1954)

SOURCE: "A Renaissance of German Poetry: Gottfried Benn," in *Modern Language Forum*, Vol. 39, No. 2, December, 1954, pp. 115-25.

[In the following essay, Seyppel discusses Benn's place in the history of German poetry, focusing on the poet's "trance-poetry," which addresses metaphysical concerns and the irrational mind.]

When the delicate question "What is important in contemporary German literature?" is raised, two names immediately come to mind: Ernst Jünger and Gottfried Benn. They were prominent even before World War II. While Ernst Jünger, the prose writer, represented the more traditional, "classical," formalistic literary style, the lyricist Gottfried Benn was classed as an early Expressionist of the era before World War I. The younger generation, born after that war, did not know him at all. But after the second collapse of the German state, Benn came back with matured, richer, and more powerful poetry carrying German literature to an anti-rationalistic and Dionysian tendency. The contrast of form and expression which dominated German literature in the decades when George and Rilke were in their prime seems to have been revived in the work of Jünger and Benn. The conflict between the Classicist and the Romanticist, between Rationalism and Anti-Rationalism, between the Apollonian and the Dionysian has found another manifestation.

Both Jünger and Benn belonged to the group of "inner emigration" under the Nazi regime, though in very differ-

ent ways. Despite their cosmopolitanism and their admiration for French culture, they never left the camp of those believing in the great military tradition of Germany. Their pride in the high intellectual standard of the German officer's corps, to which both belonged in time of war, found frequent expression in their works. After an initial enthusiasm for the "new state," which seemed to promise a national regeneration in 1933, Benn very soon found the way back to a more sober state of mind. Jünger even opposed the regime in his writings. Benn was condemned to silence by a general "Schreibverbot" issued by the *NS-Kulturkammer* in 1936. He remained silent until 1948, an almost forgotten man. But practically overnight he rose to fame. Being the most celebrated figure of contemporary German literature, he recently looked back upon his life, his work, his political extravagances and disillusionments. He has attempted to explain what to him—the irrationalist—is in the end utterly inexplicable: life, the intellect, the arts, and the life of the artist.¹

Benn is now generally considered the greatest lyrical power since Rilke, and the renaissance of interest in poetry and in its creation is mainly and almost exclusively due to him. In 1951 Benn's mastery was recognized by awarding him the *Georg Büchner-Preis*. Today this North German writer with the heavy, short body, short neck, massive head, and strange looking bluish eyes is celebrated throughout Europe as the most valuable rediscovery in the field of letters. In the United States, a volume of selected poems and prose is in preparation. (Benn was born in Mansfeld in 1886, and lives in West Berlin as a dermatologist and venereal disease specialist.)

The strange blend of scientific allusions and irrationalism, of intellectual and mystical references in Benn's poetry demands a tremendous effort on the part of the reader to absorb those hidden, secret, and deep meanings with which the work is filled. If, however, the reader is familiar with the art and technique of such men as Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot, and W. H. Auden (the latter of whom Benn introduced to the German audience), then a penetration of the many layers of thought in Benn's work is considerably easier. Poetry, for Benn, is more than just a number of beautiful rhymes, more than the reflection of a "mood," more than a description of some "poetic" object; it is a return to phenomena usually forgotten or covered by human history; it is a return—in ecstasy, with free verse—to the origin of human existence, to the origins of history. It is (to put it in conventional terms) a metaphysical undertaking aimed at the metaphysical facts of life—death, birth, God (or Gods)—in short, the Irrational.

Art, for Benn, is the expression of things usually inexpressible. With the help of a refined intellect—and *trance*, as we shall see later—the artist plunges back into the mysteries of nature. But the classical concept of the harmony of art and nature ("Kunst und Natur sei eines nur," as Lessing said) is overcome by Benn, the intellectual interested in the origins of "bios." The new poetry, the German writer says, is a "Kunstprodukt," a product of the intellect.²

Consciousness, the critical approach, "Artistik," go with it. Not only is the poem observed while being produced, but the poet observes himself, too. The object of poetry and its final form—the poem—are transcended for the sake of the artist, the poet. No longer is art proclaimed as *l'art pour l'art*, but as *l'art pour l'artiste*. Thus, the writing of a poem may itself become the object of poetry. This is *Artistik*, tightrope-walking on the narrow brink between art and the negation of art.

Benn quotes Valéry as an example of the blend of "poetic and introspective activity." He enumerates those whom he considers his predecessors: Eliot, Mallarmé, Baudelaire, Pound, Poe, and the surrealists; George, Rilke, and Hofmannsthal to some extent; and quite definitely the avant-gardists Heym, Trakl, and Werfel.

With the first publication of his collected poems in 1912 (*Morgue*), Benn was considered an Expressionist. Since then, his work has become greatly modified and much less experimental. But the original eruptive force and power of expression have remained unchanged. There is now less expressionistic and naturalistic interest in medical facts (compare the titles of his early works, *Gehirne* and *Fleisch*) and more aesthetic fascination, more "Kulturkritik." Like Nietzsche (without whom neither Benn nor Jünger nor most of the passionate critics of our age are imaginable), Benn is absolutely aware of living in an era of decadence. His poetry cannot halt it, but can only mirror and, perhaps, overcome it in its own way: through art which will not die with its age. Poetry can give meaning to decadence, the meaning of Goethe's line: "Stirb und werde!" Benn does not believe in the vulgar concepts of life and death; he puts his trust in that sphere "in der du stirbst und endend auferstehst."³

Art transcends life; the new art copes with social decay in its own way. What Benn has to say about "Artistik" is quite symptomatic of art in our desperate age and of the attempt of artists to give meaning to, or make up for, nihilism. He prefers the term "Artistik" to the traditional word "Kunst," indicating the trend away from everything that might suggest a tradition of, or dependence on, classical, romantic, or realistic literature.

Artistry [Artistik] is the attempt of art to experience itself as content in the midst of the general disintegration of contents, and to form from this experience a new style; it is the attempt to establish a new transcendence against the general nihilism of values: the transcendence of creative desire.⁴

By his "creative desire," Benn has enriched German literature with a new vocabulary. With the vocabulary of Grimmelshausen, as Max Rychner remarked, Benn's poetry would be impossible to write or to understand.⁵ The poet has not relied on what has been added to German prose and lyrics since Goethe and Nietzsche, but has introduced the realm of science into literature. His education in the natural sciences, his training in medicine, and his interest in biology have added new experiences, new

subjects, new perspectives, and have greatly expanded the poetic language. Terms like "Genotyp" and "Phänotyp" have become Benn's property. His experience as a physician in both peace and war have often supplied him with subject matter for a poem which his poetic intuition then shaped and carried into realms far beyond any scientific comprehension. The following poem is an example of this double process in Benn's poetry: a woman in labor pains is linked with the moment of her conception, her love, her desire, and—the Freudian idea—her death.⁶

"Curettage"

Nun liegt sie in derselben Pose,
wie sie empfing,
die Schenkel lose
im Eisenring.

Der Kopf verströmt und ohne Dauer,
als ob sie rief:
gib, gib, ich gurgle deine Schauer
bis in mein Tief.

Der Leib noch stark von wenig Äther
und wirft sich zu:
nach uns die Sintflut und das Später
nur du, nur du . . .

Die Wände fallen, Tische und Stühle
sind alle voll von Wesen, krank
nach Blutung, lechzendem Gewühle
und einem nahen Untergang.⁷

Benn has always been open to life around him, as much interested in the "Boulevardpresse" as in the scientific literature to which he has contributed considerably.⁸ He has watched closely the expansion of modern life into the realm of atavistic traits (like the adoption of South American ecstatic dance rhythm) and into the realm of technological Utopias. There are the "Jazz vom Rio del Grande" and the "Buickwagen am Ufer des Öresund"; "Totemfragmente" and "Gammastrahlen." He has, like James Joyce and T. S. Eliot, taken the vocabulary for his work from slang, jargon, dialect, foreign languages, scientific terminology, and the standard language. There is Edgar Allen Poe's "nevermore" and that idol of adolescence, "swing." There is the beloved word "blau," used sometimes romantically, sometimes traditionally, sometimes experimentally, with a hundred connotations. It is the only term denoting a color which Benn has explicitly sanctioned for himself, rejecting the rest of them as no longer applicable or artistic. Then there is the naturalistic expression "stinken" in the poem "**Mann und Frau gehn durch die Krebsbaracke**" (in which he is as horrifying and as photographically-medically exact as Zola ever was). He says: "Slang expressions, argot, gypsy-talk, hammered into our linguistic consciousness by two world wars, quotations, sports jargon, classical reminiscences are all in my possession."⁹

Forgotten, long disintegrated civilizations, ancient cultures, and past societies come back to the poet Benn in his state

of *trance*, probably the most important single element in the whole of the poet's work. Worlds rise and fall; ages pass by; a few souls, a few remnants survive. Benn catches up with them by descending into his memory, the memory of mankind slumbering in the depths of subconsciousness, and by probing into the origins of man which are still alive in each individual, though covered by many layers of universal and personal history. It is a kind of cosmology which slowly builds up under the artist's hands. The poem "**Quartär**" in the volume *Statische Gedichte*¹⁰ is an expression of this technique.

I

Die Welten trinken und tranken
sich Rausch zu neuem Raum
und die letzten Quartäre versenken
den ptolemäischen Traum.
Verfall, Verflammen, Verfehlen—
in toxischen Sphären, kalt,
noch einige stygische Seelen,
einsame, hoch und alt.

II

Komm—lass sie sinken und steigen,
die Zyklen brechen hervor:
uralte Sphinx, Geigen
und von Babylon ein Tor,
ein Jazz vom Rio del Grande,
ein Swing und ein Gebet—
an sinkenden Feuern, vom Rande,
wo alles zu Asche verweht.

Here arises the banal question: "What does this poem mean?" Benn's trance-poetry can be as little explored as the works of T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, or the French surrealists. The German lyricist did not write a commentary, either; he demands absorption beyond rational understanding. The categories of "understanding" or "rational explanation," outdated with the advent of late romantic and post-romantic poetry, have lost their value for modern poetry (and for modern art generally). Arnold Schönberg's music with the abolition of "harmony," Picasso's painting with the abolition of "picture" themes, T. S. Eliot's poetry with the abolition of story content, cannot be "understood" in the traditional, rational way in which the harmonious constructions of Haydn or Mozart, the obvious subject matter of Raphael or Rubens, or the altogether concrete meaning of Longfellow's or Byron's poems can be understood. Of course, there have always been the mystics, the irrationalists in art, philosophy, and literature; and emotion has always been a starting point toward the reality beyond matter and facts. But modern poetry, and art as a whole, is mystical without religion and irrationalistic without God in the traditional Christian spirit. It is a new mysticism with immanent values, and where it is transcendental it is not dogmatically so. Benn is a case in point. The reader of a poem like *Quartär* has to absorb the full and pregnant meaning of it very slowly and gradually; he has to identify himself with it eventually, just as the poet in his trance has approached the world: the worlds ("die

Welten") of the "sphinxes" and "violins" and the "Babylonian gate" and the "jazz from Rio del Grande." Just like the poet, he has to wait for visions and toxic impressions of ancient or distant cultures. Cycles of life and cultures must arise in the depths of his soul. He must yield to the forces which linger at the bottom of his consciousness. Benn is truly an "impressionist"—not one who takes outside physical impressions and molds them together, but one who waits for impressions from within and from the primeval layers of his pre-historical psyche. This way of producing poetry has also been called "expressionism," but it is easily seen that "isms" lose their meaning in the face of such complicated creative processes. In short, the poetic structure of Benn's *opera* must be taken as a whole, synthetically rather than analytically. He calls his prose "absolute" and his poems "static," and explains his prose in the following way:

Let us look at my work. The novel is built—note the following expression carefully—in the form of an orange. An orange consists of numerous sections, the single parts of the fruit, the divisions, all equal, all next to each other, equally valuable . . . They do not all extend toward the open space, they extend toward the middle, toward the white tough root which we remove when we take the fruit apart. This tough root is the phenotype . . .¹¹

This prose is "absolute," as Benn says elsewhere, because it does not conform to the laws of time and space, to laws of psychological development; it is concerned only with the origins of things, their totality, the absolute, the root, the "phenotype." Benn's "static" poetry runs parallel to his "absolute" prose. It is a poetry without evolution, without a "red thread." What is a "static poem"? The last poem in the volume *Statische Gedichte*¹² may answer this question.

Entwicklungsfremdheit
ist die Tiefe des Weisen,
Kinder und Kindeskind
beunruhigen ihn nicht,
dringen nicht in ihn ein.

Richtungen vertreten,
Handeln,
Zu- und Abreisen
ist das Zeichen einer Welt,
die nicht klar sieht.
Vor meinem Fenster,
—sagt der Weise—
liegt ein Tal,
darin sammeln sich die Schatten,
zwei Pappeln säumen einen Weg,
du weisst—wohin.

Perspektivismus
ist ein anderes Wort für seine Statik:
Linien anlegen,
sie weiterführen
nach Rankengesetz—,
Ranken sprühen—,
auch Schwärme, Krähen,
auswerfen in Winterrot von Frühlhimmeln.

dann sinken lassen—,
du weisst—für wen.

For those who sink into the state of trance, and that is for those who have transgressed the limits set by normalcy, youth, and worldly foolishness, there is no longer "development," no longer the necessity of "having opinions," of doing and acting, of "arriving and departing." They are beyond the worries of children and grandchildren. They are static, absolute, and wise—they have reached the "Nirvana" of peace and wisdom. In Benn there is a profound desire for rest, for union with the Ultimate. There is the romantic desire in him which carries him toward rest—and death. Love, as the romantics proclaimed and as Freud verified "scientifically," is not too far removed from the desire to die. Love and death are but desires of one root; love and death may be one in what Schopenhauer has called in Indian fashion "Nirvana."

Noch einmal weinen—und sterben
mit dir: den dunklen Sinn
von Liebe und Verderben
den fremden Göttern hin.¹³

This stanza of Benn carries all the romantic desire of love and death, loving the beloved and dying with her, which Novalis and Kleist experienced, though in different ways. Tristan and Isolde in their "Liebestod" represented an artistic culmination of that mystical union in which two worlds are united.

Benn has always understood the state of ecstasy and "intoxication" ("Rausch"), celebrated by Baudelaire and de Quincey, for in it the realm of the pre-ego is being disclosed and unveiled.

Trunkene Flut,
trance- und traumgefleckt,
o Absolut,
das meine Stirne deckt,
um das ich ringe,
aus dem der Preis
der tiefen Dinge,
die die Seele weiss.¹⁴

In trance the soul remembers the deep things. Benn the intellectual, Benn the scientist, Benn the urbane is "fed up" with intellect, science, and urbanity: "Ein armer Hirnhund, schwer mit Gott behangen. Ich bin der Stirn so satt."¹⁵ He is tired of thinking, tired of consciousness, tired of his "forehead." His consolation?

O Nacht! Ich nahm schon Kokain,
und Blutverteilung ist im Gange,
das Haar wird grau, die Jahre fliehn,
ich muss, ich muss im Überschwange
noch einmal vorm Vergängnis blühn.¹⁶

In the poem *Betäubung*, the state of trance is longed for, desired, yearned for; it is ". . . die Grenze, an der die Flöte klingt . . ."¹⁷ Here, the flute of poetry begins to play.

Trance is the suspension of the split into the subject and the object.¹⁸ In it, the poet overcomes the separation of the world into the ego and the object.

Keime, Begriffsgenesen,
 Broadways, Azimut,
 Turf- und Nebelwesen
 mischt der Sänger im Blut,
 immer in Gestaltung,
 immer dem Worte zu
 nach Vergessen der Spaltung
 zwischen ich und du.¹⁹

This stanza is a good example of the melting-pot of words in Benn's poetic laboratory, of the level of subconsciousness ("Blut") on which the melting is accomplished, of the creative drive toward the shaping of words after the split between "I" and "you" has been "forgotten."

But contrary to the nineteenth-century romanticists and Bohemians and their present-day descendants, Benn as well as many another modern artist has taken his place in his respective society.²⁰ This is a very important phenomenon which must not go unobserved. Although Benn has always insisted on his freedom from any restrictions imposed upon him by society as far as his literary work is concerned, he has at the same time never deserted his functions as a physician even in the darkest, most dangerous, most desperate situations, including the Soviet occupation of war-torn Berlin in 1945. Also—and this is another important phenomenon which must be remembered—Benn has always shown a great artistic responsibility along with his awareness of social-medical responsibility. Admitting the possibility of only half a dozen "perfect" poems out of the lifetime work of a poet, he has throughout his career labored with enormous patience in order to produce those very few poems which might survive. In his autobiography he has told us of the search for the final form of a poem which often lasted years, and sometimes even decades. Far from being a poet with only literary eruptions, he has employed his intellect in the final shaping of his dreams, visions, impressions, associations, and anticipations. And he has—a third important observation—never abandoned the great metaphysical experience of Western Civilization culminating in the concept of Transcendence, of God, despite his trend toward that vague thing commonly called "nihilism." In addition to his artistic transcendence (transcending nihilism by creative writing, as we have pointed out), he has upheld metaphysical transcendence, as illustrated in the first stanza of the poem "*Verse*" in the volume *Statische Gedichte*:

Wenn je die Gottheit, tief und unerkennlich
 in einem Wesen auferstand und sprach,
 so sind es Verse, da unendlich
 in ihnen sich die Qual der Herzen brach;
 die Herzen treiben längst im Strom der Weite,
 die Strophe aber streift von Mund zu Mund,
 sie übersteht die Völkerstreite
 und überdauert Macht und Mörderbund.

One is reminded of the words of Goethe's *Tasso*: ". . . gab mir ein Gott zu sagen, was ich leide," and the element of grace contained in it.

One often wonders whether Benn has given his best in those lines which represent the modern school of poetry,

or in those in which the German lyrical tradition of Walther von der Vogelweide, Goethe, and Eichendorff is continued, an example of which is the poem "*Durch die Stunde*," one of the most beautiful poems in modern German.

Notes

1. *Doppelleben*, Wiesbaden: Limes Verlag, 1950.
2. *Probleme der Lyrik* (Wiesbaden, 1951), p. 7.
3. *Trunkene Flut* (Wiesbaden, 1949), p. 120. Cf. Rilke's poetry for the same tendency.
4. *Probleme der Lyrik*, p. 12.
5. Max Rychner, "Gottfried Benn," *Neue Schweizer Rundschau*, July, 1949.
6. Love and death, as a related phenomenon, is of course also a Romantic theme; see further below.
7. *Trunkene Flut*, p. 20.
8. Benn is a devoted reader of the sensationalistic Berlin afternoon newspaper *Der Abend* and of detective thrillers.
9. *Probleme der Lyrik*, p. 32.
10. (Wiesbaden, 1948). Only part of the poem is quoted.
11. *Doppelleben*, p. 161.
12. The poem bears the same title as the volume.
13. *Trunkene Flut*, p. 96.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 7.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 21.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 23.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 65.
18. Cf. the philosophy of Heidegger and Jaspers as another attempt in modern German thought to overcome the subject-object split. See Joachim H. Seyppel, "A Comparative Study of Truth in Existentialism and Pragmatism," *Journal of Philosophy*, L (8), 229-241.
19. *Trunkene Flut*, p. 15.
20. Cf. Archibald MacLeish's theory of the artist in modern society.

Times Literary Supplement (review date 1961)

SOURCE: "Poet of Nihilism," in *Times Literary Supplement*, May 26, 1961, p. 326.

[In the following review of *Primal Vision*, the *Times Literary Supplement* provides an assessment of the English translations of Benn's poetry, concluding that some of Benn's craft is lost, even in the best translations.]

At the age of twenty-six Gottfried Benn made his mark in 1912 with the shocking realism of *Morgue*. By the time of his death in 1956 he was established, after a remarkable comeback, as an extreme champion of what he cryptically called *Artistik*, poetry of the “free word—the word that yields no tirades . . . and no commentaries; that produces one thing only: form”. Art had become for him “the last metaphysical activity within European nihilism” through the “power of the nothing to create form”. Benn’s public adherence for a time to Nazism produced bitter feelings, voiced among others by Klaus Mann; it was immaterial that he was never a member of the Nazi Party. The link between these beliefs and Benn’s nihilism is obvious again and again: “there is no reality; there is the human consciousness ceaselessly forming, reforming . . . spiritually stamping worlds from its own creative property”.

If some aspects of Benn’s work and thought are most provocatively evident only in their German context, his literary importance in a European setting is such as to justify, even necessitate, a selection of his writings in English translation. Whether the editor of *Primal Vision* was wise to devote quite as many as 200 of his pages to the prose, and to print only some thirty of the poems (with the originals wisely printed side by side) is a matter of opinion. There is something in Benn’s comment that “the important thing is what one makes of one’s nihilism”, and in his case the answer is poetry often of the utmost fascination and a few poems of the loveliest perfection. It remains valuable to have ready to hand the evidence of Benn’s philosophy and, in the introduction, an outline of his development, for no full assessment of his poetry can ever overlook the association with the attitudes from which it sprang. It is none the less a pity that the introduction does not offer serious critical guidance on the structure of the poetry. But the bibliography draws attention to Mr. Michael Hamburger’s interpretative essay in *Reason and Energy*, and now there is available Professor Heselhaus’s extremely perceptive study of German lyric poetry.

The renderings of the poems (by Dr. Christopher Middleton, Mr. Hamburger, and others), preserving in the main the essentials of mood and method, are of a quality that enables their versions to exist almost as poems in their own right. But when Benn settled into a style in which closely interlocking rhyme becomes integral to the rhythmic and “expressive” structure, translation sometimes has to fall just a little short of the ideal. A comparison of the translation of, say, “**A Weightless Element**” and “**The Wave of Night**” with the originals will illustrate the point. The impressive excellence of the translations of the poetry deters one from quibbling over details—but in “**Night Café**” “lovely sunset” is surprising by comparison with “das schöne Abendbrot”.

Ulrich Weisstein (review date 1961)

SOURCE: A review of *Primal Vision*, in *Symposium*, edited by E. B. Ashton, Vol. 15, No. 2, Summer, 1961, pp. 151-55.

[In the following review, Weisstein criticizes the editor of the collection *Primal Vision* for its omission of important poems and its clumsiness and inaccuracy of translation. Weisstein, however, admits that Benn’s poetry presents some insurmountable difficulties to any translator and confirms that this first volume of English translations is an important introduction of Benn’s poetry to English language readers.]

The publication of [*Primal Vision*] can well be regarded as a literary event; for with it a representative selection from the prose and poetry of Gottfried Benn, Germany’s leading poet after Rilke and the last torchbearer of Expressionism, has for the first time become available to the English-speaking public. This is not to say, however, that, hitherto, Benn’s work has gone altogether unnoticed in the United States. The four excellent renditions by Babette Deutsch, for example, which are included in the collection, appeared as early as 1923 in her anthology *Contemporary German Poetry*. Starting around 1952, English versions of approximately forty of Benn’s poems—most of them in Lohner/Corman’s, some in Francis Golffing’s and a few in this reviewer’s translation—began to appear in such Little Magazines as *Poetry*, the *New Mexico Quarterly*, the *Quarterly Review of Literature*, *Wake*, *Origin*, *Contact*, *Four Winds*, and *Folio*. No more than two or three of these have found their way into *Primal Vision*, whose editor failed to include in his bibliography a detailed checklist of all available translations and their authors. He and his English team thus lay themselves open to the charge of having slighted their American compeers, and the exact hierarchy of values with regard to the two sets of translations, where they overlap, remains to be established.

It is a pity that Benn has to be introduced to his transatlantic audience by way of an anthology from his works. But this lies obviously in the nature of things, since this author never produced the one central work of large proportions which we have in Thomas Mann’s *Buddenbrooks* and *Magic Mountain*, in Hesse’s *Magister Ludi*, Broch’s *Death of Vergil*, Musil’s *Man without Qualities*, or Rilke’s *Duino Elegies*. Moreover, it cannot be denied that Benn tended to repeat himself in many of his published writings. But whereas the number of themes embraced in his many-faceted oeuvre is fairly restricted, the persistently recurring ideas are expressed in an infinite variety of ways. For expression was what really mattered to the artist who believed that “all that is primary arises explosively” (*Primal Vision*, p. 162), but who also insisted on a subsequent levelling-off and careful polishing of the volcanically erupted lyrical substance.

Benn’s style may be described as a continuous fireworks of brilliantly formulated poetic aphorisms. In preaching the Nietzschean gospel of art as the final stage of occidental metaphysics, the ecstatic apostle of *Ausdruckskunst* writes a stunning prose in which the argument progresses blow by blow and where (with the sole exception, perhaps, of the apologetic “*Lebensweg eines Intellektualisten*”) a syntactically level-headed beginning is invariably followed