Gottfried Benn's Poetry and Loosening the Expressionist Image

Gottfried Benn Şiiri ve Dışavurumcu İmgenin Çözülme Süreci

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Abstract
After studying the prevailing expressionistic attitude in Benn's early poems such as "Nachtcafé," the paper traces the loosening of imagery in Benn's more psychoanalytic and mythological poems. The paper then offers a close reading of "Das sind doch Menschen," a poem from Benn's latest period, which exemplifies a distinct break in his poetics and the emergence of a markedly performative and personal voice. The backdrop of expressionism, his early fascination with mythology and mid-career attempts to achieve a perfect lyric structure continued to have obvious influences on Benn's later writing but this personal and anecdotal period occasions a new balance between poetic image, lyric self, and abstract statement. In addition, the paper also traces Benn's attempts to recover a more agentic lyric self within the larger poetic context of the post-war era, turning to poetic theories advanced by contemporaneous poets such as Ingeborg Bachmann and in Benn's own momentous lecture on poetics, *Probleme der Lyrik.*
Keywords: Gottfried Benn, Expressionism, Poetry, Lyric, Imagery

Öz
Bu makale, Benn'in "Nachtcafe" gibi erken dönem şiirlerindeki dışavurumcu tutumu inceledikten sonra, Benn'in daha psikanalitik ve mitolojik şiirlerinde imgenin gevşemesinin izini sürmektedir. Ardından, Benn'in poetikasında belirgin bir kopuşun ve performatif bir sesin ortaya çıkışının örneğini veren geç dönem şiirlerinden "Das sind doch Menschen"i incelenmektedir. Dışavurumculuk ve mitolojiye olan ilgi Benn'in geç dönem şiirleri üzerinde bariz bir etkiye sahip olmaya devam eder. Fakat daha kişisel olan ve anekdot tarzına yaklaşan bu geç dönem, şiirsel imge, şiir kişisi ve soyut ifade arasında yeni bir denge yakalar. Ayrıca, makale boyunca, şiir dünyasındaki gelişmeler, 2. Dünya Savaşı sonrası dönemin bağlamında ele alınmış ve bu dönemde daha etken bir şiir kişisi yaratma girişimleri değerlendirilmiştir. Bu doğrultuda, Ingeborg Bachmann gibi şairler tarafından ortaya atılan şiir teorileri ve Benn'in *Probleme der Lyrik* başlıklı önemli konuşmasında öne sürülen poetika tartışmaları ele alınmıştır.
Anahtar Kelimeler: Gottfried Benn, Dışavurumculuk, Şiir, Lirik, İmge

This paper studies Gottfried Benn's poetry with particular emphasis on Benn's changing use of imagery in the different phases of his career. In his expressionist period, Benn's images are highly crafted, syntactically dense, and reminiscent of the imagist movement in American poetry. This urge for autonomous imagery is

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continuous with the aesthetic ambitions of various other modernist and avant-garde movements such as expressionism, suprematism, and surrealism. In contrast, poetic images in Benn's later career appear as more organic components of personal or anecdotal narratives. This anecdotal turn in the aftermath of the WWII does not quite abandon the expressionist urge, but rather melts it into more readily subjective spaces of a plainer, personal, autobiographical, and confessional poetic style. In turning towards an increasingly plainer poetic mode, Benn discovers new dialectical possibilities for the expressionist image, rooted in more dynamic interplays between objective and subjective stances.

Lyn Hejinian suggests that "both subjectivity and objectivity are outdated filling stations" (1987: 99). To associate the image-laden, medical, concrete and constructivist aspects of Benn's earlier expressionist style with objectivity and the later plainer and more confessional style with subjectivity might raise eyebrows. Where does one draw the line? The construction and assembly of images - no matter how concrete, scientific, or material – always necessarily rely on subjective intuition. Likewise, the plain and spontaneous articulation of private sentiments is occasioned by certain contextual and structural patterns navigated by the self. So perhaps, rather than committing to a critical vocabulary which aims to trace the objective and subjective aspects of poetic rhetoric, it might be necessary to work with more layered and contextual categories while describing the relationship between poetic utterance and the self, as well as the kinds of rhetorical effect aimed at by poetic utterance which purports to be plain, epigrammatic, and confessional.

For example, while judging the poetic consequences of an abstract assertion, we might focus more on its truthfulness, rather than on its truth. We might focus less on the assertion and more on the conditions of assertability generated by the rest of the poem: its speaking voice, image structure, and dramatic qualities. This kind of transition away from criteria like objectivity and subjectivity would also allow us to trace the journey of expressionist imagery from its earlier to its later phases. While in its early phases, expressionist poets like Benn rely on the montage of highly crafted imagery without the support of abstraction assertion - which would more explicitly delineate ideational synthesis and the ideational extensions of the imagery in the speaker's thought process - they gradually master the art of extending these crafted images, as well as the affective responses prompted by them, into abstract and ideational structures.

As Norman Kemp Smith asserts in his defense of abstraction, "[t]hought is here creative in precisely the same general manner as in the making of physical experiments – the mind waiting upon reality, alert to take notice of its reactions" (1967: 335). Though, in the early twentieth century modernist moment of his career, Benn tasks integrative artistic techniques such as montage to evoke processes of abstraction and mental synthesis, in his later work, he begins to foreground the processes of abstraction and synthesis in plainer vocabulary. Complaining about the "the invasion of Literature by description" and concrete

imagery, Paul Valéry, in 1936, argued that such methods would ultimately reduce poetic expression "to nothing the slightest necessity for concentration on the reader's part, in order *to win him over* with *immediate effects*, rhetorical shock tactics" (1960: 76). While persistent invitations to spontaneity and sensuous attention provide strong descriptive mechanisms for poetry, in the absence of language displaying their endurance and alterations in the act of thinking, the images ironically end up losing precisely that particularity which the speaker might have tried to award to it in the first place.

In Benn's early poetry, three features supplement the dominance of the visual mode and suggest a latent propensity to break out of the conventions of early expressionism: a dramatic poetic self, musicality, and the erotic. These forces continuously disturb the seemingly objective and concrete surfaces of Benn's early poems and in the later stages of his career, they become more central to his poetry. The supplementation of the visual is not a complete surprise given the highly moralistic or critical attitude which characterizes most of Benn's as well as the expressionist artists' output. Typically, in expressionist works, visual cues dominating a certain atmosphere are foregrounded to demonstrate the moral or psychological dynamics undergirding a social setting or formation. In that sense, expressionist works often inhabit this uncomfortable duality between a commitment to visuality and an expressive urge which depicts the affects and sensations that emerge from such visual stimuli.

In *Expressionism,* Hermann Bahr famously tells the story of Western art by emphasizing the increased function of visuality and the impressionist servitude to instances: "He becomes more and more eye; and the eye becomes always more passive, always less active. The eye no longer possesses a will of its own, it abandons itself to the stimulus until it becomes at last completely passive, a mere echo of nature" (1925: 45). Benn was aware of this problem of the observing self turning into a passive recorder of its impressions and of materialistic attitudes, and how these might divest the self of moral agency. As Mark Roche argues, "Benn was a consistent critic of materialism" and increasingly, he felt that "quantitative calculations will not bring orientation" (2002: 34). One central challenge for Benn's career, then, was to find a way of utilizing the accomplishment of impressionist aesthetics to give rise to a more agentic poetic self which characterizes the second, and more favorable outcome, in Hermann Bahr's account, of an aesthetic which privileges visuality. That is to say, rather than "[t]he stimulus becoming sensation; the sensation becomes conscious and inserts itself into our thought" (1925: 38). In this paper, I will be interested in tracing how this second mode – the visual stimuli becoming part of enacting themselves in thought – gradually becomes the more dominant impulse in Benn's poetry.

Before close-reading poems from different stages of Benn's career to demonstrate this process, let me address some of the central issues concerning Benn's understanding of the lyric and his dramatization of the poetic self. Benn's early

medical poems in the *Morgue* sequence, often relying on the montage of scientistic and atmospheric description, push the modernist urge for concrete imagery to its limits. Arne Höcker argues that in these poems, or in Benn's "laboratory of words," "next to the microscope and under the condition of the typewriter, Benn observes how context is formed out of single elements" (2013: 469). Likewise, Edgar Lohner describes "the violent, sordid constrictions of Benn's earlier poetry" involving a "hypnotic bondage to medical detail" (1953: 52), and Andreas Anglet characterizes Benn's earlier portrayals of the sordid urban conditions in Berlin as a kind of "x-ray view of the Berlin night café society" (2007: 221).

However, in Benn's early work and the critical accounts that try to characterize his objective and medical descriptive language, there is an excess which indicates a surplus to the objective vocabulary. For example, in Lohner's account, though in these early poems "made out of words," Benn creates a sense of "objective reality," there is also clearly the shadow of a spiritual world, "*la condition humaine.*" (1953: 52) Anglet is more explicit: He divides the poem "Nachtcafé I" into two sections, first involving the "presentation of the coffeehouse scene" and the second "more personal coda" which is obviated by the "strong satirical strain" behind the poetic voice, the sense of an observer, not only observing, but judging and "measuring" the manifestations of the "ideological tradition" of the present historical moment" (2007: 218, 221).

In *The Poetry of Gottfried Benn,* Martin Travers also offers a powerful account of this flexible duality in Benn's early work: Travers singles out "Nachtcafé" as a poem which especially announces a suggestive relaxation in Benn's commitment to a medical and scientific vision. Though he describes it as "a social study in miniature, carried out with clinical exactitude," he also senses in this poem the movement of the "individual towards a recognizably public sphere, here to engage directly, in an openly satirical way, with the metropolitan culture of late Wilhelmine Germany. And with that movement there comes both the projection of a new lyrical subject, who works both within and against the erotically acerbic idiom of Berlin life" (2007: 42-43). In this paper, I am especially interested in how this "projection" intensifies throughout Benn's poetic career, as the poetic self assumes a more visible and direct presence in the poem and the constructivist image structure becomes a more organic part of an affectively responsive voice, speaking, judging, measuring, and being moved by the contents of its surrounding atmosphere.

The problem of recovering the poetic "I" and using a linguistic medium to convey an authentic self was an enabling challenge for many mid-twentieth-century poetic movements across the world, most prominently demonstrated by the confessional attitudes which come to dominate English/American poetry in the postwar era. In German poetry, too, the postwar moment makes it more urgent to recover an agent who can take up moral, social, existential questions in the space of a poem. In her 1959-60 lectures at Goethe University in Frankfurt, for instance, Ingeborg Bachmann describes the sensation of "[w]enn wir aber eines Tages wieder in einer

ungewöhnlichen Situation Ich sagen, kommt uns, mehr als in dem frühen Zustand, an: Beklommenheit, Staunen, Grauen, Zweifel, Unsicherheit" [But when one fine day we again find ourselves saying *I* in an unusual situation, we are more powerfully seized by trepidation, astonishment, horror, doubt, and insecurity than in the earlier setting] (1993: 219).[1] To demonstrate the power of reclaiming the "I" with such affective range, Bachmann uses as an example, an exchange between a mother and a child. The mother catches the child doing something wrong and urges him to own up to his mistake. After multiple rounds of rejecting the charges and maintaining a calm distance to the described event, the child finally explodes:

> 'Ich habe es getan,' und dann gleich wieder und ganz vergnügt über den Satz oder vielmehr [das] entscheidende Wort: 'Ich habe es getan, ich, ich ich!' Es wollte gar nicht mehr aufhören und schrie und kreischte immerzu, bis es sich vor Lachen in den Armen der Frau wand wie ein Epileptiker. (1993: 218)
>
> ["I did it," and immediately thereafter positively reveled in the sentence or rather its decisive word, "I did it, I, I, I!" He simply didn't want to stop saying it and screamed it and shrieked it over and over again until, overcome with laughter, he reeled into the woman's arms like an epileptic.]

For Bachmann, in this scene, the word which tends to become so automatic ("wenn das Wort längst eine Selbstverständlichkeit ist") in everyday communication – "I" - suddenly reclaims its significance and unlocks an entire range of affective responses (1993: 218).

Bachmann was not alone in making the case for a postwar return to the poetry of the "I" where the self is now available – in a challenging way- with an even more pronounced intensity. Benn also, in *Probleme der Lyrik,* his famous 1951 lecture at the University of Marburg, offers a staunch defense of a poetry that is founded upon the unmistakable presence of an enduring self. At the beginning of his lecture, he sets out the problem for modern poetry as involving two poles, or "zwei Objekte": "unbelebte Natur," the inanimate nature, and the Author: "Also ein Gedicht mit Trennung und Gegenüberstellung von angedichtetem Gegenstand und dichtendem Ich, von äußerer Staffage und innerem Bezug" ["That is, a poem with the separation and juxtaposition of the imputed object and the poetic I, of external accessories and internal reference"] (1954: 15). Later, Benn contends with certain modern and modernist conceptions of poetic speech which emphasize the linguistic construction as its main actor. For example, he refers to Eliot's theories of impersonality or to Mallarmé's famous declaration about how poetry is written with words rather than with feelings. Though a champion of autonomous poetic form, Benn disagrees with this constructivist emphasis and emphasizes instead the centrality of the self in providing the necessary endurance and resilience to poetic voice.

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[1] The translations provided here of Ingeborg Bachmann's lecture are by Douglas Robertson. See Works Cited for full citation.

> Ich würde sagen, daß hinter jedem Gedicht, ja immer wieder unübersehbar der Autor steht, sein Wesen, sein Sein, seine innere Lage, auch die Gegenstände treten ja nur im Gedicht hervor, weil sie vorher *seine* Gegenstände waren… Im Grunde also meine ich, es gibt keinen anderen Gegenstand für die Lyrik als den Lyriker selbst. (1954: 23-24)
>
> [I would say that behind every poem stands the author, unmistakably and always: His being, his existence, his inner situation. The objects only emerge in the poem because they were his objects before. Basically, then, there is no other subject for lyric poetry but the lyric poet himself.]

A systematic study of the different stages of Benn's career demonstrates the formation of this powerful lyric self, first latent in his early work as a set of attitudes which undergird the method behind his noticing and montaging of certain stimuli, and later, as a more active agent able to integrate these stimuli into thought, abstract statement, and plain response.

As a result, Benn's later poetry foregrounds a traditional impulse which has nourished the dramatic aspects of the lyric voice for ages. This impulse emphasizes – to use Ludwig Wittgenstein's useful distinctions - the 'truthfulness' rather than the 'truth' of a statement. In other words, in a poem, we judge an epigrammatic or plain statement, or a moment of abstraction, by testing their truthfulness in relation to the self which remains continuously emergent in its images and descriptions. If Benn's earlier poetry prompts us to ask how the poet looks or sees, in his later work, we find ourselves asking whether what he sees or enlists into observation is commensurate with the speaker's more moral or abstract assertions. According to Saul Kripke, "Wittgenstein proposes a picture of language based, not on *truth conditions*, but on *assertability conditions* or *justification conditions*: under what circumstances are we allowed to make a given assertion?" (1982: 74). In fact, this question more generally encapsulates the fate and function of the epigrammatic statement in modern poetry. While the event of modernism – in its emphasis on objectivity, concrete arrangement, and montage - makes it difficult for the modern poetic taste to accommodate abstract assertions or poems built entirely of moralizing abstractions, it also awakens modern poetry to the necessity of reclaiming a poetic self which can dramatically supplement its sensuous existence with a living voice.

The enactment of a living voice often requires the use of plainer and more spontaneous rhetoric. Across Benn's career, we can observe the gradual relaxation of the poetic voice to allow more colloquial and quotidian instances of language, such as in the very title of "Das sind doch Menschen" [But They Are Human]. But even then, the composition of the rhetoric remains hybrid, presenting dynamic exchanges between plain assertion and intricate visual sensuous stimuli, obvious remnants of his early expressionist phase. This hybrid rhetoric is also foreshadowed in Benn's earliest works, as I will show in my close-readings, not only in his oscillation between traditional forms and free verse, but also in his use and

absorption of disparate linguistic registers: Benn remains a champion of poetic autonomy and ritualistic musicality while he also challenges prosody and the musical autonomy of his works by including phrases, words of varying lengths, and public discourse. For example, Martin Travers argues that the number "824" in "Nachtcafe" "is easily appropriated by the eye but not by the reading voice, which is forced to choose between two modes of articulation. From the very first word of the poem, it is clear that the details of this world will resist integration into any familiar pattern of meaning." (2007: 44). In other cases, however, the musical impulse takes over and we become aware that the poet's selections of certain visual cues are motivated by a desire to "flee from the clearly-contoured image into a musicality" (Hannum, 1963: 277).

From the outset, then, Benn's poetry tries to maintain two impulses at a balance: First, a desire for formal lyric patterning, rhythmic insularity, or what Gerhard Loose calls his "passionate, indeed obsessive, devotion to form" (1962: 349). This devotion often leads Benn, as Hans Egon Holthusen asserts, to the management of the "artfully fashioned stanza with alternating rhymes and gentle iambic cadences in which the solitary lyrical 'I' carries on its melancholy soliloquies" (1956: 264). Second, it is the more public and spontaneous voice which allows itself colloquialisms, offhand remarks, and utterances, and these often threaten the musical or rhythmic insularity of the lyric poem. It is important to recognize these two impulses because they set the stage for Benn's gradual easing out of the constructivist modes of expressionist rhetoric, and into the more confessional registers of his later works. As Benn will reveal in his lecture, *Probleme der Lyrik,* this tension holds a central stage in his poetic philosophy. He talks about the everyday disenchantment of language: in business meetings, material transactions:

> "Gespräche, Diskussionen – es ist alles nur Sesselgemurmel, nichtswürdiges Vorwölben privater Reizzustände, in der Tiefe, ist ruhelos das Andere, das uns machte, das wir aber nicht sehen. Die ganze Menschheit zehrt von einigen Selbstbegegnungen, aber wer begegnet sich selbst? Nur wenige and dann allein. (1954: 44)
>
> [Conversations, discussions… it's all just armchair-mumbling, worthless exchanging of private irritations, and in the depths lies that restless other which has made us, but which we don't see. All of humanity thrives on some self-encounters, but who truly encounters themselves? Just a few and then alone.]

Benn associates the realization of poetic aspects of language with the act of withdrawing into one's solitude. Yet, his account is also very clear in performing this withdrawal from out of the public sphere, from out of everyday rhetoric. In his poetry, too, the extension of the self into public realms and away from them, into solitude, is very much a part of the poetic act. From the very beginning of his career, poetry for Benn is not simply the realization of solitary intensity or of language refined in solitude. The full realization of poetic assertion, the achievement of

enchantment through language in the modern era, might still demand internal speech and solitude, but it surely also demands the representation of this withdrawal into solitude, those public occasions or demands which prompt a need for withdrawal. As Travers describes, there is a part of Benn which is committed to "self-positioning within a broader and more critically focused socio-cultural context" (2007: 41), and yet another part of him which seeks aesthetic transcendence through lyric poetry and maintains "the conviction that art alone can act as a vehicle of worldly transcendence" (2007: 44).

Benn's Expressionist Imagery

One of Gottfried Benn's early, expressionist poems, "Nachtcafé" was published in 1912 after a number of medical/dissection poems. In this poem, the speaker attempts to assemble a social scene, while the demand for sociability produces an exceedingly relational language and individual perceptions blend into flexible syntactical relationships. In other words, the "heightened sensuality" (Travers, 2007: 44) in this assembled scene ushers a certain presence, of atmospheric involvement in the setting of the café, while the paratactic assortment of its images emphasizes the linguistic operation behind the poem, as words and referents struggle to find attachments that will ascribe them sensual or contextual significance. This leads Martin Travers to describe the poem as being simultaneously "both of this culture and yet apart from it" (2007: 44).

> 824: Der Frauen Liebe und Leben.
> Das Cello trinkt rasch mal. Die Flöte
> rülpst tief drei Takte lang: das schöne Abendbrot.
> Die Trommel liest den Kriminalroman zu Ende.
> Grüne Zähne, Pickel im Gesicht
> winkt einer Lidrandentzündung (Benn 1966: 18)
>
> [824: The Love and Life of Women.
> The cello has a quick drink. The flute
> belches throughout three beats: his tasty evening snack.
> The drum reads on to the end of the thriller.
>
> Green teeth, pimples on his face,
> waves to conjunctivitis.][2]

The very first figure in the poem, a number, announces one of the poem's primary ambitions: To unsettle the relationship between function and articulation. The number 824 does not look threatening as a numerical figure, but once it is uttered, it destabilizes the form by making the syllable count ambiguous. How to say it?

[2] The translations of Nachtcafé provided here are by Michael Hamburger. Hamburger's full translation of the poem is included in *Primal Vision: Selected Writings*, ed. E.B. Ashton, New Directions, 1971, pp. 219.

Acht, zwei, vier, or simply achthundertvierundzwanzig? And what is this number anyway? Is it the street number of the café? Is the speaker a habitué who refers to the 'usual' place by its number? Or it might simply be the name of the café. The problem of articulation is already coupled with the absence of an apparent function. The poet reproduces the chance nature of encounters at the café through his language so that the reader can hope for some elucidation through testing possible connections between various perceptions.

Travers explains that the number "refers to a legal clause defining the status of women in extramarital relationships, whose imputed promiscuity the lyrical subject juxtaposes to the idealized love described in Schumann's song-cycle "*Frauenliebe und -Leben*" (2007: 43). In the context of this expressionistic assemblage, however, the number itself reinforces a hermeneutic promiscuity, provoking questions about the nature of poetic language: Is poetry motivated by reference, what a number(s) refers to? Is it motivated by the struggle of different linguistic units to attain a certain visual or musical coherence? Is it motivated by alienation – by the degree to which public utterance or social functions of language become defamiliarized and unlock new possibilities for language?

The rest of the first stanza follows a surrealistic bent, a fluidity in sense perception and bewildering sets of associations between disparate observations. The atmosphere denies the gaze an extended contemplation; the eyeball travels swiftly from one entity to another. Yet, despite the ceaseless quickening of attention, the poet manages to create a sense of intimacy and atmosphere filled with erotic tension between the men and the women in the café. As Andreas Anglet argues, "[t]he night café is the modern manifestation of the primeval horde's cave. Like in Freud's psychoanalytical archeology, in Benn's poems under the day's surface of the urban social life, there reigns an anarchic realm of sexual appetites and bodily decay" (2007: 22).

The most striking aspects of "Nachtcafe" are the superficial anatomical details that create a powerful sense of presence. The use of anatomical and bodily details is very typical of Benn's early poems. Here, however the descriptions are not, as in other cases, about the metaphorical permeability of the human body. That is, the poet is not dissecting in order to find even in the most grotesque anatomical features, a metaphorical depth. Instead, the 'symptoms' of particular diseases are tested for their potential to reveal something more than just the 'individual' condition. How possible is it for individual maladies to capture the dynamics of sociability among the patrons of the café? To test this, Benn points at things and names them. Naming has always been one of the most prized tasks for a lyric poet because nouns insist on maintaining a connection with the actual world, while other figures of speech elaborate the manner of subjective separation or in Adorno's vocabulary, individuation.

For the lyric, the nature of this connection and/or separation is often the most important question. Richard Wilbur talks about the "two impulses of poetry": "the

impulse to name the world, and the impulse to clarify and embody the self" (2000: 133). In his early verse, Benn turns towards the former impulse, so much so that his paratactic assortments turn into a mode of separation from the world. Benn's paratactic cataloguing of the symptoms of reality calls attention to the material aspects of language, to language itself as a medium. Benn alerts us to how the very structure of language - its sounds and everyday combinations - is always already mediated.

Benn conveys this sense of mediation, more specifically, through self-conscious transitions between shorter and longer words and by fixating perception on compound nouns. In the second stanza, the first line only offers a catalogue of symptoms. The subsequent line, however, adds a theatrical element. All the symptoms are "waving" — to what? To another symptom, to *Lidrandentzündung*. The people in the first line (patrons?) are waving to a person with conjunctivitis (the waiter?). Yet the poem hijacks our attention and moves it away from the action, towards the overt sensuality of its description. An illusion of physicality is awarded to the protracted word *Lidrandentzündung* which clearly stands out and imposes a certain primacy on perception. It controls the scene. It is hard not to visualize blood and the color red while articulating this word and coming to terms with its indifference to prosody. As Travers also explains, this word, along with other "drawn-out medical terms… frustrate[s] attempts at scansion" (2007: 43). Blood-shot eyes, bloody veins, exhaustion, dryness. The structure of attention imbues the word with the feeling of necessity, the red spills out into the poem and the motif of Lidrandentzündung keeps returning: "Zwei Augen brüllen auf: / Spritzt nicht das Blut von Chopin in den Saal" [A pair of eyes roars out: / Don't splash the blood of Chopin round the place] (Benn 1966: 18). All this investment in sensuous imagery explains the sense of suppression, of uncomfortable restraint that informs the social relations at the café. As we read, we experience the associative threads of imagery, we find ourselves – not following a central narrative – but measuring and validating the sensuous achievements of language.

Benn continued experiments with this expressionist and associative modes. There are some outstanding examples where his images offer a kind of psychoanalytic map of subjectivity. The poem "Mutter" [Mother] from 1913, for example, reads like a roadmap or riddle in that it allows the poet to collect his recurrent images - forehead, wound, blood - and to hint at an underlying psychoanalytical structure for his other poems. Here thinking does not gravitate towards images; rather, images gravitate towards thinking while simultaneously refusing to assimilate into the realm of detached or abstract ideation.

Ich trage dich wie eine Wunde
auf meiner Stirn, die sich nicht schließt.
Sie schmerzt nicht immer. Und es fließt
das Herz sich nicht draus tot.
Nur manchmal plötzlich bin ich blind und spüre

Blut im Munde. (Benn 1966: 24)

[I bear you like a wound
upon my brow that will not close.
The pain sometimes abates, and
my heart flows from it still alive.
Only now and then I suddenly become blind,
and feel blood in my mouth.][3]

The first line introduces the main metaphor. The speaker carries the mother *like* a wound on his forehead, yet the relative clause in the second line immediately reverses the equation: The rhetorical weight falls on the wound and not on the lyric I. The "I" disappears in the middle section, where the image of the wound necessitates further inflections. It is tempting, therefore, to liken the speaker's language to the wound because the speaker cannot seem to close it altogether. The scab keeps cracking and bleeding. The same happens to the speaker's language: by the fourth line, we realize that he has been dressing it with false assurance. "Und es fließt / das Herz sich nicht draus tot." On the surface, this line reads like a consolation: Nevertheless, life goes on, my heart keeps beating, I'll survive. I'll make it. Yet, this statement also reveals a hidden anxiety. The fact that a wound can entertain such an irrational fear - that his blood might run out - is telling. It provides insight into the processes of deflection that the speaker practices to ward off threatening thoughts. The loss of his mother creates such a fathomless absence that the concept of life gets continuously unsettled by the presence of death. Death is omnipresent, Benn seems to be saying, for someone who has lost a mother.

The continuous suppression of death anxiety, of the fear that life will not cohere together and be sucked up into a totalizing absence is what initiates the metaphorical drive in the first place. Metaphors are tragic because their very conception is marked by an awareness of separation, of connecting two otherwise unrelated phenomena. The only way for the speaker to overcome this tragedy is to grant a degree of autonomy to his images so that they can organize our attention without continuously pointing towards their rhetorical function. In *Aesthetic Theory,* Adorno argues that "… symbols or metaphors in modern art make themselves progressively independent of their symbolic function and thereby contribute to the constitution of a realm that is antithetical to the empirical world and its meanings. Art absorbs symbols in such a fashion that they are no longer symbolic" (2002: 95). The search for autonomy thus requires that the poet cut the umbilical cord between his metaphor and its metaphoricity, its rhetorical purchase. This may explain the spillage in the penultimate line which is marked by a spontaneity, a *Plötzlichkeit* that differs from the piecemeal temporality in the rest

[3] This translation of "Mutter" is from Martin Travers, *The Hour That Breaks: Gottfried Benn: A Biography.* Peter Lang, 2015, pp. 24-25.

of the poem, a suddenness which announces an insight but also disrupts the operative mechanism of the earlier metaphor How do we explain the movement from the forehead to the eyes and then the mouth? Are we to imagine blood flowing down his face? Or is the speaker referring to the bloody, metallic taste in the mouth that brings death almost so close that it cannot be suppressed anymore, as in the previous lines? But there is an apparent discrepancy between the ephemerality of suddenness (by which the lyric I resurfaces) and the extraordinary nearness of tragedy in the final lines. My aim so far has been to outline the achievements of an expressionist aesthetic in the early phases of Gottfried Benn's poetry.

In "Mutter," then, two levels of detachment are required: First is the overt turning away from reality by way of metaphor and second is the metaphor's liberation from rhetoricity which demands that the reader dwell on the relationality between the images which constitute the metaphor, to treat them as things of perception rather than simply of ideation. The project of granting images autonomy and tasking readerly judgement with discovering their associative relationality gives rise to a degree of interpretive looseness. While it grants readers an interpretive freedom to determine the prevailing modes of visual relationality in the poem without any hierarchy of perception, it also risks depleting the "Ich" – the opening word of the poem – from a meaningful agency.

This issue relates more generally to the privileging of visual imagery as part both of expressionist and modernist aesthetics. In his mid-century lectures, *The Philosophy of Rhetoric,* I. A. Richards describes this issue by referring to the privileging of visual vocabulary in aesthetic assessment.

> The blunder with the word *see* may seem too crude to be likely. But the patient toil of scores of teachers is going every day, in courses about the appreciation of poetry, into the effort to make children (and adults) visualize where visualization is a mere distraction and of no service… Words are the meeting points at which regions of experience which can never combine in sensation or intuition, come together. They are the occasion and the means of that growth which is the mind's endless endeavour to order itself. That is why we have language. It is no mere signaling system. (1946: 131)

According to Richards, the excessive emphasis on visuality – in both modern art and aesthetic criticism – eclipses the ordering and intellectualizing capabilities of language. The illusion of autonomy granted to each sensuous image obscures the work of plain and abstract ideation that language also undertakes to process of visual information. As Richards argues, "[b]ut if we say 'a realizing sense,' we must remember that this is not any 'sense' necessarily, such as sense-perception gives, but may be a feeling or a thought" (1946: 130). In a similar vein, Lionel Trilling raises questions about how indirection and symbolism are being adopted as the modus operandi for a modern poetics, "I do not doubt that the language of poetry is very largely that of indirection and symbolism. But it is not only that. Poetry is closer to rhetoric than we today are willing to admit; syntax plays a greater part in

it than our current theory grants, and syntax connects poetry with rational thought" (1953: 281). Both Richards and Trilling suggest a conception of poetic language as made up of a more balanced combination of sensuous and ideational components.

In short, Benn's early expressionist poems were able to develop sensuous intensities through a largely impersonal and autonomous language. A poetic language held together by the sensuous association of its images demands that the reader work through its parts to decipher possible relations between competing claims for autonomy. But in the absence of a mediating lyric voice, which performs cycles of relaxed and watchful attention, the images lose their purposiveness. By striving towards differentiation and authenticity, every image comes already imbued with a purpose. This is the most important reason why language in modernist poetry is often studied as an event in itself. When instances of language, which are trying to achieve distinct forms of sensuality, are networked into relationships, a deliberate obscurity develops. Beryl F. Schlossman argues that "language as 'event' transfixes what it is supposed to be saying: the intrusion of opacity into the domain ascribed to transparence or translucence produces new patterns of revelation" (1991: 238). The promise of such revelations and the resultant hermeneutic struggle produces an illusion of knowledge. Alain Badiou argues that "the event reveals the void of the situation. This is because it shows that what there is now was previously devoid of truth" (2005: 54). When language purports to be an event, it mystifies even its most mundane daily functions and turns content into an illusory site for the excavation of truth. Content appears authentic, as if it were able to escape mediation, and the form becomes secondary, thereby failing to unsettle constructivist ambitions of objectivity.

Benn's Later Style

Benn's later style holds readerly validations to second-order investigations by placing them into more clearly articulated subjective positions and performative contexts. It dramatizes the image-oriented modernist poetics. In so doing, it achieves two very important things: First, it counterbalances the intensity of the modernist mode of perception with something more random, true-to-life, and spontaneous, literally performing the artworks' "urge, as if in need of a breath of fresh air, to step outside of" itself (Adorno 2002: 63). Second, it holds readerly validations to second-order investigations by placing them into more clearly articulated subjective positions. A dense and stylized image exists *for* the reader but within a clearly demarcated subjective experience. This way, the false sense of freedom that seemingly autonomous images might award to the reader is unsettled from its very conception because those images now exist in a dialectic of (in)dependency. This poetics would not have been possible without the modernist insistence on autonomy. Without it, we could still be asking whether it is possible for images to resist (symbolic) commodification and assimilation into the larger meaning. Modernism managed to make this line of inquiry redundant by preempting our ability to cognize images and by ascribing a decisive tentativeness

to the clarity of poetic perception at any given time. Benn's later style reinserts these dense images into performative structure. It carries images *within* personal and anecdotal structures, inviting an assessment of both their individual intensities and their ability to elucidate the affective mechanisms which empower subjective agency (i.e., how specific states of being, modes of perception, spatial and temporal affinities heighten the awareness of an individual consciousness and bring about various actions and commitments).

Gottfried Benn's turn to mythological motifs after his early expressionist period (1912-1915) can be seen as an attempt to make up for the lack of the sense of a whole. In such poems as "Ikarus" (1915) mythology becomes a unifying device that creates a field of interactivity for his otherwise reluctant imagery. Mythology continues to play a central role for Benn's poetics up until 1927. It never truly disappears from his poems but in the mid-30s, he becomes a lyric poet in the more traditional sense of the word. Questions of form and formlessness begin to occupy him more, he develops an impeccable prosody, and makes the desire for naming and representing the world one of his primary subjects. "Astern," considered by many as Benn's towering achievement (1936), was composed during this high-lyric period. Each of these periods reward individual attention but for the purposes of this paper, I shall turn to "Das sind doch Menschen", a poem from Benn's latest period, in which we can observe a distinct break in his poetics, a liberation of sorts that makes space for a distinctly personal and psychologized poetic voice.

The backdrop of expressionism continues to have an obvious influence on Benn's writing but this personal and confessional period occasions a new balance between poetic image, lyric self, and the abstract statement. The poem chronicles the gradual deepening of an individual's concentration in what sounds like an intimate, neighborhood pub, a Kneipe. The first line, "Das sind doch Menschen, denkt man" [But they are human, one thinks], immediately locates the speaker at an ill-humored remove from the rest of the crowd (Benn 1966: 336).[4] Throughout the poem, the speaker seems to be making a conscious effort to sustain a forced optimism in his ability to relate to other individuals. This requires that the speaker see beyond the surface, which, for him, is the economic relations that seem to mediate even the most personal gestures. The challenge is not merely to go beyond the surface but to stay there, to give the imaginary depth a compelling structure so that the speaker can socialize what otherwise feels ego-driven and inward. When the speaker observes the waiter walking to a table to take an order, he is tempted to distance himself from the "invisible" customers due to their hedonisms and possibly tactless consumerism ("das sind doch Zartfühlende, Genüßlinge"; "brennend, verzehrt, wüstendurstig / nach einem Gaumenpfirsichsaft") [but they are sensitive, hedonists in their own way"; "burning, consumed, desert-thirsty / for

[4] The translations provided here of the poem "Das sind doch Menschen" are by Michael Hamburger. Hamburger's full translation of the poem is included in *Gottfried Benn: Prose, Essays, Poems,* ed. Volkmar Sander, Continuum, 1987, pp. 265-266.

a palate peach-juice]. Yet, his thought drags on and the speaker identifies a possible mode of engagement with the crowd while averting his habitual antipathy: "sicher auch mit Empfindungen und Leid" [surely with feelings, too, and sufferings] (1966: 336). The stanza, comprised of one long sentence, allows us to see how the speaker's attention is compartmentalized and what it takes for the speaker to find his way *in* to the scene. The way *out* of his habits of perception and *into* the deeper resonances held in store for him requires that the speaker stop seeing the scene as a singular phenomenon. The sameness he assumes to be driving other people's motivations is in fact the singularity of his perspective. How to break from this hardened perspective is the challenge.

Already in the first stanza, we can see that the speaker is creating a situation. There is no discernible event and the relationships between individuals are only theoretical. What if? What if I were to talk with these people? The openness of the situation allows the speaker to elucidate the affective mechanisms which make distinct emotions and moods discernible. These emotions are not contained in a dense image. Rather, they are socialized. In other words, the speaker does not provide sufficient material for objective engagement (images, observations) to hold either the speaker's or the readers' attention. The table itself remains "unsichtbar" (invisible) and the speaker's engagement with the scene is clearly motivated by his expectations rather than his actual experiences (1966: 336). Hence, the speaker's response to the stimuli around him is not descriptive, or vitalizing. The only adjective in the first stanza is "unsichtbar" and the rest are unambitious, hollow nouns which, despite their intentions, fail to grant the scene an intentionality. This is the most important distinction between an aesthetics based on sensuous imagery and Benn's later poetic style: While the former struggles to vitalize every image with intentionality, the latter examines the *conditions* under which a set of images or observations can rise to the level of intentionality. The former tasks each linguistic utterance with overdue significance, turning the hermeneutic act at times into a self-satisfying endeavor to 'unlock' potentials stored in linguistic acts; whereas, the latter, recognizing the impossibility of such continuous perceptive investment, relaxes the hermeneutic act and allows the reader to trace how attention comes to 'lock' in certain observations and finds in them an aestheticizing compulsion.

The second stanza acts as a transition between a concrete/expressionistic and abstract/confessional modes of attention. The speaker is still committed to a noun-heavy language which catalogues various emotions without finding their objective correlative and denies the listener sensuous engagement. Despite the speaker's assertion of a kinship in the spectrum of his emotions, they are no more than a projection of his inner state. The speaker wants to believe that his disquiet is shared by others and the certainty in his tone (*auch da, wenn auch, zwar*, *auch dort!*) obviates his need to identify with others in an attempt to calm his despair. Yet, despite the continuation of the noun-heavy language, the stanza is also markedly

different in tone. In the first line, the speaker includes a direct address: "So allein bist du nicht" ["You're not all that alone"] (1966: 336). Moving from the more general "denkt man" ("one thinks") in the first stanza to the more specific and concentrated "du" in here introduces a tension between the general and the particular. This tension is consolidated in the speaker's attempt to individuate states of being by inflecting them with other correlated emotions.

> in deinem Wirrwarr, Unruhe, Zittern,
> auch da wird Zweifel sein, Zaudern, Unsicherheit (1966: 336)
>
> [in your tangles, disquiet, trembling,
> in them too there is doubt, hesitation, uncertainty]

The stanza begins by asserting a kinship in *Alleinsein* [solitude], which prompts specification – it is a specific experience of solitude, one that is defined by confusion, disquiet and trembling. These nouns - these chunks of emotions – do not prove sufficient and the speaker continues in his attempt to identify *degrees* in them. "Auch da wird…" ["in them too"]. These states, too, demand further specifications. In them too, there will be doubt, wavering and uncertainty. The speaker's compulsive search for *shades* of emotions here diverts his attention from developing kinship with other people and turns him instead to developing kinship between various states of being. This second stanza stays in the abstract mode, never developing sensuous affiliations. Still, it manages to thicken the tension between the general and the particular, as well as to intensify the anticipation for sensuous images.

In the third stanza, the eventual manifestation of a sensuous image, grants the poem a confessional quality. The image is not at the speaker's disposal. It refuses to come readily and demands a tightening of attention. Only after the speaker manages to turn to the actual source of his unease does the image finally emerge. The stanza begins by disqualifying the exercise performed in the second stanza to specify states of being. "Unendlich ist der Gram der Herzen / und all gemein" [Endless the heart's grief is / and general] (1966: 336). Elaborate descriptions of the degrees of one's disquiet cannot award the speaker the ability to grant purposiveness to his images. In the next line, the speaker finally turns away from the language of despair in favor of the more pressing subject: Desire. What might allow the speaker to identify with other people is not dwelling on negative emotion, but a desire *for* another which get its richness from existential disquietude.

At last, the speaker's wandering and contemplative attention yields an image which is also the poem's most articulate moment. This image not only discloses the speaker's most private yearnings but also reveals the incompatibility of these yearnings with the larger public. This is in stark contrast to Benn's early expressionist style where the city is often eager to accept and be morphed by projections of erotic desire. Here, erotic image is much more contained and cannot initiate a wholesale phenomenological revolution. In fact, the speaker returns to

the scene, to the 'situation' at hand after crafting his image. In some ways, then, this sensuous image is 'bracketed', calling attention to the subjective states which bring the world to this temporary, lyrical order:

> brennend, verzehrt, wüstendurstig
> nach einem Gaumenpfirsichsaft
> aus fernem Mund,
> untergehend, ertrinkend
> in Unvereinbarkeit der Seelen – (1966: 336)
>
> [burning, consumed, desert-thirsty
> for a palate peach-juice
> from a distant mouth,
> going down, drowning
> in the separateness of souls –]

The most important grammatical shift here is marked by the insistent use of present participles, turning action verbs into adverbial qualifiers of a psychological state. Have these people ever loved, desired in this way, the poem wants to know. However, the description is painfully conscious of its inability to mobilize the very desire it's trying to describe. The image is also separated from any pronoun. Whereas the speaker initiates this image by wondering "aber ob sie je geliebt haben…" [but whether they've ever loved], at the end of the stanza, he abstains from using the possessive pronoun, saying instead, "in Unvereinbarkeit der Seelen" [in the separateness of souls]. The tone which was already depersonalized (sie) is further abstracted from the specific context, stressing the clear difference between the mode of attention necessary to traverse a situation and to construct an expressionist image.

In line with this depersonalization, the speaker retrieves "man," the indefinite pronoun with which he had started the poem. But there is an important difference here. The question in the third stanza (whether these people have loved…) is not completely abandoned. It is taken up by the next stanza through the demonstrative pronoun "das" ("das weiß man nicht") which in turn initiates a labyrinthine description of the waiter – refusing to mark a grammatical separation from the image, and dragging its phenomenological range all the way until the end of the poem.

> das weiß man nicht, kann auch
> den Kellner nicht fragen,
> der an der Registrierkasse
> das neue Helle eindrückt,
> des Bons begierig,
> um einen Durst zu löschen anderer Art,
> doch auch von tiefer. (1966: 337)
>
> [that one cannot know, can't

> ask the waiter either
> who at the till marks up
> the price of a new pale ale,
> greedy for his tip
> so as to quench a thirst of a different
> but also deeper kind.]

The continuous introduction of relative clauses calls attention to the constructedness of the speaker's sympathies. It is hard to tell whether the speaker really sympathizes with the waiter and sees his desire for money as stemming from a similarly intense existential necessity. But what is remarkable about this stanza is that despite the wide range of doubts and suspicions, it manages to employ an impressive variety of grammatical functions which furnish the observation with an aspectual awareness, almost like an expressionist painting which foregrounds its multiple layers and dimensions. Notice also how far we have come from the second stanza, where the speaker was failing to find specific attachments and was resorting instead to a mere cataloging of various emotions: Wirrwarr, Unruhe, Zweifel, Zaudern, Unsicherheit…

Most importantly, this poem highlights the ways in which romantic or sexual desire becomes entangled in economic concerns. If this reader feels a sense of melancholy in the final words of the poem, it is because the final stanza forsakes the sensuous precision of the third in order to emphasize a lack of conviction, a sense of despair in response to the increasing alignment between desire and economic concern. Emblematic of this uncertainty is the pun on the word "löschen," which is, of course, primarily idiomatic: "den Durst löschen", to quench one's thirst. Yet, it also means to extinguish, to erase. Whether the desire articulated in the poem's primary image genuinely carries on and sustains the speaker's attention all the way to the end is questionable. Whereas the dense, synesthetic expressionist imagery immediately suggests a dynamic state of responsiveness, the more narrative and anecdotal sections of the poem loosen this urgency of attention. In doing so, the poem also offers a more truthful account of human perception. Rather than viewing the world in dense image compositions, the eyeball travels around the pub with a changeable rhythm.

At the end of the poem, we judge the poem's truth-telling maneuvers ("das sind doch Menschen") less on their truth but more on their sincerity and truthfulness. Hence, Benn's later poetry, like many other departures from the image-oriented traditions of modernism, foregrounds the *struggle* to formulate a truth and the sincerity of the speaking voice behind that struggle. This assessment is akin to Adorno's emphasis on the truth-content of artworks:

> the 'What is it all about?' – becomes 'Is it true?' – the question of the absolute, to which every artwork responds by wrestling itself free from the discursive form of an answer. (2002: 127)

Expressionist imagery, by design, increases our desire for visuality and concreteness, offering a narrative of poetic attention which comes to depend on imagery that is already charged with meaning. However, it is only in his later periods that we begin to observe what Adorno describes as the artwork "wrestling itself free" from this desire. Benn's later poems repurpose expressionist legacy by absorbing sensuous descriptions into ideational and performative accounts, rather than presenting them as autonomous or concrete presentations of consciousness. Charles Altieri offers a similar assessment of these transformations in artistic expression from a Wittgensteinian perspective:

> This desire aims not at truth, which involves reference, but at truthfulness, by which the person states an identity on clarifying how he or she is modified by the experience and redirected toward other features that might be internally related to this new way of seeing. Then confession is the ultimate clarifying of intentions by a commitment to displaying what in life has mattered most for the self. (Altieri 2016: 70)

Likewise, in his later poems, Benn narrativizes images as part of a thinking consciousness which variously struggles in its pursuit to integrate moments of sensuality into its search for meaning. While some images open channels for a deepening of subjectivity, some images resist this dialectical traffic. In this way, the measuring of the poem's sensuous investments and intensities is not privileged as a solely hermeneutic effort. The poem provides its own models for the activation and failure of sensory participation with a speaker who actively weighs and measures the virtue of its descriptive investments.

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