**Benn, Gottfried (1886-1956)**

A practicing physician throughout his life, Benn ranks among the most influential and controversial twentieth-century German poets and intellectuals. After achieving notoriety with the Expressionist poem cycle *Morgue und andere Gedichte*, Benn published poems, novellas, essays and dramas leading up to his election to the Prussian Academy in 1932. Benn was an outspoken supporter of the Nazi party from January 30, 1933 until June 30, 1934 (the Night of the Long Knives), when he withdrew from the party in disillusionment. Following a publication ban in 1938, Benn spent the remainder of the Nazi era writing privately. Banned by the Allies until 1948, Benn regained prominence due to his poetry collection *Statische Gedichte* (1948; *Static Poems*, 1991) and essays such as “Probleme der Lyrik” (1951). Benn received the Büchner Prize in 1951, though his affiliation with the Nazis complicates his cultural legacy. He died in Berlin in 1956.

**Timeline of Life**

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| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **1886** | **1896-1903** | **1903-1904** | **1905-1911** | **1914-1917** |
| born in Mansfeld, Brandenburg | Gymnasium in Frankfurt (Oder) | studies theology and philosophy in Marburg | studies medicine at Kaiser Wilhelm Academy for Military Doctors | serves as doctor in Belgium |

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| **1917-1935** | **1932** | **1933-1934** | **1935** | **1938** | **1945** |
| medical practice, Berlin | elected to Prussian Academy | member of Nazi party | reenlists as military doctor | receives publication ban | resumes medical practice in Berlin |

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| --- | --- |
| **1945-1948** | **1956** |
| Allied publishing ban | dies in West Berlin |

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| **Timeline of Works Published During Lifetime** | | | | | |
| **1912** | **1913** | **1914** | **1916** | **1917** | **1918** |
| *Morgue und andere Gedichte* | *Söhne* | *Ithaka* | *Gehirne* | *Fleisch* | *Diesterweg* |

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **1919** | **1923** | **1925** | **1927** | **1928** | **1931** |
| *Etappe;*  *Der Vermessungs-dirigent* | *Gesammelte Schriften* | *Spaltung* | *Gesammelte Gedichte* | *Gesammelte Prosa* | *Das Unaufhörliche (with Paul Hindemith)* |

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| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **1932** | **1933** | **1934** | **1936** | **1948** | **1949** | **1950** |  |
| *Nach dem Nihilismus* | *Der neue Staat und die Intellektuellen;*  *Antwort an die literarischen Emigranten;*  *Züchtung* | *Dorische Welt* | *Neue Gedichte;*  *Ausgewählte Gedichte 1911-1936* | *Statische Gedichte;*  *Trunkene Flut* | *Der Ptolemäer;*  *Ausdruckswelt;*  *Roman des Phänotyp* | *Doppelleben* |  |

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **1951** | **1953** | **1955** |
| *Fragmente;*  *Probleme der Lyrik* | *Destillationen* | *Aprèslude* |

Benn moved to rural Sellin (Czelin in modern-day Poland) shortly after his birth in Mansfeld, Brandenburg in 1886. Growing up there as the son of a Lutheran pastor left a lasting aversion to religious thinking and a sense of inferiority. His father’s refusal on religious grounds to allow Benn, by then a physician, to administer morphine to alleviate the pain his beloved mother experienced when dying from cancer exemplifies the experiences that fed Benn’s radically materialist worldview. Though he had absorbed biblical vocabulary and symbolism, Benn accepted, along with so much else in Nietzschean thought, Zarathustra’s notion that “God is dead.”

After studying theology and philosophy for one year, Benn obtained admission to Berlin’s Kaiser Wilhelm Academy for Military Doctors, where he received medical training in exchange for military service. Based in scientific method, psychology and evolutionary thinking as well as military values, Benn’s medical training led to stints as a military doctor in both World Wars and constituted a pillar of what he later called his “Double Life,” a stylization whose central dichotomy pitched rationality in staunch opposition to the imaginative, often intoxicating world of poetry.

Benn’s first major publication, the 1912 *Morgue*-cycle, remains a watershed moment in Benn’s career and German Expressionist poetry. Presenting bodies in graphic states of anatomical dissection, decay, and suffering, *Morgue* seemed lifted from the environment that for decades, critics imagined Benn to have experienced as a pathologist. In spite of scholarship revealing the complex poetics at work in them, the *Morgue* poems’ breath-taking anti-humanism continues to shock and fascinate readers.

Benn’s fame connected him with Berlin’s Expressionist literary scene before he received orders to serve as a military doctor in Belgium. In relative isolation from 1914-1917, Benn produced dramas and prose including the experimental *Gehirne* (,1916), novellas that depicted the extreme psychology of one of Benn’s favourite fictional alter egos, Dr. Rönne. After opening a medical practice in Berlin in 1917, Benn published collections of his work as well as new poems, prose and essays before being elected to the Prussian Academy of the Arts in 1932.

Benn publically promoted the Nazi regime through administrative deeds, radio broadcasts and texts such as *Züchtung* (1933) that resonated with Nazi racial thinking. Benn realized that he had made a profound error even before the Night of the Long Knives (June 30, 1934). He saw little alternative to withdrawing from public life and resuming service as a military doctor, particularly after the republishing of his early poems brought party attacks and a publication ban in 1938. Writing privately in what he called an “aristocratic form of emigration,” Benn’s production included critiques of Nazism and, to some extent, his own earlier positions, though neither has fully resolved the question of how to think about his receptivity to National Socialism.

The prose and poetry penned in wartime helped return Benn to prominence. Of the essays, novels, autobiography and influential treatise on poetry published between 1948 and 1951, his 1948 *Statische Gedichte* (*Static Poems, 1991*) achieved special resonance. In contrast to Benn’s destructive Expressionism, many of the Static Poems manifest a strict form and calm aesthetic stylization whose utter remove from the everyday world strikes some readers as a denial of the atrocities occurring at the time Benn wrote them. Benn’s receipt of the Büchner Prize in 1951 cemented his post-war cultural status. Benn died in Berlin on July 7, 1956.

His poetry, prose, essayistic, autobiographical, medical works and texts unpublished during his life were collected and edited in *Sämtliche Werke* (1986-2003).

**References and Further Reading:**

Dierick, Augustinus. (1992) *Gottfried Benn and his Critics: Major Interpretations 1912-1992*. Columbia: Camden House.

Lethen, Helmut. (2006) *Der Sound der Väter. Gottfried Benn und seine Zeit*. Berlin: Rowohlt.

Emmerich, Wolfgang. (2006) *Gottfried Benn*. Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt.

**Key Biographies of Gottfried Benn**

**Hof, Holger. (2011) *Gottfried Benn. Der Mann ohne Gedächtnis.*** *Eine Biographie*. Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta.

Raddatz, Fitz J. (2003) *Gottfried Benn. Leben - niederer Wahn. Eine Biographie*. München: Propyläen.

**Key Works**

*Morgue und andere Gedichte* (1912; partially translated as “Little Aster,” “Lovely Childhood,” “Cycle,” “Man and Woman go Through the Cancer Ward,” in the volume *Primal Vision*, 1960)

*Gehirne* (1916; partially translated as "Brains," 1960)

*Statische Gedichte* (1948; “Static Poems,” 1991)

*Probleme der Lyrik* (1951; translated as an annotation of a thesis, “Problems of the Lyric Poem,” 1970)