

# AFTER THE CATASTROPHE. WOLFGANG BORCHERT'S "DRAUßEN VOR DER TÜR": BETWEEN GUILT, DISORIENTATION, AND THE POSSIBILITY OF LIVING AFTER

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**Abstract:** Post-war German literature is often understood as a literary response to war, destruction, and political guilt. However, the catastrophe of war is not limited to physical destruction; it also entails the collapse of the social, moral, and existential structures that allow individuals to experience themselves as belonging to a meaningful world. This paper examines Wolfgang Borchert's *Draußen vor der Tür* as a drama of existence after catastrophe, focusing on the returning soldier Beckmann and his experience of disorientation, fractured identity, guilt, and exclusion. The analysis explores how Beckmann's confrontation with a destroyed social world and his unresolved moral responsibility develop into an existential crisis that raises the question of whether life remains possible after catastrophe. Particular attention is given to Beckmann's persistent search for meaning, his attempts to confront others with responsibility, and his continued questioning in the absence of satisfactory answers. The paper argues that Borchert does not offer hope as reconciliation, certainty, or resolution. Rather, the drama locates a minimal yet significant possibility of hope in persistence itself: in Beckmann's refusal to stop questioning, searching, and struggling to find meaning within a world whose previous structures have collapsed. In this sense, *Draußen vor der Tür* does not resolve the existential crisis produced by catastrophe, but neither does it close entirely into despair.

**Keywords:** Wolfgang Borchert, *Draußen vor der Tür*, post-war German literature, existential crisis, guilt, identity, hope.

**Field:** Humanities

## 1. INTRODUCTION

„Ein Mann kommt nach Deutschland“ (Borchert, 1986, p. 8) is the opening sentence of Wolfgang Borchert's drama *Draußen vor der Tür*. Yet, from the very beginning, this is not simply a story of a man "returning" home. Rather, it is as if he were setting foot in this country for the first time. Beckmann is a returning soldier, but the opening immediately makes clear that something is fundamentally wrong with this "return." There is no "home" left to provide familiarity, security, or a sense of belonging. The man who has returned finds himself confronted with walls of incomprehension, rejection, and denial.

Post-war German literature is frequently understood as a literary response to war, destruction, and political guilt. Scholarship has often focused on landscapes of ruins, the historical concept of the *Stunde Null* ("Zero Hour"), or the literary confrontation with National Socialism. Wolfgang Borchert's *Draußen vor der Tür*, however, opens up a different perspective. The drama does not primarily ask about the causes of catastrophe; rather, it confronts the question of **how human existence remains possible after the collapse of the social, moral, and personal certainties that once gave life structure and meaning.**

This article therefore approaches Borchert's drama not merely as a representation of the returning soldier or as a literary document of the immediate post-war period, but as an exploration of existence after catastrophe. What happens to a person when not only the physical world has been destroyed, but also the structures through which identity, belonging, responsibility, and a sense of the future are constituted? Through Beckmann, Borchert presents the experience of a man who has returned physically but is unable to return to the world he once knew. His return thus becomes a paradox: **he has come back, but there is nowhere to return to.**

The article asks: **How is human existence possible after the collapse of social, moral, and personal certainties, and does *Draußen vor der Tür* leave any room for hope, or does the drama ultimately portray the impossibility of returning to life?** It argues that Beckmann should not be interpreted solely as a returning soldier, but rather as a figure of radical disorientation and fractured identity whose search for meaning reflects the broader crisis of post-war German society. At the same time, the drama's refusal to provide a definitive resolution does not necessarily amount to absolute hopelessness. Rather, Borchert may be understood as locating a minimal possibility of living in Beckmann's persistent refusal to stop asking questions.

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## 2. THE CATASTROPHE

„Die Welt, die bisher so bunt und freudig war, wurde zum grauen, leeren und echo- und wertlosen Raum.“ (Kowalski, 2024: 80) However, the catastrophe in *Draußen vor der Tür* is not simply the destruction of buildings and cities. It is the collapse of the structures through which human beings normally understand themselves and their place in the world. What happens, then, when the structures of social order become unstable?

“Ethics in literature is usually connected through its thematic, mimetic and representative function, and not through the literary structural, poetic and performative notion. Taken in this way, literature mirrors life because it simply serves the classic questions of pedagogical illustration: how we should treat other people, what the greatest virtues are, how conflicts arise and how they are resolved [...]. Ethics in that case serves as an interpreter of literary questions” (Denkovska, 2023: 81). Drawing on the experience of the soldier returning “home”, Borchert places Beckmann in a series of liminal spaces: between life and death, the will to survive and the longing for death, past and future, dream and reality, and an intact identity and the disintegration of the self. This liminality is also inscribed in the drama’s topography. Beckmann wanders through the doorways and streets of his hometown, traversing a Hamburg reduced to ruins. He is physically back in the city, yet he remains socially and existentially outside it.

**Beckmann simply does not belong.** He no longer belongs to “his” community because the community he remembers no longer exists; more radically still, even the linguistic markers through which his individuality was once recognized have been eroded. His wife no longer calls him by his first name. Instead, she addresses him simply as “Beckmann”, reducing the person she once knew to a surname and, ultimately, to an object:

„Beckmann – sagte meine Frau zu mir. Einfach nur Beckmann. Und dabei war man drei Jahre weg. Beckmann sagte sie, wie man zu einem Tisch Tisch sagt. Möbelstück Beckmann. Stell es weg, das Möbelstück Beckmann. Siehst du, deswegen habe ich keinen Vornamen mehr.“ (Borchert, 1986, p. 15)

Beckmann’s loss of his first name becomes a particularly striking manifestation of his fractured identity. The loss is not merely emotional or relational; it is also linguistic. The intimate form of address through which he was once recognized as an individual has disappeared. By comparing himself to a piece of furniture, Beckmann describes his own reduction from a person who once possessed a place within a relationship to an object that can simply be moved aside. His statement, „deswegen habe ich keinen Vornamen mehr,” therefore turns the loss of the name into a literal expression of the loss of relational identity.

Beckmann’s exclusion can therefore be understood not merely as an individual experience of loneliness, but as an expression of a broader crisis of social security and belonging. Zygmunt Bauman describes modernity in terms of an increasing “liquefaction” of previously stable structures and an accompanying imbalance between individual freedom and security (Bauman, 2000, p. 170). In Beckmann’s case, this loss of security becomes radically concrete: the structures to which he might have returned - home, marriage, community, and social recognition - no longer provide him with a place.

He has no viable means of re-entering ordinary social life.

His attempt to work at the theatre is rejected by the cabaret director, who insists that „die Leute wollen doch schließlich Kunst genießen, sich erheben, erbauen und keine naßkalten Gespenster sehen” (Borchert, 1986, p. 39). Beckmann is thus not only unable to reclaim his previous personal identity; he is also denied a place within the cultural and social present.

Even his attempt to determine the conditions of his own existence - to take his own life and finally rest - fails. In Borchert’s drama, the Hamburg Landungsbrücken play an important role as a place of despair and failure. The place symbolizes the hopelessness of returning soldiers who are rejected by post-war society and unable to find a new beginning (Milz, 2000).

Landungsbrücken in St. Pauli, Hamburg



Source: Denkovska, taken on July 23, 2026

Beckmann tells the Elbe:

„Pennen. Da oben halte ich das nicht mehr aus. Das mache ich nicht mehr mit. Pennen will ich. Tot sein. Mein ganzes Leben lang tot sein. Und pennen. Endlich in Ruhe pennen. Zehntausend Nächte pennen.“ (Borchert, 1986: 12), a plea that has been brutally refused by the river: “Ich will dir was sagen, ganz leise, ins Ohr, du, komm her: ich scheiß auf deinen Selbstmord!” (Borchert, 1986: 13)

For Beckmann, return does not mean restoration.

### 3. THE EXISTENTIAL LEVEL

What happens to the individual when historical catastrophe confronts them with guilt, responsibility, and the limits of human existence? Beckmann's personal experience becomes more than a sociological symptom. He is not simply homeless; he is confronted with fundamental questions: What am I responsible for? What am I guilty of? Who am I now? And what makes it possible to continue?

According to Jaspers, moral guilt arises from the responsibility that each individual bears for their actions before their own conscience, including their conduct in political and military contexts. As Jaspers explains, „Die moralische Schuld aber besteht bei allen, die dem Gewissen und der Reue Raum geben. Moralisch schuldig sind die Sühnefähigen, die, die wußten oder wissen konnten, und die doch Wege gingen, die sie in der Selbstdurchhellung als ein schuldiges Irren verstehen, - sei es, daß sie sich bequem verschleierten, was geschah, oder daß sie sich betäuben und verführen ließen, oder sich kaufen ließen durch persönliche Vorteile, oder daß sie aus Angst gehorchten“ (Jaspers, 1946: 58). Beckmann is aware of this moral dimension. He does not evade responsibility by claiming the status of a mere victim; instead, he seeks to confront the person who issued the order that led to the deaths of his men. He therefore turns to the Colonel, demanding that responsibility be acknowledged and symbolically returning the eleven dead to him - lives that represent only a small addition to the thousands already weighing upon the Colonel's conscience.

Yet Beckmann's attempt to obtain an acknowledgment of responsibility remains unfulfilled. The Colonel evades responsibility by treating the deaths as ordinary and inevitable occurrences (Borchert, 1986: 24–35). In doing so, he exemplifies a social order in which moral responsibility can be dismissed as commonplace. “These structures are the law of the land – in Lacanian terms, the Big Other. Yet they are fundamentally absurd (Orwellian puppets of power), signifying that the Symbolic order is corrupt or false.” (Dimitrijovska-Jankulovska & Denkovska, 2005-1: 103). At the same time, Beckmann cannot simply transfer his own moral burden to the Colonel: the confrontation exposes precisely the difficulty of assigning responsibility within a society shaped by collective participation, obedience, and moral evasion. The Colonel's refusal therefore leaves Beckmann without the recognition he seeks and prevents any genuine resolution of his moral and existential conflict.

This failure extends beyond the individual encounter. Borchert's subtitle – „Ein Stück, das kein Theater spielen und kein Publikum sehen will“ - points to a broader social unwillingness to confront the consequences of the catastrophe. The problem is therefore not confined to Beckmann or to the Colonel; it concerns a society that resists confronting guilt, responsibility, and suffering. Borchert offers no clear resolution to this dilemma, and consequently, Beckmann is left without an answer. The existential crisis

produced by the catastrophe thus remains unresolved.

### 3. AFTER THE CATASTROPHE

The destruction of the world produces the disorientation of the individual; the disorientation of the individual produces a crisis of identity; and the crisis of identity raises the question of whether life can continue at all.

What can "hope" mean in a world in which the very conditions that make hope possible have themselves been destroyed?

Borchert does not offer hope as a resolution. Instead, he perhaps offers hope as persistence: the refusal to stop searching, questioning, and moving forward even when no satisfactory answer is available. Beckmann continues to search for meaning, to confront others with their responsibility, and to ask questions for which he receives no convincing answers.

#### 3.1. Searching for Meaning

Beckmann lies in the sand, unable to stand because of his stiff leg - a "souvenir" from the war, as he calls it. He had intended to drown himself, unable to bear the limping and hunger any longer. He is equally tormented by the fact that his wife has taken another man, that his home lies in ruins, and that his one-year-old son is buried beneath the rubble. He tells the Other about his dream: the Elbe refused to accept his life and spat him back out. He is still freezing, just as he was in Russia, and has reached the point where he feels he has had enough of life.

The Other disappears when a girl appears. She has heard voices and asks who is lying there by the water. Beckmann responds sarcastically, describing himself as a "dark heap" between the water and the sand. The girl is relieved to discover that he is still alive; she has seen too many corpses by the water. She asks him to stand up, but Beckmann cannot: his kneecap was shattered in Russia. The girl takes pity on him. Seeing that he is wet and freezing, she calls him a fish, helps him to his feet, and offers to take him home with her, although she admits that she may regret it. She recognizes Beckmann's despair. Slowly, they set off together.

The Other remains behind, reflecting on the strange nature of human beings. One moment, they contemplate death; the next, at the sight of a loving woman, they soften and appear to forget everything. Yet this apparent contradiction is significant. Beckmann does not suddenly overcome his despair; rather, the encounter interrupts his movement toward death. The possibility of human connection, however fragile, creates a temporary opening in a world that had seemed entirely closed to him. His movement with the girl therefore does not constitute a resolution, but it marks the first indication that persistence may itself be a form of hope.

#### 3.2. Confronting Others

Beckmann now seeks to return responsibility to the Colonel so that he can finally sleep again. He reminds him of February 14 in the Russian town of Gorodok. He vividly recalls the moment when the Colonel assigned him responsibility for twenty men and ordered them to scout the area and take prisoners. During the mission, they came under fire. Eleven men died - a loss for which Beckmann feels responsible. Yet the war is now over. The Colonel attempts to downplay the matter, but Beckmann insists on confronting him with responsibility for those deaths and with the grief and longing of the men's families.

Beckmann's confrontation is therefore not merely an attempt to accuse the Colonel. It is an attempt to restore meaning to the deaths that have been reduced to an ordinary consequence of war. By insisting that the Colonel acknowledge the eleven dead, Beckmann refuses the normalization of suffering. His persistence takes the form of an ethical demand: someone must remember, someone must answer, and someone must accept responsibility.

The Colonel, however, refuses to provide such an answer. His dismissal of the deaths demonstrates once again the failure of the social world to acknowledge Beckmann's experience. Nevertheless, Beckmann continues to confront those around him. His persistence therefore does not lead to reconciliation; instead, it becomes a form of resistance against forgetting and indifference.

#### 3.3. Asking Questions and Seeking Answers

Beckmann asks the Colonel how he can sleep and live without screaming, suggesting that eleven additional deaths on his conscience should make little difference to a man who already carries responsibility for so many. The question, however, reaches beyond the Colonel. It expresses Beckmann's own inability to understand how human beings can continue living after catastrophe as though nothing has happened.

He then encounters the "dear" God. Beckmann asks whether it is the people God treats well - or those who fear Him - who call Him "dear." For Beckmann, God is anything but "dear." He accuses Him of having taken his son and asks where He was when Stalingrad and all the other horrors took place. God

claims that no one believes in Him or cares about Him anymore.

As Frankl (1984) points out, "It must be kept in mind, [...] that optimism is not anything to be commanded or ordered. One cannot even force oneself to be optimistic indiscriminately, against all odds, against all hope." Even God's pleas to convince Beckmann that life is worth living fail to satisfy him. Instead, Beckmann responds with further questions:

„Träum ich? Seh ich alles verzerrt durch diese elende Gasmaskenbrille? Sind alles Marionetten? Groteske, karikierte Menschenmarionetten? Hast du den Nachruf gehört, den mein Mörder mir gewidmet hat? Epilog auf einen Anfänger: Auch einer von denen – du, Anderer! Soll ich leben bleiben? Soll ich weiterhumpeln auf der Straße? Neben den anderen?“ (Borchert, 1986: 65) His psychic state between reality and dream "acts like a mirror - reflecting societal hypocrisy, internal trauma, and existential fear." (Dimitrijovska-Jankulovska & Denkovska, 2005-2: 460) He finds no satisfactory answers. Yet he continues to ask.

This persistence is crucial. Beckmann's continued questioning does not demonstrate that he has recovered hope; rather, it suggests that the complete abandonment of hope has not yet occurred. As long as he continues to ask whether life is possible, meaningful, or worth living, the possibility of an answer remains open. Hope therefore appears not as certainty, consolation, or resolution, but as the refusal to stop searching even in the absence of convincing answers.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

In Wolfgang Borchert's *Draußen vor der Tür*, the catastrophe of war is represented not merely as physical destruction, but as the collapse of the social, moral, and existential structures that enable human beings to experience themselves as belonging to a meaningful world. Through Beckmann, Borchert presents the returning soldier as a figure of radical disorientation, fractured identity, and unresolved guilt. Yet the drama's refusal to provide reconciliation does not necessarily amount to absolute hopelessness. Rather, Beckmann's persistent search for recognition, responsibility, and meaning suggests a minimal yet significant form of hope: not hope as consolation, certainty, or resolution, but hope as persistence - the refusal to stop questioning and searching even when no satisfactory answers are available.

Borchert thus leaves Beckmann, and the audience, without a definitive solution to the existential crisis produced by catastrophe. At the same time, the very act of continuing to ask whether life is still possible prevents the drama from closing entirely into despair. In this sense, *Draußen vor der Tür* locates the possibility of hope not in the restoration of the world that has been lost, but in the individual's continued struggle to find meaning within its ruins.

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