

GOTTFRIED BENN
Selected Poems and Prose

EDITED AND TRANSLATED BY DAVID PAISEY



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*Roam on! The light we sought is shining still.
Dost thou ask proof? Our tree yet crowns the hill,
Our Scholar travels yet the loved hill-side*

from 'Thyrsis'

GOTTFRIED BENN

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FyfieldBooks
CARCANET

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About the Author

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Translator's Preface

This is a personal selection from the much larger work of Gottfried Benn presented in two roughly chronological sequences, of verse and prose respectively, so that developments over time can become apparent. In bulk he produced several times more prose than verse, but I have selected much less of the former for translation. The dates supplied here are of first recorded appearances of texts, either in manuscript or print, as established in the four-volume collected edition published by Limes Verlag (Wiesbaden) in 1958–63, edited by Dieter Wellershoff; later authorial amendments have been incorporated. Note that the date supplied at the head of each text is not part of the original where no dated manuscript survives, composition may have preceded the year of first publication. I have left the texts largely without commentary, to allow readers to form their own opinions. A brief biographical note follows, which may help to put particular works into context, notably those of the Nazi period. There is a huge critical literature on Benn in German, but I see no point in listing any part of it for readers who know no German. Benn's original texts can all be found in the latest collected edition by Klett-Cotta Publishers in Stuttgart. I did not think it necessary to print a bibliography of their first and subsequent appearances during his lifetime.

People say poetry cannot be translated – Benn said so himself – and my effort may be futile, but I think there may be some merit in trying to convey something of the quality of a great poet to Anglophone readers who cannot read him in the original. Nevertheless the inclusion of the German originals of all the poems selected may encourage some interaction with the poet's own words. In my renderings of the poetry, which Benn intended to be read on the page rather than spoken, I have tried to reflect the scope of his characteristic diction, as well as his original metric structures, rhyme-schemes (with the occasional expedient of assonance), and often even the punctuation. I have allowed myself more latitude in translating the free verse. The prose is more easily rendered into English, and I have aimed at literal versions which respect the rhetorical structures – sentence length and so on – of the German originals, some of which were intended to be spoken. The early experimental narratives are pioneering examples of Expressionist prose, but the other works are mostly quite straightforward. I have translated two from the Nazi period in full, one because it is a superb piece of rhetoric, the other because its toxicity is extreme. I have omitted a substantial study entitled *Goethe and the Natural Sciences* (1931) because it takes for granted educated German readers' familiarity with the life and works of Goethe and would require much annotation. The eyewitness account of the trial and execution of Edith Cavell in 1915 (1928) is included for its English interest. Most of the remaining prose here consists of excerpts from longer texts, chosen sometimes for their beauty, sometimes for their information content and interest, notably those which refer to poetry, especially Expressionist poetry. There are

many fine poems I have not translated, but, apart from remaining narratives and the Goethe essay, I think I have included the best (and worst) of the prose.

I should like to dedicate these translations to the memory of Leslie ('Moses') Reed (1920-84), in September 1947 my meticulous first teacher of German at Whitchurch Secondary School, Cardiff. I am grateful to Professor Leonard Forster (1913-97) who encouraged me to work on diction in Benn's poems up to 1927 at University College London and in Berlin, where I met Benn briefly in July 1951. My thanks also to Michael Schmidt (another Benn enthusiast) and Helen Tooke of Carcanet, Alun and Julie Emlyn-Jones, and to Massimo Danielis, who created the aquatint engraving *Benn: Ein Wort* in 2012 for the cover of this book.

Biographical Introduction

In a letter Gottfried Benn wrote to his long-standing correspondent in Bremen Friedrich Wilhelm Oelze on 11 September 1950, he said: 'My private life is really completely opaque, a continuum of gaps and losses, no-one could make a story of me, perceive and portray any coherence. A strange parallel to my so-called oeuvre, which consists only of break-ups and break-downs, and has no line which can be read'. Nevertheless a brief biography follows, with particular attention to the period in the 1930s which caused Benn, and causes his readers, severe problems.

Gottfried Benn was born on 2 May 1886 in Mansfeld (a village in Westprignitz, North Germany), as the second child of a Lutheran pastor and his French-Swiss wife. He spent most of his childhood in Sellin (now Zielin, West Poland, another village in what was then the German Neumark), where he was allowed to join the son of the local manor as he received instruction from a private tutor; the two went together to secondary school (Gymnasium) in Frankfurt on the Oder. In adulthood he liked to point out how many important German writers had grown up in Lutheran parsonages, but his father was very authoritarian, and Gottfried clashed with him bitterly for refusing his mother medical relief during her painful death from cancer in 1912.

He went to Marburg University to study philology and theology, as his father wished, but after two years, in accordance with his own wishes, changed to the study of military medicine at the Kaiser-Wilhelm-Akademie in Berlin, for which there was a state subsidy. His intended career as a regimental doctor in peacetime was cut short by kidney damage suffered during manoeuvres. He undertook further training as an auxiliary doctor in Berlin hospitals, including the Westend Hospital in Charlottenburg, and in particular on a dissection course in Moabit. He later confessed¹ that he had been removed from psychiatric work because he found it impossible to take any interest in individual patients' case histories, to the extent that doing so led to severe physical symptoms in himself. His first small collection of poems, *Morgue and Other Poems*, was published as a pamphlet in Berlin in 1912 and created a sensation: Benn became known as a leading figure in the new movement called literary Expressionism.

After his further professional experience and a trip to America as a ship doctor, he found himself in the army again at the beginning of the First World War. He took part in the battle for Antwerp, then spent much of the war in Brussels, where he was given the job of doctor in a hospital for prostitutes; this was a very productive period in literary terms. In 1917 he was discharged as a result of some kind of nervous breakdown, and returned to Berlin. Here he opened the private practice for skin and venereal diseases which was his often meagre source of income for the rest of his working life in that city, with the exception of the period from 1935 to 1945, when he was again employed by the army, this time as a medical administrator. Throughout his life, poetry was of primary importance to him, though he wrote in other genres too; medicine mere

paid the bills.

Although intellectually and socially he was very much a loner, he married three times,² and, particularly in the unmarried intervals, had a number of sometimes overlapping and far more than casual sexual relationships, possibly the first being with the very fine poet Else Lasker-Schüler.³ His first marriage was cruelly cut short by his wife's early death, and, as he did not like young children, he did not feel able to bring up his daughter Nele himself, so she lived with friends in Denmark, and was adopted there in 1946. In 1929 a young actress with whom he was having an affair committed suicide, knowing he did not consider her his equal intellectually. There are tender references in a few poems to his second and third wives, but despite their importance to his daily life, neither played a part in his creative work. Only one of his male friendships can be said to have been close for a time, that with Erich Reiss,⁴ a Berlin publisher who had produced some of his early works; around 1930 the two met regularly in the evening to drink in Benn's favourite pub. Benn's long correspondence with F.W. Oelze, already mentioned, maintained a polite distance at the personal level, after Benn's extreme wariness at first and a hiccup in 1936, but it did provide him with a degree of support (though hardly at the intellectual level Oelze unsuccessfully aimed for), and, more importantly, assistance with preserving his manuscripts through the war of 1939-45 and its immediate aftermath.

Benn's early poems of extreme suffering amongst the lowest levels of society seem driven by a wild but unexpressed compassion, and some of the early prose suggests a highly vulnerable sensitivity which was to be hidden under various assertive defence strategies. However, he soon turned his attention to his thereafter constant theme of the fractured human self in a tragic world of post-Nietzschean nihilism, where human existence and experience is potentially meaningful and transcendent only in so far as it produces art. States of intoxication, rushes of blood to the brain and other organs, commingling of cultural and anthropological memories, all these could help provide the conditions necessary for the production of poetry and in part its subject. Benn's poems are monologues, acts of defiance erected against the void: but 'the poem is the mind's unpaid work ... one-sided, without effect and without a partner'.⁵ The poems trace a great arc across his life and are undiscursive: they can stand for themselves.

His prose, by contrast, with the exception of some early experimental pieces with a narrative-autobiographical kernel, is full of assertions and argument, though it too tends to the conclusion the poems simply incorporate. Much of it is rhetorically refined and mellifluous, but it should not be read in isolation from its social and political circumstances. He was elitist, and a racist foretelling the end of the white race.⁶ It is perhaps easy to see the attraction of parts of National Socialist ideology for him, but difficult to understand the stupidity of such an apparently rigorous thinker leaving his isolationist comfort zone to welcome the Third Reich in print, as he did in prose collections of 1933 and 1934; politics had hitherto been for him a sphere outside the permanent haven of art, and certainly never its possible concurrent. Perhaps there is a millenarian in every lyric poem

but for a time Benn saw the political upheaval as an anthropological mutation capable of countering European nihilism; perhaps also he was blinded by the possibility of acceptance in the nationalist community, as opposed to the indifference to the individual of modern society.⁷ He had also been flattered in 1932 by the public recognition implicit in his election to membership of the Literary Section of the Prussian Academy of Arts. But the uncharacteristically convoluted prose of his 1932 inaugural speech to that body reveals how nervous he was trying to impress; as spoken it must have been near-incomprehensible. Despite misgivings, he remained among the rump of members who had not resigned, emigrated or been dismissed at the beginning of the Nazi regime in 1933, as had several whose places were filled by more of its literary supporters, and from 15 February to 8 June 1933 was its acting chairman. He was criticised for remaining in Germany by various writers who had emigrated, notably his friend Heinrich Mann, and defended his position in print.

What today seems his worst moral failing of this or any period is his acceptance of Nazi policy towards Jews. His essay 'Doric World'⁸ considered, as a model for the 'total state' of Nazi Germany, the severe, militaristic, slave-based and to us morally transgressive state of ancient Sparta, because it had bred what he considered the beginnings of high art. And 'Eugenics I'⁹ of the previous year had supported state-run eugenics, and by implication the beginnings of the Holocaust since it contains the chilling proposition that modern man 'becomes great through the concept of the enemy, only the man who sees enemies can grow': from the start, the Nazi state had insistently proclaimed Jews its prime enemy. Benn's absorption and repetition of Nazi theory in prose examples from 1932 to 1933 extends even to the micro-level of vocabulary, which no English translation can reveal:¹⁰ and the climax of 'Eugenics I' uses the extreme rhetoric later characteristic of Goebbels in his prophetic rants: '*brains* must be bred, great brains to defend Germany, brains with canine teeth, teeth of thunderbolts'.¹¹ Benn did not act like an anti-Semite, as we have seen in his friendships with Elsa Lasker-Schüler and Erich Reiss, and wrote to one of his concurrent mistresses on 4 December 1935: 'My favourite milieu has always been the Jewish, and next to it the aristocratic one'. But he had nevertheless decided to adopt the Nazi position, or at least not to criticise it, and wrote to the same correspondent two weeks later: 'Yes, the Jews, that inexhaustible subject! One should *really* have nothing to do with *any* of them, taking an absolutely strict line. But then along come someone like E[rich] R[eiss] with a gift of chairs and two books published by Piper, and that is nice'.¹²

Whatever his personal feelings, he did not publicly oppose Nazi policy towards the Jews, nor, even after the war, did he disown or apologise for his earlier arguments in favour of other aspects of the Third Reich, arguments which had been long in gestation. His fault was not a *Lord Jim* leap, a momentary error bitterly regretted and expiated over many years.¹³ In 1949, Benn heard that the Jewish émigré novelist Alfred Döblin,¹⁴ with whom he had been friendly before 1933, and who returned to Germany in November 1945 as a French Cultural

Officer in Baden-Baden, despite his admiration for some of Benn's works, had called him 'a scoundrel';¹⁵ morally this seems to me entirely just. xvii

Benn never joined the Nazi Party (NSDAP), and after the war was to have no difficulties during the de-Nazification process of the occupying powers. The more he was exposed to the organisations and ideas of Hitler's Germany immediately after his welcome of 1933/34, however, the more they revealed strong currents of opposition to his avant-garde past and far from orthodox present, and he felt himself under threat. Keeping his head down did not seem by itself a sufficient strategy for self-preservation, and in 1935 he decided to rejoin the army, calling this step 'the aristocratic form of emigration'.¹⁶ He left Berlin for an administrative post in Hanover at the end of March 1935, and continued in the post in Berlin again from 1937, and from 1943 to 1945 in Landsberg an der Warthe (now Gorzów in Poland).

He had reckoned without the non-intellectual side of the Nazi regime, however, and, in response to the publication in March 1936 of his *Selected Poems*, was subjected to a virulent anonymous attack in the 7 May issue of *Das Schwarze Korps*, the weekly newspaper of Heinrich Himmler's SS, which took exception mainly to the shocking explicitness of some early works, and said he qualified as 'successor of those who have been thrown out of the house because of their unnatural piggery'.¹⁷ To counter this implied threat of dismissal from the army, and possibly worse, Benn succeeded in raising support from his commanding officer in Hanover, Major-General von Zepelin, and from Hanns Johst,¹⁸ President of both the Literary Section of the Academy of Arts and of the Reichsschrifttumskammer (Chamber of Literature, founded by Goebbels in 1933) of which Benn had been a member since December 1933. However, on 15 May 1936 he was forbidden to publish anything while still a serving soldier, and on 2 April 1938 was to be excluded from the Chamber of Literature.

Benn continued writing while under this ban, which did not prevent further National Socialist attacks on Expressionism and its literary products, including Benn. He had a particularly virulent opponent in Wolfgang Willrich,¹⁹ but in September 1937 Heinrich Himmler wrote to Willrich that the institutions for which he was responsible had been forbidden to take any part in actions against Benn, thanks to his unobjectionable behaviour since 1933.²⁰ Benn was incautious enough to have 22 recent poems privately printed in August 1943, and sent them to seven people only.²¹ One of these poems ('Monologue', written in 1941) contained some withering criticism of National Socialism and its policies of enslavement, which could have cost him his life had it become public. Including a Shakespearian lament for the loss of measure, and denunciation of individual Nazi leaders, mainly for their vulgarity, it mourns the tragedy of inaction he had chosen.

After the war, and then long-drawn-out difficulties in finding publishers for his new works, his reputation in West Germany rose quite quickly, based largely on the rhyming, strictly metrical poems he was still writing, which found admirers and imitators among some poets of the younger generation. He also had

considerable success with new works in prose, though he never returned to the experiments of his early years. Alexander Lernet-Holenia, one of the friends to whom Benn sent a copy of his privately printed poems of 1943, had told Benn in 1942 that he was the greatest lyric poet for 100 years, but needed to invent a new third style after his 'cancer shed' early poems and his eight-line stanzas of the 1920s:²² I believe he never did so. In both prose and verse he revisited familiar themes and arguments. When I visited him on 20 July 1955, he was very kind to a painfully inexperienced student, and obligingly wove into his conversation many of the formulations I knew well from his publications. In his post-war letters he told how his wife had asked him to stop writing poems about roses and melancholy, and I believe most of the works of that final period bear the mark of depression. The often repetitious prose seems to me a falling-off, and the verse to shrink in scope to a concentration on art as the sole product capable of transcendence, to poems about writing poems. He thought no writer could hope to produce more than a handful of perfectly achieved lyric poems in a lifetime, but for me there are more than enough in his work to rank him among the greatest German poets of the twentieth century, however seriously flawed he was as a man. He died on 7 July 1956.

¹ In *Epilog* (1922).

² He married: firstly in 1914 Edith Osterloh, who died in 1921 (their daughter Nele was born in 1915); secondly in 1938 Herta von Wedemeyer, who committed suicide during the chaotic final weeks of the Second World War when, alone, she despaired of leaving the Soviet zone of occupation for the American one; and thirdly in 1946 the dentist Dr Ilse Kaul, who outlived him.

³ Else Lasker-Schüler (1869–1945), a Jew who would emigrate to Jerusalem to avoid Nazi persecution; Benn delivered a moving eulogy to her in Berlin in 1952, long after her death.

⁴ Erich Reiss (1887–1951) was a Jew, and his business, begun in 1908, was liquidated by the Nazis in 1936. He was sent to Sachsenhausen concentration camp, from which he was released in 1938 thanks to appeals from influential supporters (not including Benn, who at that time would have had no influence with the authorities), and emigrated to the USA via Sweden. His warm and chatty letters to Benn from 1946 to 1951 have been published.

⁵ In *Summa summarum* (1926).

⁶ In Benn's view, the threat came mainly from the East.

⁷ Ferdinand Tönnies' *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft* (1887) is the classic formulation of this sociological opposition, still very current in Benn and his contemporaries. Nazi community was, of course, exclusively German.

⁸ 'Dorische Welt' (1934).

⁹ 'Züchtung I.' (1933). Eugenics, systematised by Francis Galton (1822–1911), remained a much-studied subject until some time after the Second World War, when its Nazi associations discredited it. University College London maintained a lecture room named Eugenics Theatre for well over a decade after 1945.

¹⁰ For instance, the words *Führerbegriff*, *Volkheit*, *volkhaft* and *arthaft*, not hitherto part of Benn's diction, can be found in 'After Nihilism', 'Eugenics I', 'Expressionism' and 'Doric World', but not in the poems.

¹¹ Compare Goebbels: 'Only a brazen species will be able to assert itself in the storms of our time. It must have guts of iron and a heart of steel' (quoted in the notes to Victor Klemperer, *Tagebücher 1944*, ed. by Walter Nowojski and Hadwig Klemperer, 4th ed. (Berlin, 2006), p. 85. Victor Klemperer's *LTI [Lingua Tertii Imperii]*, first published in 1946, has documented Nazi linguistic practices.

¹² Benn's letters to Elinor Buller of 4 and 17 December 1935.

¹³ Joseph Conrad's novel *Lord Jim* (1900) was known to Benn in translation.

¹⁴ Alfred Döblin (1878–1957), now best known for his novel *Berlin Alexanderplatz* (1929).

¹⁵ 'Ein Schuft'; see Benn's letter to F.W. Oelze, 23 March 1949. In his memoir *Doppelleben* (1949), Benn wrote that he could not see why Döblin had described him thus.

¹⁶ So in *Zum Thema Geschichte* (probably 1943) and *Doppelleben* (1950), part 2.

¹⁷ The reference is to the homosexual Ernst Röhm and his supporters in the paramilitary SA, many of whom were murdered in the 'Night of the Long Knives' on 30 June 1934. The passage on Greiner

homosexuality in Benn's 'Doric World' (1934) is purely factual, and there are few other hints of a bisexual interest.

[18](#) Hanns Johst (1890-1978), a writer whose play *Schlageter* (performed on Hitler's birthday in 1933) contains the famous line: 'When I hear the word *culture* I release the safety-catch on my Browning'.

[19](#) Wolfgang Willrich (1897-1948), a member of the SS and author of *Clearing Out the Temple of Art* (*Säuberung des Kunsttempels*, 1937).

[20](#) Quoted by Joachim Dyck in *Der Zeitzeuge. Gottfried Benn 1929-1949* (Göttingen, 2006), p. 235.

[21](#) Listed by Dyck, *Der Zeitzeuge*, p. 300.

[22](#) Alexander Lernet-Holenia (1897-1976), Austrian writer, whom Benn had known since 1930; see Benn's letter to Oelze of 24 April 1942.

POEMS

I

The spittoon-glass -
not remotely a match
for such great green tepid floods -
crashed down at last.

The mouth dropped after it. Hung deep. Sucked
back vomit convulsively. Disappointed
any trust. Gave stones for bread
to the breathless blood.

II

The little bundle smelled like a chicken-coop,
beat to and fro. Grew. Fell still.

The granddaughter played the old game:
when grannie's asleep:
around the collarbones there were such hollows
she hid beans in them.
In the throat you could even fit a ball,
if you blew the dust out.

III

His thing was a spittoon with plumstones.
He crawled over and bit them open.
They threw him back in his bunk,
and the madman died in his straw.

Towards evening the head keeper came
and gave the attendants an earful:
You lazy damned beasts,
why is this box not cleared out yet?

IV

For weeks her children had been looking after her

when they came home from school,
holding her head up,
then there was some air-movement and she could sleep.

One of them bent over unintentionally
and the head fell out of its hands.
Turned round. Hung across her shoulder
deep blue.

V Requiem

A coffin gets to work, an empty bed.
When you consider: a couple of hours wasted
to silent night now find themselves translated
and floating in the cloudscape overhead.

How white they are! The lips as well. Like smudges
at the edge of snow across the winter land,
comforting snow, redeemed from deceitful colours,
hill and valley held in an open hand.

Near and far are one in perfect balance.
The flakes blow over fields, then rapturous
blow on, the world's last flickering mere absence.
O scarcely dreamt! The distant happiness!

The mouth of a girl who had lain long in the reeds
looked kind of nibbled.
When we sectioned the thorax, the gullet was full of holes.
Finally, in a pocket under the diaphragm
we found a nest of young rats.
One little sister lay dead.
The others lived on liver and kidney,
drank cold blood and had had
a nice childhood here.
Their death was nice too, and quick:
we threw them all in the water.
Ah, how the little muzzles squeaked!

The solitary molar of a whore
who had died a missing person
had a gold filling.
As if by mutual consent,
all the others had left.
The morgue attendant knocked it out
and pawned it to go dancing.
Because, he said,
only dust should come to dust.

Incision-ready, everything is white.
The scalpels steam. The belly's painted.
Under sheets a whimpering thing waited.

'Herr Professor, the time is right.'

The first incision. Like slicing bread.
'Clamps, please!' A spurt of something red.
Deeper. The muscles: shining, fresh and wet.
Is that a bunch of roses on the bed?

Is that pus that's spurting so?
Is the intestine snagged below?
'Doctor, you're standing in my light,
the peritoneum has vanished from sight.
Anaesthetic, I can't operate
if the belly is walking to the Brandenburg Gate.'

Silence, muffled and deep, only broken
by dropped scissors that cause a minor explosion.
And the sister, an angel in blue,
proffers sterile swabs to the crew.

'I can't find a thing in this dirt, OK!?'
'Blood turning black. Take the mask away!'
'But - God in heaven - what are you doing?,
can't you stop the heels from moving?'

Severe deformation. Finally, found!
'Hot iron, sister!' A fizzing sound.

You're lucky again this time, my son.
Perforation had nearly begun.
'Do you notice the little green bit? -
Three hours to fill the belly with shit.'

Belly closed, skin closed. 'Plaster here!
Good morning, gentlemen.'

The theatre clear.
Death gnashing and grinding his teeth in fury
slinks in the cancer shed for another sortie.

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