

Gottfried Benn's Static Poetry
Aesthetic and Intellectual-Historical
Interpretations

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1. Introduction

Gottfried Benn's importance as a poet is to be measured not only by his provocative *Morgue und andere Gedichte* of 1912: bitter revelations, in part with a matter-of-fact scientific tone, of bodily decay, the smell of cancer wards and corpses, the misery of urban existence. Nor can his importance be restricted to his later accounts of the dissolution of the self in the light of modern civilization—as, for example, in his well-known “Verlorenes Ich” of 1943. Rather, Benn is to be equally recognized for his embrace of form, measure, and balance. He is, with Rilke,¹ the twentieth-century poet of stillness.

In a work generally recognized as the best introduction to hermetic modernism, *Die Struktur der modernen Lyrik*, Hugo Friedrich stresses the dual incomprehensibility and fascination of modern poetry. According to Friedrich, modern poetry is characterized by predominantly negative categories: fragmentation, decay, nonassimilability, brutal abruptness, strident imagery, dislocation. The early Benn made a name for himself in part by extending this modern tradition into uncharted territory. His early poetry—“Mann und Frau gehn durch die Krebsbaracke,” for example—shocked even those accustomed to the negativity, dissonance, and harshness of the modern lyric. Moreover, significant features of Benn's poetry throughout his career are captured by elements that Friedrich broadly sketches in Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Mallarmé, and their twentieth-century European inheritors: the proud isolation of the poet combined with a depersonalized rhetoric; the hermetic elements of obscure, if not incomprehensible, poetry; the hegemony of form over content and of suggestivity over understanding; the poet as representative sufferer; the interlacing of diverse fields of language; and finally, an undefinable and seemingly empty transcendence that nonetheless serves as a goal. In focusing on Benn's static poetry I would like to stress certain moments, which become more pronounced in later years, in which he deviates from some of the central tenets of the modern lyric. His static poetry is not one of agitation as much as it is one of calm, not one of dissonance as much as it is one of balance, not a break from as much as it is a recollection of premodern traditions, techniques, and definitions of beauty. This poetry is of course not without its mark of modernity, but it is—true to its own theme—more than merely modern.

Benn titled one of his poems and a collection of his poetry “Statische

Gedichte."² Many poems outside this cluster of works can also be called *statisch*, in their attempts to embody stillness or stasis.³ As we will see in the analyses that follow, *Statik*—literally “statics,” the branch of mechanics that deals with bodies at rest or forces in equilibrium—is a complex concept. Though the adjective *statisch* gives Benn’s poems a technical coloring, the use of this word in conjunction with poetry also takes away from its scientific connotations:⁴ *statisch* becomes a metaphor for poetic equilibrium and balance, indeed for motionlessness and permanence as such. Benn’s multifaceted use of the term *Statik* also involves a critique of history and, in particular, of national socialism.⁵ For him, *Statik* implies an affirmation of stillness in areas as diverse as aesthetics, politics, epistemology, ethics, and metaphysics. In his letter to Peter Schifferli of 23 November 1947 Benn writes: “Statisch ist ein Begriff, der nicht nur meiner inneren ästhetischen und moralischen Lage, sondern auch der formalen Methode der Gedichte entspricht und in die Richtung des durch Konstruktion beherrschten, in sich ruhenden Materials, besser noch: in die Richtung des Anti-Dynamischen verweisen soll . . . Statik also heißt Rückzug auf Maß und Form, es heißt natürlich auch ein gewisser Zweifel an Entwicklung und es heißt auch Resignation, es ist anti-faustisch” (*DD*, 92–93).

Recognizing the overlapping dimensions of *Statik* as well as the value of close readings of individual poems, I do not present a schematic study of the different spheres in which the concept plays a role;⁶ rather, I attempt to illuminate the concept’s diverse meanings by presenting detailed analyses of four works: “Trunkene Flut” (1927), “Wer allein ist—” (1936), “Statische Gedichte” (1944), and “Reisen” (1950).⁷ With these four poems, formally diverse yet similar in the richness of their cryptic allusions, I hope to show a progression from a more dynamic and archaic stillness to a more subdued and cerebral repose. “Trunkene Flut,” written well before Benn articulated his concept of *Statik*, is on the surface a dynamic work, full of allusions to motion, struggle, and transformation; nonetheless, I suggest that the poem contains hidden seeds of Benn’s later elevation of stillness. “Wer allein ist—” is Benn’s starkest affirmation of aesthetic stillness. “Statische Gedichte,” another of his best-known works, extends the concept of stillness into the spheres of psychology, ethics, and politics. Finally, “Reisen,” written after Benn had seemingly moved beyond the concept of *Statik*, nonetheless reasserts, in its own unique way, some of the principal tenets of stasis—above all, indifference toward the external world. Other poems also support this thesis of a development, but the close analysis of individual works is of more interest to me and, I

imagine, of more help to the reader than lengthy sets of lists and quotations.⁸ The individual artworks are more at the center of this study than is the linear development of Benn’s poetry, though reflection on the latter is made possible as an outgrowth of the former.

The poems illustrate the wide-ranging spheres in which stillness plays a role, and they contain interesting allusions to the tradition of thought on stillness. Benn’s knowledge of intellectual history was extensive and precise. He studied theology and classical philology; his letters contain numerous philosophical references; and his poems and essays allude to Greek mythology, Roman history, and German literature. The poems to be analyzed here contain veiled allusions—all but a few previously overlooked—to a tradition of stillness informed by, among others, Parmenides, Aristotle, Epicurus, Seneca, Eckhart, Cusanus, Goethe, Nietzsche, and Rilke.

Stillness, or *Ruhe*, has long been a privileged concept in German letters.⁹ In the mystic-pietistic tradition it was elevated for its religious import: stillness was considered not only a characteristic of divinity but also a necessary precondition of human oneness with God. Secularizing this tradition and drawing on the writings of the Stoics and Spinoza, classical authors such as Goethe, Schiller, and Hölderlin associated *Ruhe* with peace of mind. When we achieve repose not only are we at one with ourselves, we have the capacity to act in harmony with the world. In the late eighteenth century *Ruhe* also became a privileged aesthetic category. Winckelmann, who considered sculpture the highest of aesthetic forms, argued that stillness is a facet of all great art. Many authors followed him, elevating stillness as a moment of not only the artwork but its production and reception as well. There is still another sphere in which *Ruhe* has significance: politics. The association of *Ruhe* with order and the status quo has been prevalent throughout German history. In the nineteenth century this association helped undermine the concept’s traditionally positive associations. Georg Büchner, Heinrich Heine, and others attacked the elevation of *Ruhe* as conservative and reactionary. It is against this complex prehistory of stillness that Benn’s concept of *Statik* merits attention. Benn not only alludes to the religious, psychological, and aesthetic dimensions of stillness, he gives *Statik* a political meaning that adds complexity to the seemingly simple conservative versus liberal assessment of *Ruhe*.

With few exceptions, Benn has been approached from the perspective of immanent interpretation or new criticism or, conversely, from the standpoint of sociological and political criticism.¹⁰ His poetry, both dense and hermetic, does indeed require word-for-word analysis, but it is only by understanding the intellectual-historical context of the

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poems—the numerous and veiled allusions—that one can fully comprehend their meaning and significance. The “intellectual-historical” thrust of this project has three partially overlapping facets: the attempt to situate Benn’s embrace of stasis within the history of the idea of stillness, the endeavor to view stasis as a form of inner emigration, and the attempt to decipher a multiplicity of obscure allusions.

The unraveling of difficult allusions helps us to understand not only Benn’s poems and his situation, first within the tradition, and second vis-à-vis his own age, but also the inadequacies in his well-intentioned critique of the national socialist movement. After analyzing the poems as formal constructs, I evaluate their statements. I call my readings “aesthetic” and mean thereby an analysis of rhetorical language and literary structures, followed by an immanent critique of the texts’ philosophical statements—that is, a critique that weighs the internal, logical consistency of the works’ presuppositions and claims. The term “aesthetic” is appropriate for such a practice insofar as one views art, with Hegel, as a sensuous, if complex and intuitive, representation of ideas, whose validity presupposes logical coherence.¹¹