

CHRIST AS THE LOST I:
MULTIPLE INTERPRETATIONS OF GOTTFRIED BENN'S
POEM "VERLORENES ICH"

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—For Hugo Bekker

Verlorenes Ich

Verlorenes Ich, zersprengt von Stratosphären,
Opfer des Ion—: Gamma-Strahlen-Lamm—
Teilchen und Feld—: Unendlichkeitschimären
auf deinem grauen Stein von Notre-Dame.

Die Tage gehn dir ohne Nacht und Morgen,
die Jahre halten ohne Schnee und Frucht
bedrohend das Unendliche verborgen—
die Welt als Flucht.

Wo endest du, wo lagerst du, wo breiten
sich deine Sphären an—Verlust, Gewinn—:
ein Spiel von Bestien: Ewigkeiten,
an ihren Gittern fliehst du hin.

Der Bestienblick: die Sterne als Kaldaunen,
der Dschungeltod als Seins- und Schöpfungsgrund,
Mensch, Völkerschlachten, Katalaunen
hinab den Bestienschlund.

Die Welt zerdacht. Und Raum und Zeiten

und was die Menschheit wob und wog,
Funktion nur von Unendlichkeiten—
die Mythe log.

Woher, wohin—nicht Nacht, nicht Morgen,
kein Evoë, kein Requiem,
du möchtest dir ein Stichwort borgen—
allein bei wem?

Ach, als sich alle einer Mitte neigten
und auch die Denker nur den Gott gedacht,
sie sich den Hirten und dem Lamm verzweigten,
wenn aus dem Kelch das Blut sie rein gemacht,

und alle rannen aus der einen Wunde,
brachen das Brot, das jeglicher genoß—
o ferne zwingende erfüllte Stunde,
die einst auch das verlorne Ich umschloß. (1.205-6)

[Lost I

Lost I, blasted apart by stratospheres,
victim of ion—: gamma-ray-lamb—
particle and field—: chimeras of infinity
on your grey stone of Notre-Dame.

The days pass for you without night and morning,
the years continue without snow and fruit
menacingly the infinite concealed—
the world as flight.

Where will you end, where will you camp, where
will your spheres extend—loss, gain—:
a game of beasts: eternities,
along whose bars you flee.

The glance of the beast: the stars as tripes,
the jungle death as being and creation's ground,
human being, battles of nations, Catalaunias,
down the maw of the beast.

The world thought to pieces. And space and ages
and what humanity wove and weighed,
merely the function of infinities—
the myth lied.

Where from, where to—not night, not morning,
no evoë, no requiem,

you would like to borrow a cue—
but from whom?

Oh, when all bowed toward a center
and even the thinkers thought only the God,
they branched out to the shepherds and the lamb,
whenever the blood from the chalice made them pure,

and all flowed from out of the one wound,
broke the bread, that each man savored -
o, distant compelling fulfilled hour,
which once enveloped even the lost I.¹

Gottfried Benn's "Verlorenes Ich" [Lost I] (1943) is one of the most celebrated and anthologized of modern German poems. Indeed of all German poems published in the last sixty years, only one other work, Paul Celan's poem on the death camps, "Todesfuge" [Death Fugue] (1945), is more recognizable. Both poems, not surprisingly, seek to interpret the modern world that gave rise to National Socialism, and in an era dominated by secularism both poets, surprisingly, worked very closely with their respective religious heritages. Celan (1920-1970) was born into a German-Jewish family in Bukovina, and his poetry is very much defined by the Jewish experience of the twentieth century, specifically the Holocaust (Celan's parents were deported in 1942 to the German-occupied Ukraine and murdered, while Celan himself survived a Romanian forced-labor camp). Common to Celan and Benn is a rich integration of religious and specifically Biblical motifs, but whereas Celan's poetry is colored by the Judaic heritage and by the fate of the Jews in the twentieth century, Benn's is marked by, among other factors, a continuing fascination with Christianity and a complex relationship to German history.

Benn (1886-1956) was born into a Lutheran minister's home in a small north German village, where both his father and his father's father before him served as Protestant ministers. Benn's mother, also a very religious person, was Calvinist, having come from French Switzerland. At the request of his father and against his own wishes, Benn studied theology and philosophy for a year in Marburg before switching to philology for a year in Berlin and then ultimately medicine at the Kaiser Wilhelm Academy in Berlin. In the same year that Benn completed his medical studies, he gained fame as a poet with the publication of *Morgue and Other Poems* (1912), which integrated shocking images from the world of medicine. Already in these remarkable works, Benn's abandonment of his religious background is evident: his first published poems depict the decay of the

body without any sense of nobility or transcendence, a cold and irreverent challenge to human dignity.

During his life Benn was drawn to various forms of nihilism. For a brief period of one and a half years he was enamored of National Socialism. He gave two infamous radio broadcasts in April and May of 1933 in support of the party.² Benn mistakenly believed that the National Socialists, unlike the left, would free art from political influence or purpose, and he saw in the party a release from stagnation, materialism, and chaos. His embrace was abstract, irrational, and formal. Benn soon recognized his misreading of the Nazi view of art, and he was confronted with the concreteness of Nazi brutality, rejecting the violence evident in the Röhm purge of June 30, 1934. The disillusioned Benn returned to the military (having served already as a physician in World War I), adopting what he described in a letter to F. W. Oelze on November 18, 1934 as "die aristokratische Form der Emigrierung" [the aristocratic form of emigration] (1.39). The Nazi paper, the *Völkischer Beobachter* [*People's Observer*], criticized Benn's works as decadent, and in 1938 Benn was forbidden to publish in Germany.

Benn's answer to the restlessness of the age was the elevation of artistic form. Some of his poetry written during the Third Reich belongs to the so-called inner emigration, which resisted the regime, but in subtle and abstract ways, indirectly criticizing the instrumental and the violent by elevating alternative, often traditional and humanistic, values.³ At the end of World War II Benn was heralded as the greatest of those German poets who survived the war. His poetry was celebrated partly for its intrinsic value and its beauty and partly as an abstract alternative to the postwar trauma. Benn's most famous poem from the 1940's is "Lost I," which represents a significant aesthetic reflection on the dissolution of the post-Christian era.

Despite its elevated position in the canon, "Lost I" has received relatively cursory treatment by critics. It has been interpreted, to be sure, more than a dozen times, but often in the form of a brief paraphrase, without the level of precision or nuance the poem warrants. My interpretation begins with an analysis of the diverse themes evoked in the first six stanzas' critique of the modern era. It then turns to the poem's final two stanzas, which evoke the unity of the Christian era and seem to mark a distinct stylistic and thematic break from the rest of the poem, but whose complexity has heretofore been overlooked. The final section seeks to unravel some of the poem's ambiguities by focusing on its complex reception and inversion of Christianity.



The first six stanzas of "Lost I" form a unity that articulates in multiple ways the crisis of modernity. The remarkable heterogeneity of Benn's images is manifest already in the first stanza, which intertwines classical mythology, Christian religion, modern science, and general allusions to the categories of modernity, such as dissonance and quantity. By offering such a heterogeneous array of images, Benn draws an implicit analogy between art and production. The poem does not grow organically; it is made: "Ein Gedicht entsteht überhaupt sehr selten—ein Gedicht wird gemacht" [A poem very rarely comes into being—a poem is made] (6.10). Writing in the age of technology, Benn aligns himself with the idea of the poet as analogous to a carpenter or a boiler man. He sides not with Plato, who in *Ion* stresses the unconscious evolution of poetry, but with Aristotle, who emphasizes the craft of art. The non-organic, which relates not only to the sphere of production but also to the work itself, is a distinguishing feature of much of Benn's poetry, beginning already with his early poems, such as "Mann und Frau gehn durch die Krebsbaracke" [Man and Woman Walk through the Cancer Ward] (1.16). On a meta-level this heterogeneity formalizes the perception of alienation. Clashing images, without a clear syntactical relation, describe the modern experience of dissonance. The technical vocabulary that in some ways transcends our understanding reinforces the modern self's sense of impotence.

The combination of religion and science, in some cases with single words evoking both spheres, suggests that science has called religion into question, or become itself our modern religion. Notre Dame is gray, which could imply dignity, but seemingly stronger in this context is the association with age and decay. Gray is the color of ashes, thus of mourning (for the religious past) and humility (in relation to the advances of science). "Stein" [stone] sounds almost naive in relation to the modern, scientific vocabulary and so serves to emphasize its pastness. The transformation of religious imagery via its association with gamma rays is multivalent. Does advancing science replace the religious sphere? Are the effects of the loss of religion as severe, if in a different sense, as radiation? Do the dangers of modern science transform the import of "lamb," and thus the meaning of sacrifice? Whatever one's answers, the tension of the two spheres and the movement from religion to science are manifest.

Chimeras are symbolic representations of the devil; one recognizes them in carnival masks or church gargoyles, for example. As Benn would

have known from his religious upbringing and his formal study of theology, the impetus for chimeras is apotropaic: if evil is formed, we can ward it off; by controlling or naming evil, we keep it at bay. Here, however, chimeras may be more than merely symbolic: a chimera is a monster, unnatural and grotesque, and the infinity opened up by modern science evokes these associations. The term "chimeras of infinity" suggests that the infinite cannot be formed or controlled; it is not containable. Infinity, a common theme throughout the first part of the poem, is a name for modernity's loss of orientation and elevation of quantification. Religion is inadequate to the modern concept of infinity.

At the same time, evil is formed, indeed over-formed, in the emerging concept of the atom bomb, to which Benn equally alludes via his references to modern physics. The discovery of nuclear fission by German scientists in late 1938 sparked an extensive research program at the start of World War II on all possible applications. The splitting of uranium was publicly discussed, including not only its economic but also its military implications, in German newspapers as early as 1939, including the *Deutsche Allgemeine Zeitung*, which Benn read (Walker 16). In the year in which the poem was written, 1943, Benn wrote a short essay on physics, in which he comments on the "Katastrophen" [catastrophes] that could follow from the application of this new discovery (4.305). The "gamma-ray-lamb" is more than an idle abstraction.

The reduction of meaning through science is especially evident in stanza five. Modern science destroys our perception of space and time and our attempts at finding meaning. The polysyndeton of this stanza implies the concept of infinity, which is then explicitly evoked. Space and time (or more precisely, ages) and what humanity put together in terms of meaning are called into question as being merely the function of infinities. What humanity has "wob" [woven] and "wog" [weighed] has the status of mere art; the assonance underscores its mere fictionality. Undermined here are all the efforts of humanity—in religion and art (the associations are both Biblical and artistic) as well as in economics and politics (creating and weaving, weighing and judging, with their allusions to items of trade and issues of justice). On the one hand, being and substance may be undercut by the allusion to mere causality, such that the chain of causality, or determinism, undermines dignity. On the other hand, the many contingencies that engender our meanings may reduce the claims of higher significance. The idea that we were created with freedom, dignity, and substance for a higher purpose is unveiled as mere myth. Both of these explanations—determinism and chance—focus on origin. In addition,

modern science, because of its ability to destroy the world, has endangered meaningful space, the memory of earlier ages, and human efforts at dignity; the myth of a higher salvation is undercut by the potential self-destruction of the world via modern science. Here the focus is on our imperiled future. Another interpretation of the phrase "merely the function of infinities" refers neither to the causality or contingencies of the past nor to the possibility of self-destruction but to the sheer openness of the future, the indeterminate range of possibilities, which in a different way calls into question the idea of inevitable movement toward higher meaning. The future, like the infinite, is so open as to give us neither orientation nor guarantees - we could go in any direction, including self-destruction.

The infinite marks both time and space. Benn unveils the modern theme of disenchantment as time passing without change, everything remaining the same.⁴ There is neither night nor morning, neither snow nor fruit. The anaphora that opens the third stanza alludes to our not being at home in the world. The loss of meaningful time in the second stanza is complemented by the erasure of meaningful space. The third and again the sixth stanzas ask the rhetorical question, where in this scenario might we turn? The allusions to the *arche* ("where from") and *telos* ("where to") reinforce the sense of disorientation. We are no longer privy to the mysteries of the nocturnal Dionysian revelries or of the mythical night of Hölderlin's "Brot und Wein" [Bread and Wine], where night is likewise the source of meaning and epiphany (l.285-91). Nor do we have the morning, the idea of a new beginning that is associated with the Easter Resurrection. The origin and telos are without meaning. Absent are the ecstatic cries, the "evoë" linked with the Dionysian votaries and the "requiem" associated with Christian burial and transcendence. The origin of religion (in ancient Greece) and the telos of religion (in the afterlife) are infinitely deferred. The lack of orientation available to us in our "spheres" of life is extended by the association with outer space ("stratospheres"). Likewise, human disorientation ranges spatially from the heights of "stratospheres" downward into "the maw of the beast." With stars for entrails and a maw that swallows human beings and the biggest battles of history, a beast of cosmic proportions menaces the reader with universal disaster.

The poem wavers in interesting ways between a sense of apathy and a sense of fear. The threat of the second stanza ambiguously refers either to the meaningless days and years or to the infinite: the second reading is more likely, unless one imagines, paradoxically, the emptiness of meaning as also threatening. This paradox appears in the third strophe of Benn's

poem "Reisen" [Travel], where emptiness assaults one: "... selbst auf den Fifth Avenueen / fällt Sie die Leere an" [... even on the Fifth Avenues / emptiness attacks you] (1.307). The infinite lies behind the superficially banal. Normally, we speak of flight from the world.⁵ Benn inverts the traditional topos: the world becomes flight when we immerse ourselves in the everyday, the banal, the material in order to banish from our minds the hidden thought of evil, the threat of the infinite, in the form of the potential self-destruction of humanity. We must seek to banish it via denial, for we have already seen that modern evil is either too infinite to be formed or when formed too explosive to be tamed. One can also read infinite, as is implicit in the term, more abstractly: the infinite is threatening precisely because it provides no orientation, no hold. In this sense the ambiguity of "menacingly" overlaps with two references to lack of orientation: a deadened sense of time and an infinite without orientation. We recall that for the ancients the infinite was associated with chaos.

Nonetheless, another meaning of infinite is possible and not to be dismissed out of hand: something of great meaning may be hidden in the infinite—either the threat we repress and so fear in our immersion in the everyday, or the infinite in its meaning as transcendence. The use of "verborgen" [unconcealed], with its allusion to *Unverborgenheit* or truth, in the Greek sense of *aletheia* or unconcealment, may suggest that our immersion in the everyday also veils transcendence, which if nothing else would threaten the routine of our everyday existence.

Capitalism and the emergence of business as a subsphere of life with its autonomous logic ("loss, gain") also contribute to the dissolution of organic meaning.⁶ Benn was a consistent critic of materialism. The autonomous sphere of business and calculation (value as a function of the market) distances us from any sense of organic meaning. We are reminded of Wordsworth's evocation of "getting and spending" in his "The World is Too Much With Us" (270). But the combination has other associations as well: the wins and losses associated with military struggle and the bestial fight for *Lebensraum*; a weighing of the debits and credits associated with modernity, for the individual and for humanity as such; and the problems and achievements of modern science and technology. Indeed, we may even recognize in the connection between science and business something of Arnold Gehlen's insight into their supportive interaction in modernity (11-13). Interestingly all of the above meanings combine in the pessimistic view that however we credit the losses and gains—in war, business, life, or history—quantitative calculations will not bring orientation; they are worth-

less. One can calculate the pluses and minuses into infinity but one still finds no hold, no bearings.

Benn is often interpreted ahistorically; his tendency toward abstraction invites such interpretations. Indeed, one of the paradoxes of Benn's resistance to National Socialism is that it took the form of an evocation of what transcended the movement of history. Beyond the poem's general depiction of modernity, however, "Lost I" is rich with nuanced allusions to his time. Although the image of beasts could refer to a Hobbesian world of self-interest and calculation or to a Nietzschean world of will to power (the blond beast of *On the Genealogy of Morals*, 2.785-88, on which Benn comments pejoratively in his letter to Ina Seidel of September 30, 1934 [*Ausgewählte Briefe*, 61]), it is also an evocation of the bestiality of the National Socialists. "Völkerschlachten" [battles of nations] are not unique to the age, as is clear from the analogous term, the neologism "Katalaunen" [Catalaunias]—an allusion to the battle between the Huns and the Romans in 451 c.e. on the Catalaunian plains, which resulted in an unusually large number of deaths—, yet the concept also refers, specifically, to National Socialist aggression and anti-cosmopolitanism. The repetition via metonymy adds weight to the force of bestiality and points to a lack of evolution and progress over time. A strong and consistent critic of the enlightenment ideal of optimism, Benn found in contemporary history a confirmation of his beliefs.

Many other passages could be read with reference to the immediate situation. The word "zersprengt" [blasted apart], for example, is not only a reference to nuclear fission; it assumes additional meaning in the light of bombs landing in one's midst. The reference to seeking shelter ("where will you camp") has specific resonance in the context of war and imminent defeat. Benn's own apartment in Berlin was bombed during the war, and survival was by no means certain. Even seemingly abstract concepts such as loss, sacrifice, fear, and force have specific historical meaning. Benn and his contemporaries were endangered by the Nazis and the effects of war. The beasts of modernity are also the Nazi perpetrators, an interpretation that is reinforced by Benn's explicitly describing the Germans as "Bestien" [beasts] in his essay *Zum Thema Geschichte* [On the Topic of History], which was composed the same year as "Lost I" (4.292 and 4.295). For Benn, not only the self, but also the cause and the war were lost, the (Nazi) myth had been unveiled as a lie, and the alternatives were few and distant. In the richness of this poem, which is, like much of Benn, primarily oriented toward the transhistorical, these contemporary motifs intermingle.

The poem's many references to bestiality reiterate modernity's distance from transcendence. Transcendence and dignity are consistently absent. The stars, symbolically the highest that we can imagine, are reduced to *Kalldaunen*, the guts of freshly slaughtered animals. Stars have traditionally represented the ideal order, harmony, and stillness of the universe, and in lighting the darkness of the heavens at night, they have symbolized divine guidance. Heine relates a story that reveals the beginning dissolution of the idea of the stars as representing our highest thoughts and most divine aspirations. One star-filled night the young Heine effuses to Hegel about the stars as "den Aufenthalt der Seligen" [the layover of the deceased] [6/1.472]. Hegel cynically mocks the idea of a heaven and of the stars as anything more than "einen leuchtenden Aussatz am Himmel" [a glowing leprosy in the sky] [6/1.472].⁷ Hegel's disparagement of the stars, on which Heine draws and which is expressed in the oral supplements to Hegel's philosophy of nature, seeks to draw a distinction between the legitimate emotional attraction of the stars and the philosophical subservience of nature to humanity: "Man kann die Sterne wegen ihrer Ruhe verehren; an Würde sind sie aber dem konkreten Individuellen nicht gleichzusetzen" [One can venerate the stars because of their stillness; but in terms of dignity they cannot be placed on the same level with the concrete individual] [9.81]. What Benn adds to this disparagement of the stars is a critique of the very sphere Hegel would elevate in contrast to the stars, human and rational ideals. Benn's dissolution of tradition goes beyond the inversions expressed by Hegel and Heine. The poem evokes the infinite, via the stars, as what is originally transcendent but now reduced to the most base of descriptors: "Seins- und Schöpfungsgrund" [being and creation's ground], which is equated with death and the jungle, and finally the abyss or maw toward which the stanza descends.

The poem has several centers of attention. The most significant, however, are those which lie in the very middle of the poem, lines 16 and 17 of 32 lines: "hinab den Bestienschlund" [down the maw of the beast] and "Die Welt zerdacht" [The world thought to pieces]. The two great errors of the modern world are here conveyed: the loss of dignity via bestial behavior, and merely functional thought. Both undermine higher meaning. The rush toward bestiality is reinforced, paradoxically, by the lack of verbs. There is no time in this modern, chaotic world to form complete sentences, and this lack of completion reinforces the sense of fragmentation. Also conveying this general sense of disarray is the parataxis and, related, the high number of dashes, colons, and rhetorical questions, here and throughout the poem. The modern world is a cerebral world that asks

questions, moves forward in knowledge, and destroys the simplicity and innocence of life. Benn expresses the idea that the world has been thought to pieces without using the copula, thereby supporting the theme of a loss of connection. The reason of the modern world and of modern science elevates function over substance, an adjustment that is already evoked in the language of "particle and field."⁸

The final lines of stanzas two through five manifest an increasing sense of limits: the world as escape, the bars before eternity, and finally the swallowing up of humanity into the mouth of the beast. Paradoxically in an age in which the infinite is prominent, humanity experiences only limits. The unsuccessful desire to flee is thus a characteristic theme of this part of the poem. We seek to flee into the past, but this is not possible. Like Rilke's panther in the poem of that name (to which Benn's poem alludes with the phrase "an ihren Gittern" [along whose bars]), we are removed from that wider sphere. The allusion to Rilke is complex, for it suggests that we—unlike the panther—can move about within our cage, and yet there is still no orientation, still a limit: "along whose bars you flee." The image of humanity as enclosed within a cage is Platonic (e.g., *Cratylus* 400c), and the association is reinforced by the view that the world is flight from something more substantial. The idea that the past is beyond us implies, however, that the Platonic answer is no longer available to modern humanity. The word "Gitter" also evokes the lattice in the convent or cloister door through which the nun or monk can communicate with the worldly visitor who comes knocking at the door; seeking but not finding shelter appears related to the erasure of the less scientific concept of infinity that animated the earlier era of monastic life and which seems as distant to us today as does the Platonic universe.⁹ The scientific mentality plays a major role in this development, which is reinforced by the fact that the word "Gitter" also has meaning within chemistry, as the grid-like ordering of molecules in structures such as crystal. The rationalization of modernity, Max Weber's "stahlhartes Gehäuse" [iron cage], may also be echoed in this language of enclosure (*Die protestantische Ethik* 188).

The reader casts about for orientation, but there is no one to offer it. The loss of orientation becomes almost comic, as one does not simply have meaning, one doesn't even have a "Stichwort" [cue or slogan]. Yet the tone is equally desperate. We are reminded of the sober lines in Nietzsche's well-known poem "Vereinsamt" [Isolated]: "Wer das verlor, / Was du verlorst, macht nirgends halt" [Whoever lost, / What you lost, stops nowhere] (*Sämtliche Gedichte* 133). There is no hold in modernity, not even a partial or superficial hold, a fact underscored by the break in style

and diction. The sense of resignation is reinforced at the end of stanzas five and six by the lack of a complete line; the perception is of disorientation, tiredness, surrender.



The final two stanzas mark a distinct break, signaled by the elegiac "Ach" [Oh], the following assonance ("Ach, als sich alle ..." [Oh, when all ...]), and the more even rhythms that contrast with the previous stanzas' frequent disjointedness. Whereas the first six stanzas consist of dark, hard, and abrupt verses, the final two stanzas are warm, melodic, and flowing. The unity of these two stanzas is enhanced by the poem's only stanza enjambment. The connecting comma contrasts with the separating periods and question marks that close each of the earlier stanzas. In these two stanzas Benn alludes to the unity of the Christian era in contrast to the many "-isms" and indeed dissolution of "-isms" in modernity. Instead of the infinity, disorientation, and functionalism of modernity, we recognize measure, a hold, substance. Instead of dispersion we find unity. Whereas the earlier stanzas are full of unrelated and heterogenous nouns, the final two stanzas are rich with verbs of meaning and connection. In the Christian era everyone turned to the one God.¹⁰ The allusions are to Christ's sacrifice, his blood and wound, and to the Last Supper and its fulfillment. The reference to the *agnus dei* contrasts with the sacrifice motif and lamb of the first stanza. In stanza one we are the potential victims of science; here Christ is the sacrificial lamb, and we are the potential beneficiaries (cf. Jn. 1.29). Additional contrasts might also be noted. Instead of thought as "zerdenken" [thinking to pieces], we recall in this earlier era a meaningful reflection on God. Instead of disenchantment, enjoyment is evident; instead of a quantitative sense of infinite time, Benn offers its qualitative form (the "fulfilled hour").

There appears to be no bridge whatsoever between the modern world and this very distant world of wholeness. Indeed, whereas the first six stanzas repeatedly emphasize a lack of orientation, the final stanza consistently evokes unity. In a striking image, what flows (or literally, runs) out of Christ's wound is not his blood but all human beings. That is, Christ and humanity are one; the people gain meaning through his sacrifice (cf. Mt. 26.27-28), and through this sacrifice a community is formed. Meaning and a coherent sense of self and community arise in relation to the realm of sacrifice, whereas the functional sphere of science and calculating self-interest, when divorced from this higher sphere, lead to dissolution.

The poem opens and closes with the image of the "I." The final line has never been addressed in its extraordinary complexity. I see three possible readings. The first reading, let us call it the "traditional" reading, is, to my knowledge, the only interpretation currently available. It recognizes a clear dichotomy between the dissolution of modernity and the harmony of the Christian world-view. In the modern world the self is lost, with science, technology, and conflict being the principal catalysts. In the earlier world the self was at home, inspired by Christ's self-sacrifice. In this reading little attention is given to the final line, "o ferne zwingende erfüllte Stunde, / die einst auch das verlorene Ich umschloß" [oh, distant compelling fulfilled hour, / which once enveloped even the lost I]. But the line presents a problem, for it describes the earlier self as also already suffering from a loss of self. Either this is not noted, or it is mentioned but subsequently ignored and dismissed as inconsequential.¹¹

One might reply that Benn made a mistake and that the poem does not ultimately cohere (Benn should have written, "o ferne zwingende erfüllte Stunde, / die ein ganz anderes Ich umschloß" [oh, distant compelling fulfilled hour, / which enveloped a completely different I]), but this response is highly unsatisfying, as it immediately proposes that the problem of interpretation be shifted back to the work and that the work be criticized for its inadequacies. Instead, one must seek out other hermeneutic alternatives. One might counter that Benn prefigures here the modern self that has become lost. This could be reinforced by the argument that Christianity was a significant factor leading to the loss of self. After all Christianity fostered the development of science, first, by invoking a monotheistic god, which in contrast to polytheism ensured belief in the constancy and stability of the laws of nature, and second, by heralding a transcendent god, which effectively emptied the world of its inherent divinity, thus rendering it capable of dissection and analysis. However, this response is highly abstract vis-à-vis the lines in question, so the question remains unresolved and unanswered by the traditional reading: why does Benn specifically name the lost self within this earlier, more epiphanic frame?

Lack of clarity in response to this troubling question evokes a second reading, which we might call the "ironic" reading. It takes seriously the suggestion that even in this seemingly benign and tranquil past, there was a "lost I." It therefore seeks to break down the apparent barrier between the two parts of the poem. Christendom is not the ideal it has been made out to be; the idea of a golden age is a fiction, for there, too, the self was lost, as the poem's explicit reference to the lost self of the Christian era

makes clear. The only differences appear to lie in the causes, intensity, and recognition of this forsakenness.

The poem's earlier suggestion that "the myth lied" reinforces our calling into question the validity of the golden age and the religious myth that stands behind it. We now recognize Benn's allusion to the earlier era as a citation, a cliché of sacral history, something well familiar to us from hyperbolic works such as Novalis's *Christenheit oder Europa* [*Christendom or Europe*]. While the final two stanzas appear to be beautifully crafted iambic pentameters, a closer review uncovers one deviation from the pattern. The third to last line of the poem opens not with an iamb, but with a trochee; not insignificantly, the word in question is "brachen" [broke], which offers us the hint that even this seemingly secure world is somehow already fractured. The German reader, moreover, will recognize in the word "Ach" [Oh] an allusion to Alkmene's "Ach" at the end of Kleist's *Amphitryon*, which reminds us of our distance from the gods as well as our capacity to be deceived.

Within the ironic reading, earlier passages encourage us to reread the final two stanzas, the postscript, with more critical eyes. The sacral meaning of "lamb" takes on new connotations in the light of the radioactive rays or death rays implied in "gamma-ray-lamb" and the perverse animal imagery of the earlier stanzas. The supposed elevation of thought is read differently when we recall the earlier allusion to "zerdenken" [thinking to pieces]. Indeed the repetition and narrowness of the phrase, "die Denker nur den Gott gedacht" [the thinkers thought only the God], seem to ridicule this act of thinking. The lack of a complete sentence (in German the auxiliary verb is missing) may suggest that Christian thinking was not complete and so scarcely ideal. Moreover, the thinkers were otherworldly; they thought only of God, ignoring all else. "Nur" [only] reveals the limitations of thought when it is bound by religion: only in the post-religious era is thought limitless and modern. The ironic reading is also supported by the analogy between the rhetoric of the enclosed "Gitter" [bars] and that of the enclosing "umschloß" [enveloped or encircled], which by association casts a pejorative connotation on the latter. Similarly, the adjective "zwingend" [compelling] suggests a moment of coercion in this hour of epiphany, which removes humanity's freedom, reminding us of the earlier allusions to determinism. The poem presents an achronological tale: the later stanzas are to be filtered through the meanings of the earlier stanzas, our having worked through these truths. We recognize the appeal to the past as the cliché it is, and the rhetoric of the conclusion is unveiled

to be either full of truisms or more ambiguous than a positive reading will allow.

The repetition of the "lost I" in the first and final stanzas evokes a circularity, which symbolically implies a lack of change and progress as well as an enclosure from which there is no escape, a vacuum of true meaning. The identity of modern and early self is emphasized by the combination of "einst" [once] and "auch" [even] and so supports the ironic reading. The traditionalist might object that "the lost I" is not meant literally, that linguistically it could simply refer to the modern self in its earlier stages. When, for example, we say, "the deceased was in England six months ago," we do not mean that he was deceased while he was in England. Thus, "the lost I" could simply be a reference to the modern self before it became modern. But such a reading does not exclude the ironic interpretation; it is possible but not conclusive. Moreover, the language "einst auch das verlorne Ich" [once even the lost I] seems to argue against this non-literal interpretation. The ambiguity remains unresolved, and the ironic reading, which has less difficulty with this final line, appears superior.

The ironic reading also has the merit of more fully integrating the contemporary context, as opposed to the ahistorical quality common in Benn criticism. The Christian idea that sacrifice gives meaning loses its appeal in the light of its appropriation in modernity. The notorious cult of sacrifice in Nazi Germany, associated with false heroism and the Nazi erasure of self, is well-documented (Baird). Sacrifice and perseverance were among the formal virtues elevated in the context of waging a difficult war, especially after the defeat of Stalingrad in February 1943; perseverance in the face of hardship and loss was celebrated in contemporary art, such as the tendentious *Durchhalte-literatur* [literature of endurance] and Veit Harlan's film *Kolberg*, which was being made during this time, though completed only in 1945. The German nation, the German soldier, and the German self were all lost, and any allusion to some form of salvation is nothing but wish-fulfillment. *Trostdichtung* [poetry of consolation], a parallel form that offered comfort and solace to the disheartened populace and oblique relief from the historical pressures, is both echoed and mocked in Benn's citation of the past as past; consolation is merely a temporary mirage. The seemingly fulfilling language of the final two stanzas must have sounded at some level ironic to the contemporary German enmeshed in total war: words such as "Blut" [blood], "Wunde" [wound], "rein" [pure], and "rannen" [ran] evoke the problems of the age; they hardly present answers. Also the word with which the poem closes assumes new

meaning in a more historical context: "umschloß" means not only "enveloped" and "embraced" but also "encircled" or "surrounded," as the Germans were increasingly surrounded by the forward-pressing Allies.



The poem, read ironically, thus seems to undermine any idea of release—even in the dream of a true and stable world. The earlier Christian self does not represent an answer; it, too, was lost. But there is a third reading of the poem, which I call the "transcendent" interpretation. It seeks to solve the questions left unanswered by the traditional reading and the riddles raised by the ironic reading by looking more closely at the poem's integration of unity and difference. Whereas the traditional reading fails to account for the complexities of the final line, the ironic reading is contrary to the poem's tone, reducing the work to a mere critique of nostalgia, but the poem is motivated by a genuine sense of loss and by profound alienation in the present; any reading must account for these sentiments.

"Lost I" is not a naive evocation of medieval Christianity, nor is it simply an ironic erasure of meaning. The final line does not invalidate the main tenor of the traditional reading, but it does complicate it by showing that a mere exercise in nostalgia does not suffice. Even in the Christian era the self was in some ways lost. The problems of human nature, though in certain respects less severe, were already manifest. Moreover, a sense of loss is the condition of the possibility of salvation; without it there would be no redemption—a prominent Biblical motif recognizable, for example, in the parables of the lost sheep (Luke 15.3-7 and Matt. 18.10-14), the lost coin (Luke 15.8-10), and the Pharisee and the tax collector (Luke 18.9-14). The motif is most prominent in the longest of all Christ's parables, the parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15.11-32), which may be indirectly evoked in the final stanza of Benn's poem not least of all insofar as the parable culminates in a celebratory supper and in the words: "er war verloren und ist jetzt wiedergefunden" [he was lost, and is found].

The poem insists that Christianity is not a utopian fiction in which life's troubles are wholly eliminated, but a realistic world-view that fully integrates struggle. The lost self is also the human being as inevitable sinner. Nevertheless, in the Christian era the self was embraced and held by a sense of community, a shared vision, and a relation to the transcendent. Though the final line complicates an otherwise simplistic historical dichotomy, the irony of earlier struggle does not cancel the poetic emotion.

Christ in his humanity experienced a sense of loss and disorientation ("My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" Mt. 27.46 and Mk. 15.34). His forsakenness on the cross, which is both particular to him and symbolic of the general human condition, is at one with human suffering even as it is embedded within a larger narrative that articulates the purpose of this suffering and offers a vision of community and fulfillment.

Indeed, the poem seems to play with the lost self being both the general self within the Christian universe, who nonetheless experiences a hold on life, and Christ himself, who embodies and inspires the Christian vision. A fascinating aspect of Benn's poetry is the preoccupation with Christ as a figure, with whom Benn identifies in certain ways, but whom he also transforms and even usurps. In this final line, unlike the other references to a lost self in the poem, the definite article is used, which seems to suggest a specific, and not a general, self. In an earlier draft of the poem (1.462) Benn mentions "Barabbas" and the "Schächer," the thieves who were crucified on either side of Christ and who received salvation through Christ (Lk. 23.33 and Jn. 19.18).¹² The draft indicates Benn's acute interest in the figure of Christ as crucified, a theme he deals with in other poems, such as "Requiem" and "Valse Triste," and in the higher identity of Christ with those whom he has saved (or not saved) in one way or another.

At the last supper Christ anticipates the loss of his bodily self. This self-sacrificial loss, however, is also gain for Christ and his community: here is a very different sense of "the lost I." In this reading the multivalence of "loss" and "gain" acquires yet another association. Any hold that might exist arises through the idea that we gain not by calculating our earnings but by freeing ourselves from these functional concerns: "Wer das Leben gewinnen will, wird es verlieren; wer aber das Leben um meinetwillen verliert, wird es gewinnen" [He who finds his life will lose it, and he who loses his life for my sake will find it] (Mt. 10.39; cf Mt. 16.25; Lk. 9.24; 17.33). Not only in concept, but in Christ's example, is this dialectic of loss and gain manifest. Christ's loss and gain, with their references to intense agony and transcendent dignity, are transformed and reduced in modernity into the calculating loss and gain of business transactions. Our virtues and thinking have been completely altered.

In the final two stanzas a progression occurs, which in a sense inverts the development of the poem as a whole. In each of the first six lines a noun represents Christ: "Mitte" [center], "Gott" [God], "Lamm" [lamb], "Blut" [blood], "Wunde" [wound], "Brot" [bread]. The seventh line opens with an "o," which echoes the "Oh" with which the seventh stanza opens; although Christ is not named, the hour of fulfillment is addressed. Christ's

sacrifice is here evoked—and with it the sublation of time, the meaningful hour. In the final line Christ is again named, here as “the lost I.”¹³ The first six stanzas of the poem embody dissolution, followed by two stanzas of elegiac consciousness, awareness of the past age of fulfillment. The first six lines of the final two stanzas offer fulfillment, followed by two lines that point back toward dissolution. They are ambiguous in the sense of representing both suffering and fulfillment, not only in Christ’s sacrifice itself, but in the allusion to the forgetfulness of this higher meaning in modernity.

Christ’s loss is not simply a loss of life, but in its modern reception a loss of the meaning of his life, a loss of his essence or identity, which also grants us a sense of identity. Our forgetting Christ and the world he represents is one and the same with God’s withdrawal from modernity. In this complex sense the lost self is both Christ and the modern self. The complexity of the lost self—whereby its reference ranges from the Christian self of the earlier era to Christ and the modern self—frees us from any allegorical reductionism. The signifier is multivalent, and a reader who may not be persuaded by arguments in favor of a direct reference to Christ can nonetheless see how both the traditional and ironic readings invite revision in the light of a more complex reading that sees both the complexities of Christianity (with its sense of both forsakenness and salvation) and the severe problems of modernity (to which the Christian ethos and its modern transformation in poetry are possible responses).

Christ’s sacrifice, modernity suggests, has been in vain: his heroism did not transform the world; the world transformed him and the role of religion. In this sense we can see Benn’s poem within the broader context of modern European intellectual history’s concept of fighting for a lost cause [*auf verlorenem Posten stehen*]. Three stages of transformation follow from this concept of fighting a losing battle: first, identification of the intellectual or poet with Christ; second, a transformation of Christ as signifier that emphasizes not primarily his resurrection, but his suffering and thus in a sense his work on behalf of a lost cause (the just soul who suffers), resulting thereby in a significant secularization; and third, a layering upon this identification the idea that the poet in his suffering and failed attempts to resist the tide of decay in modernity has risen to Christ-like stature (art displaces religion in the modern age, and the poet supplants Christ). We recognize not only an *imitatio Christi*, but also a *usurpatio Christi*.¹⁴ In this transformation of Christ, traditional features are removed and replaced with a world view that sees itself freed of illusion. The Christian message of resurrection is viewed with indifference, but the representative suffering, the martyrdom, and the assumption of a lost

cause remain. Resurrection resurfaces only in the idea of the eternal legacy of artistic form, "Unsterblichkeit im Worte und im Laut" [immortality in word and in sound] (l.185), a concept prominent in "Valse Triste" and "Verse" [Verses], among other poems.¹⁵

The ambiguity of "the lost I" becomes clear: on the one hand, it alludes in general to the complexities of life in the Christian universe and in particular to Christ's suffering and loss of life; on the other hand, it refers to our forgetting Christ and his message and our resulting sense of loss and disorientation. On the poem's macrolevel, six stanzas of disarray are followed by two stanzas of ambiguous fulfillment. On the microlevel, six lines of fulfillment are followed by two lines of ambiguous fulfillment. The final two stanzas are thus both a mirror of the poem as a whole, and its inversion. The idea that Christ transforms himself into the Holy Spirit through his sacrifice makes clear the connection to modernity and reinforces the importance of the specular structure. The modern self, however, is at a loss not because of the general struggles of the earlier Christian self or because of Christ's identification with the universal in self-sacrifice, but because of the effects of science, human aggression, and the modern dissolution of meaning. The lost selves are both different and one: the first lines refer to the lost self of modernity; the final lines refer to Christ's self-transcendence. But because Christ is one with the world, he is also the modern self, though not in its ideal meaning as transcendent, but rather in its troubled meaning as lost and in disarray. An autobiographical element may even be at play in this link between the Christian self and the modern self: Benn enjoyed in the parental home a sense of enclosure within the Christian world that is no longer available to him as a modern poet, but one in which he recognizes earlier meaning.

The identification of the forgotten Christ with the world explains the partial legitimacy of the traditional reading; the dissolution of the Christian message via the crisis of modernity allows us to grasp the partial truth of the ironic reading. Loss and disorientation arise because Christ's message has been forgotten or inverted. Although the break between the two parts of the poem is unambiguous, there is a higher connection. Indeed, the reference to "borgen" [borrow] in the penultimate line of the first part may even be said to constitute a hidden link to the realm of *Geborgenheit* [security] contained in the poem's final two stanzas. The two are not only distinct, but also related.

Like Benn's later poem "Travel," which also concludes with an elegiac "Ach" [Oh] and an embrace of a centered self, "Lost I" does not end in cynicism or despair. However, the complexity of the conclusion epitomizes

mizes, first, the ambiguity of modernity, which comes across already in the first stanza, and second, the idea that transcendence and meaning were never simply available, as may seem apparent in an idealized view of the Christian era, but could only be gained in great competition with the forces of bestiality, callousness, instrumentality, and dissolution. We can defend the meaning of the Christian images against the ironic attempt to undermine them, but we recognize that a naive Christianity is not tenable and so we can affirm the partial validity of the ironic reading. Also the historical dimension of the ironic reading can be reintroduced here in its full ambiguity. In an era of disorientation and open wounds, a call is given for a higher sense of unity, not simply the unity of the nation, but a more universal sense of unity. Whereas the ironic reading may seek to undermine the final two stanzas through their association with National Socialism's pagan myths, which drew on Christian iconography, this third reading seeks to offer a criticism of this false orientation, a reduction of religion in the light of contemporary history, much as it is reduced in the light of contemporary science. A turn to the transcendent, to higher meaning, may have a certain non-ironic resonance in the light of military battle and the longing for survival. The crisis of the age, in its abstractness and its specificity, calls out for a sense of community and shared vision.

In this third reading the lack of a conjugated verb in the phrase "die Denker nur den Gott gedacht" [the thinkers thought only the God] must be reinterpreted as an analogue of the concentration of thought. The same can be said for Benn's use of "nur" [only]. The repetition of *denken* [thinking] serves to recognize that what is under attack in *zerdenken* [thinking to pieces] is not thought as such, but a particular form of thought—less substantive, more mundane, less oriented toward intrinsic, more oriented toward functional, value. The word "zwingend" [compelling] is marked not by its affiliation with coercion, but by two positive associations: first, the word also means cogent, persuasive, overpowering; second, it has a religious dimension, insofar as it expresses the fulfillment in the New Testament of what was prophesied in the Old Testament (cf. 1 Pet. 1.20; Acts 2.23; Rom. 8.29; Gal. 3.8). It suggests, thereby, integrity of meaning and coherence in the pattern of history. The hour is not a chance event, but the fulfillment of a prophecy. "Zwingend" [compelling] is not at tension with "erfüllte" [fulfilled], but a heightening of the sense of epiphany. The "hour has come" and "the scripture" is to be "fulfilled" are the specific words from John 17.1 and 17.12 on which Benn draws. Also the allusion to Kleist's *Amphitryon* is as ambiguous as the original passage: it can

be understood as a reminder of the profoundly transcendent joy associated with experiencing the divine, even if it is now past.

The poem has constantly reflected on the dominance in modernity of infinity, in the form of limitless time and space, of emptiness and a vacuum. Here, in contrast, is an infinity of transcendence, a loss of self that grants one a sense of self. The meaningful hour contrasts with the first six stanzas' two-fold reference to the passage of time without distinction, with neither morning nor night (both stanzas two and six). The inversion of the meter with the word "brachen" [broke] serves to affirm, on the one hand, the pain and difficulties of achieving harmony and, on the other hand, the extraordinary significance of this religious event, the breaking of bread for all. That the word is not meant as destructive of the self is supported by its tameness in comparison with "zersprengt" [blasted apart]. The allusion, via the concept of the lost self, to the parable of the lost son reminds us that harmony is not easily achieved in any era, and the moment of resolution strikes like an epiphany.

The greater irony in the allusion to "the lost I" is that Christ was not lost in losing himself, but gained a sense of fulfilling identity. The final "umschloß" [enveloped] cancels the severity of "the lost I." Indeed, the circular structure of the entire poem encourages us to read the work in the light of this phrase. Circularity is of course a symbol of perfection. The ambiguity of the poem's title confirms the idea that we have forgotten the transcendence, love, and wisdom associated with Christ, substituting for it the mundane, the bestial, and the functional, and as a result, we are lost and so too is the message of Christ. We are lost because the wisdom of the tradition, which Christ represents, has been undermined. The loss of modernity is an emptiness, a concealment, in contrast to the meaningful loss and self-transcendence of the final stanzas. One of the dominant images of the poem is the bestial, the idea that humanity has lost that element of love which gives it dignity. Surrounding this image are the two mirroring lines, "Die Welt als Flucht" [The world as flight] and "Die Welt zerdacht" [The world thought to pieces], with their references, first, to our immersion in the mundane and the material as escapes from transcendence and, second, to our destruction of what has vitality and intrinsic value through our constant measurement and functionalism.

The transcendent reading gives the poem a greater resonance than simply the cynical suggestion that there is no meaning, which would not only make the poem itself vacuous and self-contradictory, but also remove from the work any hint of critique and genuine lament toward the negativity it so ably describes. One cannot criticize the modern world without

appealing to an alternative. Instead of elevating difference and otherness, the ironic reading asserts that the lost self is the same self, both in the earlier period and in modernity; there are no alternatives to irony, cynicism, vacuity of meaning. Its elevation of unity weakens the poem's account of our specifically modern problems. Although the ironic reading seems to gain by integrating historical allusions, in truth it obliterates the historical specificity and meaning of the final stanza, reducing the otherness of its symbols to the horizon of the contemporary era.

"Lost I" offers us an alternative, an other to our present predicament, and not just an abstract other, but a concrete other, informed by the negation of the negativity depicted in the first six stanzas and by the evocation of values in the final stanzas. We come to the solution by way of the contemporary crisis. This seems to have at least two elements of significance. First, the inversion of chronology suggests that the full meaning of transcendence can be recognized only by working through the problems of modernity. Second, the inversion suggests, in contrast to the ironic reading, that genealogy does not undermine validity. This insight, combined with the idea of transcendence, allows us to reinterpret the fifth stanza. The modern view may indeed be that functionalism undermines dignity, but the myth, now the myth of science, no longer the myth of religion, is unveiled as a lie: facticity does not undermine the transcendental. The openness of the future leaves room for the possibility of new orientation, but not simple affirmation, instead affirmation after the reader has worked through negativity. The sixth stanza must also be reinterpreted. The lack of an answer in the present is contrasted with the strong answer of the final stanza's past; we must return to what we have repressed and transformed. The question with which the first six stanzas conclude, where will we find an answer ("allein bei wem?" [but from whom?]), has as its answer, "verlorenes Ich" [lost I], by which we mean both Christ and poem. Each functions as a centering force.

A remarkable set of numerical symbols helps to reinforce various latent meanings in the poem as well as the hidden identity of Christ with the lost I. The number eight is particularly important: the poem has eight stanzas. The first six depict the modern world without Christ. In the Christian tradition six depicts incompleteness (before the concluding seventh day) and is the number of evil (Rev. 13.18).¹⁶ This association is furthered by the parallel between the Biblical description of the beast in Revelations 13.18 as 666 and Benn's description of the bestial nature of modernity in his first six stanzas. The age of cogent meaning depicted in the final two stanzas is removed from the present. A holistic "nine" is absent from this poem

about modernity and its other. The poem does not end with a ninth stanza, because we are still in the world of dissolution. The octagon is an image of enclosure around a center, which permits many doors. The poem is about a center lost through many exits, among them instrumental reason and bestiality. But Benn's thematic evocation of a sacred middle is mirrored in the formal symmetries of his poem. The past potential is not completely lost in the present. Reinforcing this reading is the concept of eight as symbolic of rebirth and regeneration. In Christian numerology eight is the number of resurrection, for on the eighth day after his entry into Jerusalem, Christ was said to have risen from the grave (which is why Christian baptismal fonts are octagonal in shape). The symbolism of shape reinforces the numerology: the octagon is the intervening shape between the circle, a symbol of the eternal, and the square, a symbol of the temporal, and so symbolizes the mediation of the eternal in time, or spiritual regeneration. Supporting an identity of Christ and poem, and with this the idea of the poem as pointing toward a second coming of the spirit of Christ, is the use of *Kreuzreim* (alternative rhyme, or in German, cross rhyme)—which can be taken to have symbolic value. Even the manger motifs associated with the aimlessness of the first six stanzas—"wo lagerst du" [where will you camp], "die Sterne" [the stars], and "nicht Nacht, nicht Morgen" [not night, not morning]—gain import when they are viewed from the perspective of the modern self's longing for the kind of meaning associated with Christ.¹⁷ Also significant for the analogy between Christ and poem is the fact that the name Jesus in Greek adds up to 888.¹⁸

The myth may have lied, according to the modern view, but the poem as a substitute for myth does not lie (how could it, without implying the non-truth of the statement that myth is a lie?). Though the poem does not narrate a literal account of religious truth, it does invoke a higher truth. The poem evokes this truth, initially, by negating its dissolution, that is, by criticizing the functional, the mundane, and the bestial, which arise through the loss of higher transcendence and orientation. The poem elicits a higher truth also through its poetic form and evocation of transcendence, independently of the specificity of Christ as myth. Here we recognize Benn's *imitatio Christi*, which has its highest meaning not in suffering, but in the element of transcendence that gives both suffering and achievement dignity. For Benn this transcendence consists of the poem itself. He seeks to leave literal religion behind and achieve its poetic transcendence. However, though Benn might have sought to replace Christ with the poem, the poem itself is more complex and contains in its language not only the idea

of poetic transformation but also the original meaning of Christianity. In this sense Benn may have become the victim of the processes described in Plato's *Ion*. According to Plato, poets are the worst interpreters of their own works; they write not so much out of wisdom as out of instinct or inspiration. The meanings Benn has created cannot be reduced to his conscious intentions. Many works of literature have a life of their own: the artist intends one thing, but the words, the images, the structures magically relate to convey something else.

This distinction between authorial consciousness and literary meaning should not prevent us from noting differences between the *mens auctoris* and the work itself. Benn is not avowedly Christian, even if his poem seems to affirm a message that is in harmony with Christian principles. Instead, we can say that Benn embraces central aspects of the Christian world view, both the critique of modernity and the evocation of higher meaning, even if he would see this higher meaning not in religion, but in his poetic evocation of meaning. Christ's suffering is transformed for Benn into the poet's, whose lament becomes characteristic of modernity. Moreover, Christ's resurrection is usurped by the redemptive power and continuing value of the poem. These transformations are achieved only by way of an integration of Christ, and so the question remains open to what extent the poem retains or erases its undeniably Christian origins, much as it both retains and erases elements of the traditional and ironic readings.

An interesting aspect of the third reading is its dialectical status: it integrates the strengths of the previous readings by taking seriously the passages they cannot explain and by thinking through their internal contradictions. The traditional reading stresses the difference between the medieval and modern worlds, but it cannot make full sense of the final line, or at least it cannot exclude the possibility of the ironic reading. Moreover, it leaves the reader with the sense of an unbridgeable difference between Christian and modern worlds, thus evoking a fatalistic mentality, be it cynical (with a focus on the present) or elegiac (with an orientation toward the past). The second reading, which helps us recognize the seeds of loss already in the past, is likewise fatalistic: though it does not recognize an unbridgeable difference, it erases the idea of any alternative to dissolution. Its view of the final lines as mere citation is hardly in harmony with their genuine beauty, and its erasure of difference hardly rhymes with the poem's genuine tone of lament. Surprisingly, the ironic reading has elements of simplicity. The final reading, in contrast, sees both the unity and difference between the Christian and modern worlds, between Christ and poem. This unity is reinforced linguistically, despite the obvious split

between the first six and the final two stanzas, insofar as every stanza throughout the poem has in the final syllable of each line a common rhythm: the first and third lines of each stanza are unaccented, the second and final lines accented.

The third reading recognizes the reading process as a central element of the work's meaning. In this sense Benn's poem has aspects of the intellectual journey that is central to his poem "Travel," which likewise opens with a consideration of untenable alternatives culminating in emptiness, and likewise turns, after a non-ironic "Ach" [Oh], to wisdom as concentrated thinking independent of modern diversions (Roche 30-38). Even though Benn would stress the transcendent dimension not of religion but of modern poetry, the poem conveys its values by contrasting the bestiality and functionalism of modernity with the religious tradition. Interestingly Benn alludes to the religious act of forming evil to keep it at bay, and his very poem, with its effort to name the beasts of modernity (the word "beast" occurs three times in the poem) does the very same for modernity. Its impressive nature lies not least of all in the effort to convey in a single poem the infinite problems of modernity and to do so in such a way as to evoke, rather than undermine, ambiguity and complexity. Moreover, in a modernity without orientation, with neither a reverence toward tradition nor a sense of a meaningful future, Benn seeks orientation by awakening appreciation for tradition and recognizing future values.¹⁹

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NOTES

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1. Unless otherwise indicated, translations are my own. In translating Benn, I have sought to be more literal than literary. In order to capture the elegance of the original, its rhythms and rhymes, I would have had to adopt a more figurative translation, which might have impeded the capacity of readers not fluent in German to grasp the poem's nuances. Already the title presents some challenges; *verlieren* is to lose, and *Verlorenheit* is forlornness; *verloren* is thus lost or forlorn. Other literal translations, besides, "Lost I," might be "Forlorn I" or "Forsaken I." "Lost Self" would be a looser, but still meaningful, translation.

2. For an account of Benn's infatuation with National Socialism, see Alter, and Roche 39-42.

3. On Benn and inner emigration, see Roche 39-55 and the two essays by Schröder. Many of the writers of the inner emigration were motivated by Christian principles; see Kleiberger.

4. Max Weber articulates the concept of disenchantment by showing that every sphere of life has become calculable and can in principle be known in its many facets, a topic that is central to the critique of technical rationality in Benn's poem: "Die zunehmende Intellektualisierung und Rationalisierung bedeutet also *nicht* eine zunehmende allgemeine Kenntnis der Lebensbedingungen, unter denen man steht. Sondern sie bedeutet etwas anderes: das Wissen davon oder den Glauben daran: daß man, wenn man *nur wollte*, es jederzeit erfahren *könnte*, daß es also prinzipiell keine geheimnisvollen unberechenbaren Mächte gebe, die da hineinspielen, daß man vielmehr alle Dinge—im Prinzip—durch *Berechnen beherrschen* könne. Das aber bedeutet: die Entzauberung der Welt. Nicht mehr, wie der Wilde, für den es solche Mächte gab, muß man zu magischen Mitteln greifen, um die Geister zu beherrschen oder zu erbitten. Sondern technische Mittel und Berechnung leisten das" (*Gesammelte Aufsätze* 578) [The increasing intellectualization and rationalization do *not*, therefore, indicate an increasing general knowledge of the conditions under which one lives. It means something else, namely, the knowledge or belief that if one *merely wanted*, one *could* learn it at any time. Hence, it means that in principle no mysterious incalculable forces come into play, but rather one can, in principle, *master* all things by *calculation*. This means the disenchantment of the world. One no longer needs to grasp for magical means in order to master or implore the spirits, as did the savage, for whom such mysterious powers existed. Instead, technical means and calculation perform the service ("Science," 139, translation modified).]

5. See, for example, Andreas Gryphius's well-known sonnet "Abend" [Evening] (3.131).

6. Liewerscheid overlooks this economic dimension as well as references to other spheres when he sees in the poem only biological determinism and fatalistic reductionism.

7. Heine's humorous passage continues with Hegel's alleged indictment of heaven: "Sie wollen also noch ein Trinkgeld dafür haben, daß Sie Ihre kranke Mutter gepflegt und Ihren Herrn Bruder nicht vergiftet haben?" [So you want a gratuity, too, for having cared for your sick mother and for not having poisoned your brother?] (6/1.472).

8. On the concept of substance and function in modernity, see Cassirer and, more recently, Nikulin.

9. Interesting in this context is Benn's idealization of the monastic ideal after his break from National Socialism. See esp. Benn's letters to Oelze (1.42 and 1.138) as well as the essay *Sein und Werden* [Being and Becoming] (esp. 4.211). Cf. 3.24.

10. Note Benn's description of this medieval universe in "Bezugssysteme" [Frames of Reference], also written in 1943: "Auch liegt es nahe, auf das mittelalterliche Weltbild zu verweisen in seiner völligen Geschlossenheit zum symbolischen Ausdruck, jede Einzelheit bezogen auf den Grundriß, den Grundgedanken, die Kirche, außerhalb derer ein Heil nicht ist" [It is also appropriate to refer to the medieval world-picture in its complete uniformity as a symbolic expression, every single element related to the foundation, the basic idea, the church, outside of which there is no salvation] (4.326). Cf. Hermann Broch's description of this universe, which he, like Benn, contrasts with the disintegration of modernity: "Man kann sich dieser brutalen und aggressiven Logik, die aus allen Werten und Unwerten dieser Zeit hervorbricht, nicht entziehen, auch wenn man sich in

die Einsamkeit eines Schlosses oder einer jüdischen Wohnung verkrochen hat; indes, wer die Erkenntnis fürchtet, ein Romantiker also, dem es um Geschlossenheit des Welt- und Wertbildes geht, und der das ersehnte Bild in der Vergangenheit sucht, der wird mit gutem Grund auf das Mittelalter hinblicken. Denn das Mittelalter besaß das ideale Wertzentrum, auf das es ankommt, besaß einen obersten Wert, dem alle anderen Werte untertan waren: den Glauben an den christlichen Gott" (496). [One cannot escape from this brutal and aggressive logic that bursts forth in all values and non-values of the age, not even by holing up in the solitude of a castle or of a Jewish dwelling; yet whoever shrinks from knowledge, that is to say, a romantic, someone who must have a bounded world, a closed system of values, and who seeks in the past the completeness he longs for, such a person has good reason to turn to the medieval world. For the medieval era possessed the ideal center of value that he requires, it possessed a supreme value, to which all other values were subordinate: the belief in the Christian God (446, translation modified).]

11. Motekat notes briefly that even in the Christian era the self was lost, but he then continues as if the self were after all not lost; the contradiction escapes him: "Das für sich immer, auch damals, 'verlorene Ich' war umschlossen und wußte sich geborgen ... Das einzelne Ich nicht, wie jetzt, verloren, sondern 'umschlossen' in der Ganzheit Welt und ihrer Ordnung von Gott und in Gott" [The 'lost I,' which was always, even then, lost, was enveloped and knew itself to be safe and secure.... The individual I, not, as now, lost, but 'enveloped' in the totality of the world and its order by God and in God] (335). Similar are the comments of Buddeberg, who likewise holds to the traditional reading, while noting: "Einstmals war auch noch das Ich, das sich als ein verlorenes fühlte (aber es ist auch dann noch nicht in dieser Art 'verloren' gewesen, wie das *jetzt* als grundsätzlich verloren zu kennzeichnende Ich es ist)" [Once there was also the lost I that felt itself lost (but it wasn't yet 'lost' in the way that the I is *now*, namely, fundamentally characterized as lost)] (256). Others hold to the traditional reading without noting, let alone exploring, the difficulty raised by the final line: see Balser 172; Baltz 920; Böckmann 80-83; Casper 290; Fischer 202-4; Herrmann 44-53; Hohmann 53-54; Klemm 85-88; Liewerscheidt 55-58; Perlitt 116-17; Ridley 102; Schöne, *Säkularisation*, 200-1; and Weissenberger 89-90.

12. "Oh ferne zwingende erfüllte Stunde / die einst d<er> Schächer [des Barrabas - {sic}] / die einst [auch] verlorenes Ich mit einschloss" [Oh distant compelling fulfilled hour / which once t<he> thief [of Barabbas -] / which once enveloped [even] lost I] (1.462). In this passage <er> is the editor's addition; [des Barrabas -] was crossed out by Bemm; and [auch] is a later addition. Drawing on this earlier draft, one might try to save the traditional reading by arguing that the "lost I" of the final stanza could refer to one or both of the "Schächer" [thieves]. Today the self is lost, but then ("einst") the fulfilled hour (the "erfüllte Stunde") could still save the lost self. If we were to pursue this reading, it would reinforce the distinction between medieval and modern worlds. However, the fact that the thieves have been dropped from the final version makes this reading highly speculative. It is also weakened by the evocation of a single person who is encircled, instead of on the side, as were the thieves.

13. One might counter this third reading, insofar as it identifies the lost self of the final line not only with the earlier Christian self but also with Christ, by arguing that what is lost in the crucifixion is a life and not a self or an I. When used as an adjective, however, and referring to a subject, *verlieren* [to lose] is normally associated not with a life, but with a person, as in the sentence, *er ist ein verllorener Mann* [he's a lost man], which, much like *das verlorene Ich* [the lost I], implies that the person is beyond being saved. Thus, *Ich* [I], not *Leben* [life], seems appropriate. Similarly, when we use the phrase *die verlorene Generation* [the

lost generation], we refer not only literally to the lives lost during World War I, but also to the disillusioning experiences of that generation. By choosing *I* and not *life*, Benn is able to emphasize the effects of modern developments on the psyche (to lose one's orientation and identity may be more complex and in some ways more tragic than losing one's life). In addition, the term describes the distinct crisis of the modern self (*I*, unlike *life*, emphasizes the cerebral nature of modern humanity, which long fascinated Benn—beginning already with his early stories, such as "Gehirne" [Brains]); the unique situation of Christ (the concept of self, unlike life, furthers the connection between sacrifice and identity); and of course the connections between the two, invoking a both serious and playful link between Christ and the modern self.

14. On the extent of Benn's *imitatio Christi*, especially in the mid 1930s, see Schröder, who, however, does not discuss "Lost I," which lies beyond his temporal focus. On the theme of the modern poet's identification with Christ in his suffering, see Marx.

15. In "Valse Triste," Benn writes: "...beuge, beuge / dein Haupt in Dorn und Schlehn, / in Blut und Wunden zeuge / die Form, das Auferstehn" [...bow, bow / your head in thorns, / create in blood and wounds / form, resurrection] (1.68-69). Also in "Verses" Benn articulates the origin of poetry in pain and suffering, with echoes of Christ's passion, and the permanence of poetry, with echoes of Christ's resurrection, in relation to the flux of military conflict and political power (1.184).

16. Note in this context Benn's prominent integration of the designation "Block II, Zimmer 66" [Block II, Room 66] in his description of military existence in *Doppelleben* [Double Life] (5.122-39).

17. Note here the Biblical allusion in the question, where will you camp, which echoes the first exchange between Jesus and the disciples in the Gospel of John (1.38).

18. *Iesous* breaks down as follows: iota = 10; eta = 8; sigma = 200; omicron = 70; upsilon = 400; sigma = 200.

19. For helpful comments on earlier versions of this interpretation I am grateful to Hugo Bekker, Neil Donahue, Jim Dougherty, Joachim Dyck, Walter Haug, Vittorio Hösle, Friedhelm Marx, and Henry Weinfield.

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