Among the things good poets most fear (and all poets crave for) is the fossilization, which comes with the status of a canonical figure. Their problem is to reconcile that fear with the understandable and still greater fear that they will be ignored, and that publishers will canonize someone else instead. It’s hardly a choice between rise and fall, for both threaten to become an artistic fall: it is the dilemma of the writer who wishes to remain creative.

Another Benn biography, another five hundred pages of familiar material, the familiar story of the pastor’s son’s erratic progress through medicine, army, politics and the cultural scene of the twentieth century’s two western-orientated German democracies; the familiar but still shocking assent to Hitler, including to aspects of his eugenic policies, and the hardly less opportunistic comeback, the death in 1956 as the fêted lyrical genius of the Federal Republic. Like a familiar conjuring trick, the downfall and the comeback should not cease to amaze the reader – here, rather, the author takes them too comfortably in his stride. If, when the conjuror starts sawing through the box, the audience is not horrified and waiting for the blood to flow, then the trick is pointless, it has been repeated too often. There are a number of reasons why, regrettably, this book has that effect on the reader.

The first is an over-identification with the subject. This biography is full of mood – anger, grief, sentimentality, and a string of broken hearts – but the mood is always Benn’s, and so too are the phrases which create or defuse the mood. The kind of reading, which is worthwhile – against the grain, as Benjamin commented – is made all but impossible. Where Benn has nothing to offer, Hof himself comes to the rescue, so that for instance on May 2 1886 (the day of Benn’s birth, before which – as Dickens once remarked – there had been little chance of Benn and the world being acquainted) we are shown how “die Maisonette das zarte Grün der Bäume ans Licht gebracht hatte” (p.57). This sounds as if it should have come in a Courths-Mahler biography – certainly the tone of Benn’s later text ‘1886’ makes Hof’s integrating tone grotesquely inappropriate. Not for the last time we wonder why Cotta did not bother with a Lektor for this text – such a person would also have done well to cut out infuriating mannerisms such as ‘doch zurück ins Jahr 1927’. But there is little evidence of such interventions.

Two other things, we presume, which Holger Hof did not write himself, must be laid at the publisher’s door. The title, striving for effect and novelty, could hardly be less appropriate. A poet who quotes himself, often across decades; a man whose resentments last even longer – there is
no failure of memory here. The phrase is a casual one of Benn’s, unpublished too. The Roman des Phänotyp (too often turned into a convenient source book for familiar biographical details, while its form and its place in literature are simply ignored) alleges that “im völligen Gegensatz zu Schifferkreisen” its narrative stance cannot spin yarns and bring things back from a journey; but that is no failure of memory. Nor is Benn’s refusal to respond to the magnitude of National Socialist crimes anything to do with being unable to remember what they were. Yet publishers often claim to know a good title better than their authors. But they should be more careful what they promise. When we read on the dust-jacket: “zu entdecken: ein völlig neuer Gottfried Benn” we start to feel sorry for what the publisher has done to its author, for the claim simply cannot be lived up to. It’s true that the work invested by Hof in deciphering the diary jottings from 1934 (sporadically) and from 1944 (consecutively) is anything but wasted, and anyone who has struggled to read Benn’s handwriting – what mixture could be more fatal than that of an eclectic poet and a practicing doctor? – has reason to be grateful. Hof’s efforts add detail and small pieces of enlightenment, but it cannot offer a completely new Gottfried Benn. Would a single line of Steinhagen’s or Theweleit’s readings of Orpheus’ Tod – that extraordinary poem written in the shadow of Herta Wedemeyer’s suicide in the ‘underworld’ of an American occupation zone ceded to the Russians – need to be rewritten after this biography? It is no criticism of the author if we suggest not, but Cotta should not embarrass its author with absurd claims.

A fundamental problem of this type of biography is the obverse of its virtues. Holger Hof clearly knows Benn’s poetic works and letters extremely well. It’s always worth pausing to reflect on those questions to which he, searching, can find no answer: e.g. why did Benn leave the army in 1917 and establish himself in private practice in Berlin? It’s a good way to get under the otherwise seamless text. Readers can follow Hof’s narrative through the course of Benn’s life with many resonances of his works in their ear and on the page. But by the time the narrator’s voice has harmonized with the uninterrupted flow of (often very short) quotations, not only do events take on sympathetic overtones communicated by respect for the works, but the works themselves get pre-digested into the context into which they are harmonized, and it is far from desirable that in such a controversial life works which provoked and should still provoke should be homogenized in this fashion. We’ll look at the two aspects of this problem separately.

The first tendency is clearest in the titles of chapters and sections. These are made up invariably of Benn quotations. To start the post-war chapter under the heading “Trauer [...] im Blick” (p.335f) (from the Nachlass) is quite a cheek. Benn’s extraordinary arrogance about his own
place in the events unfolding hardly comes out in that title. His attitudes had enabled him in the final months of the regime to sneer at “diese hassenswerte Menschheit mit Koffern und Kindern” (p.20), and led him to the amazing stupidities of the Willkommensgruß an die Emigranten (p.35f): “Warum sind sie nicht hier: Brecht, Werfel, Döblin, Broch, die Manns [. . .]?” (p.33). (He means they should be there in the final death-throes of the Third Reich. The inclusion of Werfel is especially interesting, since Werfel had expressed a wish to help rebuild Germany in 1933 and knew that it was only his alleged ‘ethnicity’ which made him unacceptable in Germany, this at a time, in Hof’s unfortunate phrase, “als [er] sich veranlasst fühlte, sein ‘Ariertum’ nachzuweisen” (p.63). Benn knew all about this for it was he who conducted that correspondence excluding Werfel from the Academy.) And his contempt for Peter Suhrkamp, and his pride at cold-shouldering him immediately after the war (was it a result of that sense, expressed shamefully in 1935, that “mein Bedarf an Juden ist gedeckt!”? (p.299)). It would, I repeat, be hard to feel the title of this section appropriate – this is but one case of many.

The other side of Hof’s method is more insidious. It snatches phrases out of the context of the stories and other texts and puts them into a new context. This is sometimes no more than a further example of the harmonizing which creates an anodyne impression in the text. Gottfried Benn goes to work in a clinic with an X-ray machine, and it is described through the brief episode in Gehirne where Rönne plays with the machine (the source is not identified in the text: readers who wish to stay on top of this book must always consult the footnotes at the back), or Rönne travels from Munich northwards using the words from Gehirne “durch Süddeutschland dem Norden [zu]” (p.131). These are perhaps merely mannerisms, but to find a glittering scene from Die Reise – one which is concerned with the intellectual dissection of table talk in the officers’ mess – suddenly converted into vague musings on Benn’s ‘Drogentrip’ (p.160) is more serious, and shows Hof’s contempt for the literary works, as if these were there only to provide chips of mosaic for an easily digestible biography, jig-saw pieces for puzzle other than that for which they were created. (Please read this book against the grain by checking out those bits of art, which are not integrated into the biography.) The only really good edition of Benn, as everyone knows who teaches Benn or tries to make sense of his development, is the Fischer edition of the Fassung der Erstdrucke. Hof’s technique threatens to undo the chronology this edition established (in the face of Klett-Cotta’s museal clinging to Benn’s selections and orderings) and to make Benn’s poetic development static and timeless – a more than retrograde step.

Let’s face it: a biography of a significant literary figure makes its subject ridiculous if the work is not respected. There are important issues,
journeys of the mind, intriguing questions about Benn’s intellectual and artistic trajectory, and this biography manages to miss them all. From the early years Liliencron and Jacobsen are missing – standard orientation points for the early lyric, and both gaps scandalous in a serious piece of work; there is nothing about how Expressionism understood itself at various times, nothing on Darwin or Häckel, although Hof draws attention to Oelze’s unusually perceptive question to Benn at the start of their correspondence (“Wie kann man einerseits die Wissenschaft u. ihre Resultate skeptisch ansehen, ja verächtlich betrachten u. doch sie dann für wahr setzen u. zu eigenen Ideen verwerten?” (p.275)). Holger Hof is to be praised for allowing the question to arise in his text, but he is assiduous in ducking its answer. There’s all but nothing on Nietzsche, no idea of that irony in Gesänge which rescued the poem for Adorno (Lukács having damned its irrationality), instead we’re told of Benn’s reserve vis-à-vis Adorno as Jewish and the fact that he could not be bothered to listen to Adorno give a lecture. Nothing on Benn’s later ‘existentialism’, and amazingly there’s nothing on Benn’s view of antiquity. And if intellectual events of this kind are not the stuff of a writer’s biography, then there can be little point in reading it. Despite the fun of watching Benn putting his white doctor’s coat on as part of his routine of seduction, it might be worth reminding the author that his subject was a writer and only for that reason lays claim to our attention.

We might finally ask what Holger Hof has learnt from the critics whom he lists: I mean the big critics, not the pen-pushing academics whose essays Hof no doubt understandably ignores, but the big ones. We find a casual half-reference to Helmut Lethen, nothing from Jürgen Schröder – whose approach would have much to offer in interpretation of a family producing not merely Benn himself but an NSDAP member priest and a Fememord assassin, sentenced to death, then amnestied in 1930. There’s a half echo of Klaus Theweleit’s intriguing book, and precious little attention given to the material collected in Peter Uwe Hohendahl’s exemplary reception history. Instead the reader is offered the critic who found Benn “in seinem Urteil über die Deutschen ‘schärfer und wahrer als Thomas Mann” (p.362). We need to remind ourselves that this is Klett-Cotta, not Readers Digest.

HUGH RIDLEY
University College Dublin


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