Arne De Winde

**Benn, Gottfried (1886 – 1956)**

Gottfried Benn is one of the most important German modernist authors of the 20th century. The poet, novelist and essayist – who also wrote some scenes, dramas and the text for Paul Hindemith’s oratorio *Das Unaufhörliche* (*The Unceasing*, 1931) [LINK 1] – exemplifies the tensions and contradictions of the 20th-century literary-intellectual and political history of his country.

The son of a Lutheran clergyman, Benn studied theology at the University of Marburg and military medicine at the Kaiser Wilhelm Academy in Berlin. During World War I he served as a military doctor in Brussels, where he worked in an army brothel. After the war, he returned to Berlin and practiced as a dermatology and venereal disease specialist. He remained a practicing physician until he was 68, although he had always experienced his workaday life as dull, frustrating and unprofitable. [LINK 1] This biographical experience was one of the factors that led to Benn’s (self-)interpretative model of the so-called Doppelleben(double life), based on a radical opposition between sociopolitical and dhistorical everyday life and bourgeois normality on the one hand and states of exception or artistry on the other.

At the same time, Benn’s medical expertise radically informed his literary work on a thematic as well as stylistic level. His debut, the cycle of five short poems called *Morgue* (1912), was a landmark in German literary history. It shocked and alienated the bourgeois audience because it presented the decay of the body from a “cold” dissector’s perspective without any sense of nobility or transcendence. Together with his prose works on the pathologist Dr. Rönne, who suffers from “depersonalization”, the so-called *Rönne-Novellen* (*Rönne Novellas*, 1915-1921), *Morgue* made Benn a central proponent of German Expressionism, as these early works depict the dismemberment of reality and the dissolution of the coherent self. [LINK 2] His entire oeuvre, however, remained true to the expressionist credo of “Wirklichkeitszertrümmerung”, i.e. a radical questioning of the traditional reference frameworks of progress and humanism. To the increasing rationalization of society, which smothered the self’s vital instincts, Benn opposed (under the influence of Friedrich Nietzsche) a cult of art, based on the withdrawal into the psychic stratum of the primitive and subconscious (via dream, trance and hallucination).

Stylistically, this ecstatic impetus manifested itself in rhythmic cascades of associative and suggestive images, neologisms and figures. Characteristic of Benn’s “geology of the self”, which he equally conducted in poetry, prose and essays, is that in order to debilitate instrumental reason he takes recourse to, assembles and manipulates the most heterogeneous discourses, ranging from biology and medicine over psychiatry, ethnology, religion and mythology to everyday speech and even slang.

Since the 1920s Benn’s elevation of artistic form as a manifestation of the absolute (his “Artisten-Metaphysik”) became ever more distinctive. Artistic expression was considered as mankind’s only purposeful action, as it enabled the human being to differentiate itself from chaos by creating images and figures. The conviction that only the artist is able to face up to the “formfordernde Gewalt des Nichts” (“the form-demanding force of nothingness”) remained the cornerstone of both Benn's anthropology and his poetic theory.

However, Benn’s “aesthetic imperialism“ (Harro Müller), his absolute belief in the primacy and autonomy of the aesthetic and its transformational anthropological – or even genetic – agency, caused him to side with the national-socialist regime in the years 1933/1934, which he perceived as an elementary revolutionary force. Apart from his resentment of materialism, liberalism and democracy – which he shared with the so-called Conservative Revolution – and his biological and even eugenic conceptions of human corporeality (e.g. in his essay “Züchtung” [“Breeding”, 1933]), Benn’s precarious social and economic status contributed to his sympathy for the Nazi regime, since it raised his hopes of social integration and intellectual authority. Thus, in 1933 he was one of the most prominent writers to remain in Germany after the fascist take-over. He identified with Hitler's Germany not just in acquiescence but through active support for the state by means of essays, radio addresses and public appearances, most importantly as head of the poetry section of the Prussian Academy of Arts. In this capacity, he wrote and signed the “Gelöbnis treuester Gefolgschaft” [LINK 3], the "vow of most faithful allegiance" to Adolf Hitler, which led to a controversy with a.o. Klaus Mann, against whom he made a counterattack with the infamous speech “Antwort an die literarischen Emigranten” (“To the Literary Emigrés: A Reply”, 1933).

However, disillusionment set in after the Röhm putsch in 1934. When the Nazi state directed its invectives against Expressionism in general and Gottfried Benn in particular, he rejoined the army medical corps in 1935 to escape harassment —a move he referred to as an “aristocratic form of emigration”. In 1938 the Reichsschrifttumskammer (the National Socialist authors' association) banned Benn from further writing. Particularly in these difficult war years, the role of the poet's spiritual-intellectual mentor and patron F.W. Oelze, who set up an archive of Benn’s unpublished writings and to whom Benn in the course of the years wrote about 750 letters, cannot be underestimated.

Benn made a remarkable literary comeback in 1948 when, after problems with allied censorship because of his initial support of the Nazi regime, most of his poems written between 1936 and 1947 were published in *Statische Gedichte* (*Static Poems*), in which the dualism between life and art and the fanaticism of form was further radicalized. Benn’s credo of a pure artistic “Gegenwelt” (counterworld) was further expressed and (meta-literarily) explicated in (1) the volume *Der Ptolemäer* (*The Ptolemean*, 1949), which contained the so-called “absolute” prose works he had written in 1944 (most notably the *Roman des Phänotyp* [*Novel of the Phenotype*]) and which he described as an “anti-novel” as it – just like his poetry – was a “laboratory for words” rather than a medium for narrative, action and psychology, and (2) a controversial autobiography, in whose programmatic title *Doppelleben* (*Double Life*, 1950) Benn’s strategic, self-legitimizing self-staging as an isolated outsider shows (a more explicit recantation of his earlier convictions certainly was his 1940 essay “Züchtung II” [“Breeding II”]). In 1951, when he also received the Georg Büchner Prize, he elaborated his views on the absolute and self-referential character of literature in the speech “Probleme der Lyrik” [“Problems of Lyric Poetry”], which became one of the most influential and discussed poetological works for future generations of poets. Most remarkable is, however, the tension between poetological theory and poetical praxis as the poetry of the late Benn in the 1950s was in fact characterized by an acquiescent parlando style and a melancholic openness to the world.

Despite these differences it is especially the continuity and consistency of Benn’s work that stands out: from beginning to end Benn advocated the primacy and autonomy of the aesthetic; for Benn, art had always remained “die einsame hohe Welt“ (“the lonely high world”). It is this formal radicalism or aesthetic intransigence, paradoxically causing him to get ideologically compromised, which made him one of Germany’s most important and influential but also contested authors of the 20th century. In 1956, at the age of 70, Benn died of spine cancer. [LINK 4]

**Links**

(1)

Paul Hindemith, Oratorio in three parts after a text by Gottfried Benn for soloists, mixed choir, boys’ choir and orchestra

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HU2i0yRdJDY>

# (2)

Dr.med. Gottfried Benn, Arzt und Schriftsteller – German Federal Archive © Creative Commons

<http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Bundesarchiv_Bild_183-1984-1116-500,_Gottfried_Benn-Arzt_und_Schriftsteller.jpg>

# (3)

# George Grosz, Dr. Benn's night café (1918) © Estate of George Grosz/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY

# <http://collections.lacma.org/node/181417>

(4)

# Vossische Zeitung 26. Oktober 1933, S. 2 - Gelöbnis treuester Gefolgschaft

<http://de.metapedia.org/wiki/Datei:Vossische_Zeitung_26._Oktober_1933,_S._2_-_Gel%C3%B6bnis_treuester_Gefolgschaft.png>

(5)

Benn’s first and last television interview (with Thilo Koch) a few months before his death in 1956

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c6R4w3YaDQc>

**References and Further Reading**

*Morgue und andere Gedichte* (*Morgue and other Poems*, 1912)

*Gehirne. Novellen* (*Brains. Novellas*, 1916)

*Der Neue Staat und die Intellektuellen* (*The New State and the Intellectuals*,1933)

*Kunst und Macht* (*Art and Power*,1934)

*Statische Gedichte* (*Static Poems*, 1948)

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