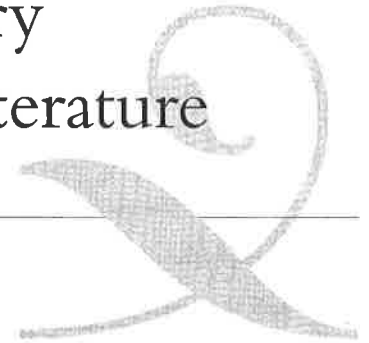


A New History of German Literature



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Gottfried Benn completes his studies in dermatology and shocks the public with a volume of poetry on medical themes

Provocation and Parataxis

A drunken corpse on a table with an aster wedged between its teeth. A nest of young rats in the stomach cavity of a drowned girl. An undertaker pulling a gold tooth from the mouth of a prostitute and heading off to a dance. A woman lying on a pillow of dark blood, her throat slit open with a knife. These images dominate the first four poems of Gottfried Benn's (1886–1956) five-poem cycle *Morgue*. "Requiem" concludes the series with an inversion of Christian motifs. Throughout, the poet's attention and rhetoric are trained on human body parts and surrounding images, the flower, the rats. *Morgue* was published together with four other poems in March 1912, and the first edition of five hundred copies sold out in eight days. One poem evokes macabre images of sick and screaming whores, prisoners, and outcasts. "Mann und Frau gehn durch die Krebsbaracke" (Man and Woman Walk through the Cancer Ward) contains grotesque portrayals of the cancer ward:

Hier diese Reihe sind zerfallene Schöße
und diese Reihe ist zerfallene Brust.
Bett stinkt bei Bett. Die Schwestern wechseln stündlich.

.....
Nahrung wird wenig noch verzehrt. Die Rücken
sind wund. Du siehst die Fliegen. Manchmal
wäscht die Schwester. Wie man Bänke wäscht.

Here these rows are decaying wombs
and this row is decaying breast.
Bed stinks beside bed. The nurses change shifts hourly.

.....
Little food is taken. The backs
have wounds. You see the flies. Sometimes
the nurse washes them. As one washes a bench. (1:16)

The use of synecdoche and metaphor underscores the depersonalization.

These provocative images shocked the bourgeois audience of the day and were rejected by all but the most avant-garde as scandalous and disgusting. One critic lamented: "Ugh! What an unbridled imagination, devoid of any intellectual decency, is there exposed; what disgusting delight in the abysmally ugly, what malicious pleasure in bringing to light things that cannot be changed" (quoted in Hohendahl, 26). Another warns: "Anyone who intends to read these . . . poems should prepare a stiff drink. A very stiff drink!!!" (quoted in Hohendahl, 91). Here the decay of the body is presented without any sense of nobility or transcendence. More brutal and grotesque than Baroque portrayals of decay and without contrasting images of transcendence, the poems

are a cold, irreverent challenge to human dignity. For Benn no longer the summit of creation, the human being is shown with bodily functions, including decay and dissolution, stench and obliteration. The death of a girl makes possible the "beautiful youth" of the rats that live off her body (1:11). The second section of "Der Arzt" (1917; "The Doctor") opens with the unsettling line "Die Krone der Schöpfung, das Schwein, der Mensch" ("The pinnacle of creation, the swine, man"; 1:14). Humanity is reduced to biology, the dissolution of the body, decay, death.

Even the choice of themes was unconventional in art, especially poetry. The images are revolting and overwhelming. The message is despair over the inability to counter decay with transcendence of any kind. Benn undermines not only the notion of humanity as the pinnacle of creation, but the concept of human life as having any higher meaning whatsoever. The form too is unusual. Benn, a practicing physician in his mid-twenties, mixes the language of science and dissection with the vocabulary of the everyday and the rhetoric of religion and poetry. The form is for the most part unrhymed free verse. The very first poem, "Kleine Aster" ("Little Aster"), underscores the disjunction between title and content. The thoracic cavity of the corpse becomes the stunning image of a vase for the beautiful flower. The body is dissolved into parts, including the brain, which is bereft of any greater significance. The poetic self does not reach out to nature or another self; he coldly dissects the body parts. The images are often paratactic, unrelated. When they are not grotesque, they border on the ironic, as in the poem "Requiem": "Den Schädel auf. Die Brust entzwei" ("The skull open. The breast in two"; 1:13). What remains intact is only the artistic craft of the poems themselves; everything else seems bereft of higher meaning.

Benn's foray into the unusual and grotesque can be seen as part of the wider movement of literary Expressionism, which spanned the decade from 1910 to 1920. The historical presuppositions of Benn's poetics and the development of Expressionism are manifold. In Germany the Industrial Revolution started late but made quick strides. In 1871, when Germany became a unified country, nearly two-thirds of the population lived in rural areas; by 1925 nearly two-thirds lived in urban areas. Berlin, where Benn lived during those years, grew from 1 million in 1880 to 2 million in 1910 and to more than 4 million in 1920. The crowded German cities of the early 20th century were turbulent and imposing, noisy and problem-ridden, vibrant and dynamic places.

From 1871 until the outbreak of the First World War, Germany enjoyed unprecedented political stability. Most of the Expressionist authors were born in this era between 1885 and 1895. Benn was born in 1886. After Bismarck had united Germany, an entire generation of Germans did not experience war. Traditional societal values remained intact, including the elevation of order, authority, and obedience. Life was stable, in the eyes of some, sterile. Many greeted the war as a release from the banality of life.

Germany's intellectual world was changing as rapidly as were its cities and industry. At the end of the 19th century, Friedrich Nietzsche had sealed for the

Expressionist generation the idea that transcendent values were a fiction, a human invention for the purpose of imposing power on others. Values did not correspond to any intrinsic truths; they were fictions, empty of higher meaning. Nietzsche's pronouncements precipitated a crisis of consciousness, with no clear orientation to fill the vacuum left by lost values.

Though specifically German, the Expressionists were influenced by a wide range of international figures: Walt Whitman, Charles Baudelaire, Stéphane Mallarmé, Arthur Rimbaud, and Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, to name only the poets. Marinetti visited Berlin one month after the publication of *Morgue*, and a translation of one of his Futurist manifestoes was published there that spring. Abstraction and distortion in art, along with the elevation of anxiety as a theme, culminating in the influential works of the Norwegian painter Edvard Munch, were also part of this general intellectual current and were represented in Germany by two major groupings of Expressionist artists, "Die Brücke" ("The Bridge") in Dresden and later Berlin, with Ernst Ludwig Kirchner and Karl Schmidt-Rottluff, among others, and "Der Blaue Reiter" ("The Blue Rider") in Munich with Wassily Kandinsky and Franz Marc, among others.

Literary Expressionism, unlike Futurism, was not a conscious grouping of authors, but a loose set of writers who published in some of the same journals and whose writings had a variety of common themes and features. The two most prominent Expressionist journals were both published in Berlin, *Der Sturm* (*The Storm*), beginning in 1910, and *Die Aktion* (*Action*), beginning in 1911. The foremost lyrical theme was no longer nature, but urban life, which led to its own genre designation, *Großstadtlyrik* (big city poetry). Poets drew on smells, sounds, modes of transportation, commerce, technology, and the bustle of city life for poetic themes. The city was portrayed as both daemonic and dynamic. As in painting, so in poetry, the modern metropolis was feared and criticized, but was no less a source of fascination. City life alienates and poisons; it is impersonal and materialistic, yet also vibrant and multifarious. Georg Heym's "Der Gott der Stadt" (1910; "The God of the City") inverts the traditional rhetoric: the church steeples are transformed into the black factory chimneys, and the city is an insatiable deity or demon to whom millions pray and from which they blindly seek their salvation. Related to the theme of the metropolis is technology. While technology seems to carry on a life of its own, the individual becomes increasingly an object, without life or soul.

A loss of higher meaning and purpose is also prominent. Heym writes in "Mitte des Winters" (published posthumously, 1922; "The Middle of Winter"): "Weglos ist jedes Leben. Und verworren / ein jeder Pfad" (Pathless is every life. And confused / Each and every path). Life is spatially and temporally disjointed. Neither past nor future has any significance. This crisis stems in part from the disenchantment with the increasing rationalization of society. The desire of the intellect to be free isolates and perverts the vital instincts. In his early works, Benn expresses a desire for loss of the self, a giving over to the subrational and the primitive, and a yearning to abandon the overly cerebral:

"Den Ich-Zerfall, den süßen, tiefersehnten" ("The disintegration of self, sweet and deeply longed-for" ("Kokain," 1917; "Cocain"). Suicide becomes a major motif, as in Albert Ehrenstein's "Der Selbstmörder" (1917; "Suicide"):

Ich grüße den Tod
Denn Sein ist Gefängnis,
Im Hirn haust Qual,
das Auge verengt Welt,
und schlecht ist Geschlecht,
es vermehrt sich.

I welcome death.
For being is a prison,
Agony lives in the brain,
The eye constricts the world
And the species is specious,
It multiplies.

The flight from consciousness is also central to Benn's early prose works. His Rönne stories, for example, "Gehirne" (1914; "Brains"), relate the anguish of the brain surgeon Rönne. Characterized by discontinuity, much like Benn's poetry, the stories depict dismemberment of reality along with the dissolution of the coherent self.

The sense of dissolution is collective, not simply individual, and it is related to the crisis of transcendence. "Es ist ein Weinen in der Welt / Als ob der liebe Gott gestorben wär" ("There is a weeping in the world, / As if the good Lord had died") writes Else Lasker-Schüler in "Weltende" ("End of the World") as early as 1905. The sense of collective crisis involves attacks on bourgeois sterility, hypocrisy, and narrowness, partly motivated by the common theme of the son's revolt against the father, but it reaches its pinnacle in the wide range of Expressionist poems with truly apocalyptic themes. The first great anthology of Expressionist poetry, *Menschheitsdämmerung* (1920; *The Dawn of Humanity*), edited by Kurt Pinthus, opens with Jakob van Hoddis's "Weltende" (1911; "End of the World"), an eight-line poem, with disjointed images evoking disaster.

The Expressionist does not see progress in the currency of society: materialism, militarism, or nationalism. And yet some Expressionists spoke of regeneration and transformation. The messianic rhetoric of revitalization is not universal and was foreign to Benn and Expressionists like van Hoddis, Alfred Lichtenstein, and Georg Trakl. Benn's poems had religious layers and employed religious language, but they tended to empty religion of its higher meaning, as in "Man and Woman Walk through the Cancer Ward," where the image of a rosary is used for the soft cancerous nodules in the dying woman's breast. Trakl, too, often inverted religious symbols in dark and opaque poems more characterized by despair and decay than by hope and transcendence.

Pinthus's anthology emphasizes the messianic strain and contains the following sections: "Collapse and Cry," "Awakening of the Heart," "Exhortation

and Indignation,” and “Love of Human Beings.” The title of the anthology, *Menschheitsdämmerung*, can mean dawn or dusk and so captures the ambiguity of transition and the movement’s circling around pessimism and optimism. These works contain an appeal to renewal, the refrain of the new human being, an exclamatory call to fraternity, spirit, humanity, heart, and soul in the face of a bestial existence. At times a political program is evoked, as in Johannes R. Becher’s “Der Sozialist” (1916; “The Socialist”). Much of the messianic rhetoric is abstract, as in Ernst Stadler’s “Der Spruch” (1914; “The Maxim”), Karl Otten’s “Die jungen Dichter” (1918; “The Young Poets”), or Franz Werfel’s *Der Weltfreund* (1911; *Friend of the World*). Often the emphasis on brotherhood and ecstasy becomes bombastic, hollow, and stale. For Benn the pathos of “the new human being” was “the last fever of lying out of a mouth already swollen from discharge” (3:125). The Expressionists were clearly better at diagnosing evil and shocking people than in painting a path to salvation, even if this impulse is irrepressible and surfaces in some respects, if highly subdued and much later, in Benn’s elevation of artistic form as a manifestation of the absolute, a position he assumed after briefly embracing, then abandoning, National Socialism.

Not all Expressionist poetry was as stylistically innovative as Benn’s, but several tendencies are visible. Common to all is the nonmimetic, nonrepresentational character. Even Benn’s cancer wards are hardly realistic. The artists express their concept of the world without seeking to represent objective reality. More specifically, Expressionist poetry makes frequent use of parataxis. Images are juxtaposed with a certain degree of randomness and without any overarching sense of grammatical relation or causality. This is especially evident in works such as Trakl’s “Im Winter” (1910; “In Winter”) and “Trübsinn” (1912; “Melancholy”), van Hoddiss’s “Weltende” (1911; “End of the World”), Max Hermann-Neisse’s “Nacht im Stadtpark” (1914; “Night in the City Park”), and Lichtenstein’s “Die Dämmerung” (1910/11; “Twilight”) and “Der Morgen” (1913; “Morning”). We find the structure in *Morgue and Other Poems* as well, especially in “Requiem” and “Man and Woman Walk through the Cancer Ward.” In addition, the language tends to be bold, intense, shocking, as might befit the depiction of decay and crisis, apocalypse and war. Highly charged and enthusiastic rhetoric, even when it ends with an allusion to destruction, is evident, for example, in Stadler’s “Fahrt über die Kölner Rheinbrücke bei Nacht” (1913; “Ride Across the Cologne Rhine Bridge at Night”). Expressionist poetry has little of the subtle refinement and sensitive delicacy of turn-of-the-century Impressionism. The language is also very heterogeneous. Benn is the most pronounced example here, employing a montage style that links clinical language, everyday language, religion, and poetry. Expressionist lyric is a mix of tone as well as of diction: the serious and comical seem to combine in works such as van Hoddiss’s “End of the World,” Benn’s “Nachtcafé” (1912; “Night Cafe”), or Lichtenstein’s “Twilight.”

Finally, some Expressionist poetry was highly concentrated. Here the best example is August Stramm, who was influenced by Marinetti’s Futurist mani-

festoes, which recognize the world as a disjointed array of information and events, brought to life by newspapers, cinema, telephones, airplanes, phonographs. Such a world calls for new forms—above all, collage. Adjectives and adverbs must disappear, so too must finite verbs and punctuation. The well-formed sentence is abandoned, replaced by a telegram-like style, with frequent use of compound nouns, phonetic spelling, and onomatopoeia to convey the continuity and rush of life, and a variety of typographical accents for emphasis. Stramm took these precepts further than most, with his paratactic linking of nouns and transcendence of conventional syntax. But aspects of the so-called telegram style are also evident in the early Benn. Paradoxically, in their efforts to convey the pace of reality and its vitality, such works remain, despite their innovative form, highly, if abstractly, mimetic.

Although Expressionists transformed our sense of poetry and had a very good sense of the ills of society and the consequences of the abandonment of metaphysics, their abstract answers were of little help to those seeking positive guidance. Many artists, disillusioned by the shortcomings of the movement, turned to a new sobriety, which was more concrete, more social, and more cynical. One of the few poets who outlived Expressionism as an active artist, Benn enjoyed a revival after World War II with works that turned much more to a classical elevation of pure form. Despite the distance in time, many of the Expressionist problems are still our own: loss of orientation resulting from the crises of Christianity and metaphysics; the search for appropriate and innovative modes of expression; the role of the ugly within aesthetics; and the new responsibilities of art in an age of technology.

See also 1882, 1910, 1921, 1929 (October), 1999

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Mark W. Roche

☞ 1912, June

Thomas Mann completes his novella *Der Tod in Venedig* after a year of writing

The Lasciviousness of Ruin

Many Junes after Thomas Mann (1875–1955) finished his most famous story, the newspaper *USA Today* (June 7, 1999) reported that the Publishing Triangle, “a group of 250 gay men and lesbians who work in publishing,” was