

Benn's Poetry—"A Hit in the Charts": Song Under Conditions of Media Technologies

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ONCE ART HAS DISSOLVED into media technologies, a certain kind of poetry nevertheless returns. It comes and stays not with reading or mnemotechniques, but simply through radio and audio equipment. This unending and unforgettable oblivion affects our very theories, which are very much written artifacts. When it comes to poetry, almost all theories forget what Jim Morrison's song called "Texas radio and the big beat."

Gottfried Benn, at the apogee of his lyrical postwar fame, was invited to his alma mater where he had, fifty years before, studied philosophy, modern languages, and literature. At first sight, then, his case would confirm Foucault's suspicion that modern poetry is just a closed loop or feedback system inside academia.¹ And indeed, Benn's Marburg lecture on *Problems of Poetry*, having received almost all its poetological key words from a correspondence with Ernst Robert Curtius, the great scholar of European literature, climaxed in the concept of an "absolute poem" (I 524).² Poetry, according to Benn, functioned as "a creative transformation," as "an attempt of the arts, within the general degeneracy of their contents, to experience themselves as their contents and to create a new style out of this experience" (I 500). Whatever was known of Benn's poetry therefore suffered an academic and philosophical interpretation whose impact on the humanities departments, especially under the verdict of Martin Heidegger, lasted at least as long as the so-called neighborhood of thought and poetry (known to be a very German arrangement) and was not renovated and replaced by the more recent theories of socialization and psychoanalysis.³

Still, neither a history of Being nor that of the soul could analyze the fact that Benn's Marburg lecture started out with a reference to occasional poems published in Sunday papers where they "attract attention, being printed in italics and within a special typographic frame" (I 494). The lecture proceeded to prove an already mentioned "degeneracy of contents" by addressing its own conditions of media-history and technology: Today's lyrical "I," that is, the pseudonym of the lecturer himself, was

someone “who learns more from the daily papers than from philosophy, someone who is closer to journalism than to his Bible, someone to whom a hit in the charts contains more of the twentieth century than a motette” (I 518). If then newspapers and hits, complete with foreign or “slang words,” supplied the subjects or data to be processed by that “creative transformation” called poetry, its output—Benn’s actual *oeuvre*—was way off “the absolute,” compared to its closeness to modern media technologies. Just as the two world wars gave birth to the prototypes of these media technologies, it was also they which “hammered those foreign and slang words into the consciousness of German language” (I 518). Heidegger was only too correct when, referring to Benn’s “creative transformation,” he laconically remarked that it was more likely to produce space satellites than poems.⁴ Unlike his interpretative followers, Heidegger situated Benn within the “*Gestell*,” the essential realm of technology.

This technology was sufficiently powerful (even self-referential) to transform “Problems of Poetry” instantly into another poetic work. A lyrical typescript from the time of the Marburg lecture transposed the theoretical prose into free rhythms and a lyrical “I” into a consumer of media technologies. Benn’s “Small Cultural Mirror” declared:

An outstanding hit tells more about 1950
 than five hundred pages of cultural crisis.
 In the movies where you’re allowed to take your hat and coat,
 you’ll find more fire-water than in theaters
 and you won’t have those annoying breaks. (III 474)

Those “five hundred pages of cultural crisis” refer, as we know, to the “life’s work” (III 306) of a German philosopher: Karl Jaspers, *Von der Wahrheit (On Truth)*, Munich 1947. Obviously, modern poetry breaks the contract with philosophy because prospective partners who are at once more seasonal and up to date have turned up: film and the music-charts in second place, radio broadcasts and their recordings in first. Whereas the pact between poetry and thought resulted from the general literalization in which the monopoly of writing situated itself during the age of Goethe, poetry in 1950 already presupposed competition with the technical media. It was in 1877 and 1893 that two of Edison’s developments—the phonograph and the cinetoscope—broke the monopoly of writing, started a non-literary (but equally serial) data processing, established an industry of human engineering, and placed literature in the ecological niche which (and not by chance) Remington’s contemporaneous typewriter had conquered.⁵ Only under these conditions of semio-technical rather than crea-

five transformation did the mechanization of writing become a problem for poetry itself. In a closing remark which "was not up to him to make," but which he still could not omit for reasons of technical thoroughness, Benn stated:

I personally do not consider modern poetry fit for performance....A modern poem demands to be printed on paper and read; it demands black typeface and becomes more graphic or plastic with each glance at its outer structure. (I 529)

Benn's poetics therefore work (to use Niklas Luhmann's term)⁶ as "differentiation" within a given system of media: ever since the gramophone took over the storage of sounds or noises, and film that of pictures or colors, literature has been forced to give up the romantic fiction of its own sensual data flow and develop instead a new typewritten materiality. Whereas Romanticism (to quote Eichendorff) still dreamt of recording a song that allegedly slept in everything, "Problems of Poetry" (in accord with Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams*) knew better: "There are colors and sounds in nature, but no words" (I 510).⁷ The absoluteness of poems thus measures, in a literal sense, their distance from phonography and cinematography. Consequently, Benn called his written words "something rather dry" emitted from "empty and hollow tubes"—and himself a "dumb" man "already trembling in front of his typewriter" (II 270). The typewriter keyboard evidently replaces or realizes the merely metaphorical tubes. This is how closely the actual writing and the printing of poems are interlocked after Remington. Whereas the narrative "I" in Benn's short story "Weinhaus Wolf" does not become a writer—as was his dream—because for this profession "one should at least be able to read one's own handwriting" (II 134), Benn the MD, even though stuck with the same professional deformation, was already past the verdict of classical literature according to which handwriting and its readability were necessary conditions for becoming a poet. In Brussels, his World War I base, Benn relied every night on other people's misuse of "army equipment"⁸ in order to send ready-to-print typescripts to his publisher. And since those nameless people, for the first time in warfare, tended to be women,⁹ Benn, in 1936, simultaneously ditched two girl friends for the one (the daughter of an officer's widow) who had learned—in spite or because of her deeply deplored lack of higher education—to type "two hundred syllables per minute."¹⁰ That is why she made her *début* as his wife with the task of transforming the manuscript of "Weinhaus Wolf" according to modern typewriter standards. How literally true is Enright's poem in stating that

“the typewriter is creating a revolution in poetry” and “opening up new fields unheard of by Donne or Blake.” Hertha Benn, née von Wedemeyer, re-mained a “typegirl typegirl burning bride”¹¹ until July 1945, when the Red Army’s takeover of a formerly American-occupied German zone drove her to suicide.

Her deplored lack of education, by the way, only reflected the technical media of her work- and leisure-time. Benn wrote about his future wife and secretary: “When it comes down to it, there is nothing in her life but her job, then her mother, then her things, then gramophone records and dancing, and after that her job again.”¹² Neither Kracauer’s “Sociology of Employees” nor its novelistic transcription (Irmgard Keun’s “A Girl of Rayon”), could have defined the shorthand typist any better. Because her daily typing disassembled all speech (as Benn too would experience it) into black and discrete characters, there was nothing left but to take her flight into the comforting continuity of moving pictures at night or even—as was the case with Keun’s heroine—to become a dancer and poet herself on the exclusive basis of radio hits. The girl of rayon listened to the loudspeaker, sang the transmitted songs, added slightly alcoholized new lyrics and finally typed this poetic output as part of an autobiographical novel.¹³

And indeed, apart from unpublished “state security reasons,”¹⁴ it was for the technical revival of those oldest lyrics, the oral, memorized, and physiological ones, that the German civil broadcast had been introduced in 1923. The storage medium gramophone-record received (in accordance with McLuhan’s law that the content of a medium is always another medium) its adequate transmission medium and, in terms of statistics, a widespread address in all those uneducated female employees. Whenever Benn mentioned radio and/or jazz, the receiving equipment belonged to (real or fictitious) women.¹⁵

Alas, the poem made of black letters behaves quite differently. First of all, it has no address anymore, apart from the Muse (I 502) and philosophical interpreters. Secondly and according to an article published under the economic title “Summa summarum,” a poem is “the unpaid labor of the intellect” which, in the years between 1913 and 1926, earned Benn an average of just “four marks fifty” per month (IV 15-18). This sum of sums of the Gutenberg galaxies was reason enough to look for other and more rewarding channels. Benn succeeded in broadcasting some poems and essays via the Berliner Funkstunde, just after the rather controversial copyright of literary broadcasts was settled in favor of the writers. This was also reason enough to attempt his own political assumption of power in 1931 when the right-wing parties started to monopolize German radio. He

only came back from this campaign of radio waves in September 1933, realizing that a broadcast of his poems had been cancelled by the Department of Propaganda without any reasons given. Thus, Benn among many others (including the Jews) experienced the truth of a ministerial statement, according to which obsolete writers were still allowed to be printed—but only if they did not break the fascist state's monopoly of radio propaganda.

These conditions of electrified data transmission define Benn's poetry better than his own poetics ever could. Even a reference to Stefan George's typographical cult could not hide the fact that poetry henceforth had to compete with transmission media and not with storage media. Benn, under the restrictions of a mere consumer who admittedly "knew nothing of printing and book-making," gave a practical answer to the question of his "Prologue to a German Poetry Contest:" "Who is able instantly to produce a hit?" (III 407). Poems such as the six stanzas of "Melodies" proved this ability to be Benn's own:

Yes, with melodies — the questioner turns pale,
he is no man of numbers and cities anymore,
the clouds turn to dust above his resting place,
the ocean's surf below.

Sometimes you'll find zebras or antelopes
taking flight in the bush of river Njassa,
everything is gentle, lightfooted, from the tropics
there is haze, the drums, and entranced addiction.

And eruptions and elements
those think for even longer times:
all the five famous continents
are just impeding matter for the sea.

You are not early, you are not late,
most likely you are nothing at all,
and now Sibelius' "Finn's Song" on the air:
Valse triste.

Everything in minor, *con sordino*,
with calm glances and calm paces
from Palavas to Portofino
along the beautiful coastline.

Yes, melodies—very ancient beings,
they bring eternity to you:
Valse triste, valse gaie, valse never been,
floating apart in dark oceans. (III 272)

Even this poem, surely not among those “six to eight” which are, according to “Problems of Poetry,” to last beyond their author’s death (I 505), follows the order of that same lecture: it turns the production process of poetry into its own content. This happens, however, not in the sense of Mallarmé or George, Curtius or other friends whose “aestheticism” wished to make Benn last “before notabilities and Olympic Gods.” The becoming of a poet follows rather the model of typist girls who, as Kracauer remarked, did not really “know all hits,” but are known, caught, and gently slain by them.¹⁶ That is why the “you” of Benn’s self-address shrinks to a nothingness or to a medium that is knocked out by “melodies and songs”—following one of Benn’s poems written for a boxer and the bartender at his favorite bar (III 276). That is also why the melody runs as a recording “on the air” and why Benn considers “music which touches him deeply, not first class music in the sense of production.”¹⁷

So much for the electronics of entertainment as a priming charge for poetry. But as the technical sound track alias popular music calls (since 1927) for parallel image sequences alias sound films, the second stanza of the poem shifts to an Africa whose provoked or drug-induced life is mediated in exactly the same technical way. Benn’s essay on “Provocated Life” started like this: “Years ago they showed a film about blacks called ‘Hosiannah’ in Berlin. There you could observe black people getting entranced by singing together” (I 332). Literally deciphered, the first stanza therefore deals with radio, the second with film, from which facts and McLuhan’s law it is easy to derive that the third will transmit (via Wegener’s then totally innovative continental drift) the third and last medium at stake in poetic production. And indeed, one of Benn’s poems celebrated the State Library in Berlin, his book source of the twenties, as a “whore-house of sentences, a paradise of fever” (III 89), because “just a general survey, a scanning through the pages, was enough to create” in him “a small intoxication” (II 171). Thus, even the most traditional of all three media came down to those nineteenth-century picture books that had to be thumbed through in order to anticipate the higher degrees of intoxication introduced by the movies.

Summa summarum, therefore, Benn’s poems such as “Melodies” are the consummation and consumption of all the media sources they use and sketch in a freely associative manner until even the cold medium of typing and print can finally compete with hits in the charts. The *parlando* of verses such as “And now Sibelius’ ‘Finn’s Song’ on the air” actually quotes the style or promise of radio announcements, at least when made by a female voice—exactly that voice which Benn’s poem “Radio” misses every time

another German "station (on long wave, medium wave, short wave, and FM) just transmits professors' voices talking about 'science as such'" (III 453). However, since a poetic *petit bourgeois* such as Benn needs "substitutes: radio, newspapers, magazines" (III 453), he actually wrote a poem called "Valse triste," as if a lyrical title could announce music, not just words (III 72). Not to mention other titles whose competition with announcements of hits is so evident: "Chanson," "Bar," "Distant Songs," or even "Banana, yes, Banana."

This pseudomorphosis of poems into "songs" guaranteed their success. Verses, having become the medium of a medium, transmitted transmissions of radio recordings. Concerning his backyard in Berlin's Belle Alliance-Strasse, which inspires his biographer to offer only the usual socio-political associations and regrets, Benn himself was inspired in a media-social manner by the "well frequented music café which opened onto this yard" and poured out songs. The conditions of lyrical production in Bozener Strasse he even reduced to a technical formula of three different tables:

The first table in Benn's favorite bar was reserved for "experiencing bottles and at night some broadcasts." After this rather materialistic form of inspiration, a second table, in Benn's medical parlor was set aside for "scribbling down" in his indecipherable doctor's handwriting the radio messages received the night before. The third table was in the same place but equipped with a microscope and a typewriter for transcription of the lyrical scribbling into something "objective" and fit to print (IV 172). Obviously the whole operation, exactly as in any computer, ran through three necessary and sufficient steps of data processing.

First: find or contact a data source.

Second: receive these data via established channels.

Third: store the data in your memory banks.

To describe the same operation in the much shorter and more prosaic terms Benn introduced under the title "radar thinker:" "*Peilen, loten, horten*" (II 436)—to scan, to sound, to hoard.

Today's literary critics could only profit from this radar thought, since their constitutive models of writing, book, and library, as they predominate even in poststructuralism, obviously require some modernization. Literature itself, whatever its subjects and topics may be, is first of all a form of data processing; it receives and stores, processes and transmits information in a manner in no wise structurally different from computers. On the other hand, modern computers accomplish not only what fascinated Benn about them, namely the solution or algorithmization of every

“thinkable” or philosophical problem and the fulfillment of the otherwise unfulfillable wish of his radio-aesthetics, namely that of “transforming letters into sounds” (II 265). Moreover, since computers implement the general logic of data, addresses, and commands with unsurpassable precision, their terminology would be helpful to literary history.

Thus, for instance, it was only after Gutenberg’s innovation gave exact addresses to books by making numerable their henceforth identical pages that baroque drama—under the command of a prince and addressee of the book’s dedication—was able to permutate and combine two different memory banks, namely the historical facts on the one hand (or shelf) and the rhetorical figures on the other.¹⁸ It was only after general alphabetization was instituted society-wide that romantic landscape poetry, as demonstrated by Richard Alewyn, was able to present an optical and acoustical nature to its readers as if they received, instead of printed letters, the described sensory data themselves.¹⁹ And it is only with Benn—in the age of film and gramophone—that such romantic authorship falls under his ironic sentence: “Today’s poetry does not develop out of a tearful heart watching the sun go down” (I 545). Certainly, this exclusion of sensory perception and coherence (walking with “calm paces” from Palavaz to Nietzsche’s Portofino would simply not be feasible) does not exclude landscape poetry in general, but its new field or landscape will be that of technical media. Once God himself—conceived in Benn’s last radio drama as the “voice behind the curtain”—announces that “information exchange is today’s cosmos of the white earth” (II 428), there remains hardly any other choice.

The “Novel of the Phenotype,” Benn’s World War Two prose, stated right from the start that “radio is highly superior to nature since it is more inclusive and may be varied at will” (II 182). And in fact, it is variable tuning capacitors that made it possible to switch—notwithstanding all war restrictions of German Volksempfänger and prohibitive monitoring of enemy stations—from “science as such” to popular music and the voices of female announcers. Quite literally, the many dispersed radio stations replace the twofold baroque archive of polyhistorical data and rhetorical figures or that unique and deep pit of the “I” from which Hegel saw arise all possible topics of a literate poetic subject.²⁰ For Benn, radio becomes the source of poetry, just as Sunday papers were that of his essays (II 427). The price paid for such a spreading of bandwidth is what he calls the liquidation of “all seriousness of things” and, still more precisely, that of the basic philosophical belief according to which all things had “engraved traits,

destinations, orders and letters of *marque*" (II 235) or, in other words, all data would contain their own addresses.

To make a long story short, only our time of technical media allows at once a purely statistical notion of the real and an operative one of the symbolic which Lacan brought down to a Markov chain, that is, to a recursive function of statistical dispersions. Likewise, the typewritten statics of Benn's so called "Static Poems" presuppose them to be at the same time "statistical poems."²¹ On the one hand, poetry constitutes "a huge catalogue, containing everything" (II 430) but lacking all call numbers or addresses; on the other hand (obviously an indirect quotation from Shannons' "Mathematical Theory of Information"), poetry has "to turn entropy around towards continuous production and reproduction of the improbable and the complexly arranged in order to achieve extraordinary results" (I 350). On the one hand, then, suicide statistics of the *Wehrmacht*, which it was Benn's official function at the Supreme Command during World War Two to record; on the other, information as an inverse function of probability or random noise.

The early expressionist Benn tried to access this noise, this impossible real, by means of intoxication. In German words, *Rausch* produced *Rauschen*. Benn's novelistic doubles such as Roenne or Pameelen had to associate without end with monitored casino talk, until the words of that everyday language lost all reference (call it the real) and all addresses (call it mankind), just to become senseless neurophysiological data in the hero's brain. As a discursive event, however, all this randomization of words originated not from intoxicated freedom, but from scientific experiments. It was Professor Theodor Ziehen, Benn's superior at Berlin's psychiatric hospital, who with whip in hand commanded the associations of his test persons to "Go on!" (II 325). That is why expressionist texts were directly confronted "with the problem of the uniformity of the psychic process, yes, confronted with some psychology dean's association experiments on his students and the merely stupid uniformity of reaction and quality" (III 396). But such a scientific intoxication could not bear a life's work. In the same text which turned away from the ecstasies of youth in order to find "a day without exceptionalities" (II 106), Benn's fascination with radio and gramophone found its first mention. The wireless produces, without the need for experiments or association tests, words in statistical dispersion, freed from reference and addresses (except for the numerical identification of stations). The fact that modern poetry is made of words, but that words do not exist in nature, forced the switchover of its data source to mass media.

To quote Benn speaking about the phenotypical poet of 1954: "He sits at home, in his modest room, is no communist, but still wants to have some money—perhaps a little—but not to live in prosperity. He sits at home, turns on the radio, grasps into the night. There is a voice in space, trembling, glooming, but darkening, then breaks off, a blueness faded away. But what reconciliation, what immediate reconciliation, what dream embracement of the living and the dead, of memories and unmemorable, it hits him completely out of control, it comes from empires compared to which the sun and the stars would be disabled, it comes from afar, it is: achieved" (I 590).

At first, this poetics of formal achievement sounds like consumer music or "l'art pour l'art," as Benn himself conceded (I 591). However, its subject is not art, but a media landscape, as strictly analyzable as in romanticism. Proof comes from the only parallel passage in Benn's complete works: "But me, I grasp into the night, there is a voice in space, I tune the radio further, it trembles, it breaks off, a blueness faded away" (II 408). Obviously, the broadcast voice does not stop, because a musical composition or a lyrical performance would have reached its achievement, but because there are tuning capacitors on every radio. The listening poet himself produces a statistical dispersion of discourses and thereby a Ziegarnik-effect which, by putting words on a background of technical absence, reveals their very materiality.

Lyrical practice, therefore, equals an interruption in computer systems. The poem explicitly called "Radio" starts up like this: "Title. Quotation mark. Science as such. Endquote. New line. Whenever I hear this kind of professors' trash on the radio, I'm really knocked out..." Poetic speech acts cut up high-brow transmissions even before their speakers can finish an initial statement. In those cases of interception, the switching of a tuning capacitor or, still more simply, of one's attention will do. Benn, although a mere consumer of technical media, already experimented along precisely the lines William Burroughs would explore with engineering precision. The project of an "Electronic Revolution" was not based anymore on radio, but on the World War Two development of tape recorders that for the first time enabled everyone to record, cut up, and finally feed back whatever official voices Burroughs' cut-ups were literally meant to destroy. In contrast to him, Benn's metaphysics of art as an "always and never," a presence and absence, a "*valse triste*" and a "*valse never been*" only demonstrate the unmemorizability of broadcast transmissions before World War Two. "It's here and then it's gone," as Mick Jagger sang about radio love.

Absence, however, poses the question of death. All media, as Klaus Theweleit's *Book of the Kings* has shown for Benn and many other artists, assure voyages to the dead, to the necropolises of a given culture.²² That is why Benn's so-called "dream embracements of the living and the dead" are strictly coextensive with the state-of-the-art in transmission technology. For more than three thousand years, as Diodor of Sicily has remarked, only writing could guarantee the European dead a memory amongst the living. In our days, however, all those ghosts and spirits have left the books to become radio waves, ectophotographs, or, as Roger Waters put it, "a gunner's dying voice on the intercom."²³ Modern transmission technologies are all derived from war technologies. And the disproportionate relation between Benn's little practical radio experiments and his all too theoretical radar thought simply reflects the gap growing between commercial consumption and military optimization of one and the same technology. According to Benn, it makes no difference whether human "space" is destroyed by "radio waves" or by "Air Force fighters" (II 153) which, since World War Two, intercommunicate by those very radio waves. Whereupon he could give, as early as 1940, an all too precise prediction of World War Three:

The ongoing war is certainly only a prelude, a prewar. The next one will gather whole continents in a fist, and only the Gods know whether this hand be white, yellow, or negroid brown. But there will be only one center left, and stratospheric bombers with one thousand miles per hour and flight ranges surpassing six or seven equators will traverse the ice-cold, blue and stony spaces filled with soundless explosions of nuclear fission. (26)

Statements like this did not pose as a critical theory of war. On the contrary, Benn was well aware of the fact that "battles give birth to mind or spirit itself" and consequently that not philosophers but "experts on missiles or on fighter jets" are the true neighbors of poets (II 190). That is why his poetry, once in fascist 1933 and again in World-War-Two 1941, ran the inherent risk of issuing commands, via radio channels, on absence and presence, death and life in general. This can be proven by means of a simple philological comparison between two versions of a famous poem that Heidegger's equally famous commentary did not quite exhaust.

In peacetime 1929, Benn wrote a poem with the highly autoreferential title "*Schöpfung*" which comprises both creation and genesis.

Creation

The first I, the first word—
 both coming from jungles full of crocodiles and mud,
 coming after all those beings
 condemned only to gulps and screams.

One word, one I—a fluff, a fire,
 a torch's blue, a starline,
 from where, where to—into the vast
 and empty space around the world, around the I.
 (III 415)

In wartime 1941, when Benn worked as a high-ranking medical staff officer in Berlin's Bendlerstrasse, at the Supreme Command of the German *Wehrmacht*, the poem underwent a reformulation. Plausibly enough, the first stanza dealing with nature, evolution and steady transitions from animal to man disappeared altogether. For purposes of the *Oberkommando der Wehrmacht*, Benn kept only the second stanza, this lyrical circumscription of a radio voice that, by being switched on and off, produces in memories that everlasting Zeigarnik-effect as it had been experimentally discovered some years before.

One word

One word, one sentence—judged life, sudden sense
 arise out of its ciphers,
 the sun comes to a standstill, the spheres to silence
 and everything gathers around it.

One word—a brightness, a flight, a fire,
 a flame's throwing, a starline—
 and then again that vast darkness
 in empty spaces around the world and the I. (III 208)

At first sight, the differences between the poem's two versions seem negligible. Both define the one and only poetical word which Benn certainly derived from St. John as the interplay between presence and absence, switching on and switching off. (Four years before, Claude Elwood Shannon had conceived a first, not yet computerized implementation of Boolean algebra by means of simple switching relays.)²⁴ But from 1929 to 1941, Benn changed most of the words which figured as absolute metaphors of that one absolute word. Flights or planes replaced the fluff; flame-throwers the blue of torches: truly a kind of lyrical rearmament. To

quote from a letter which Benn wrote that same year to a friend: "You know, I sign: in lieu of the Supreme Commander of the Wehrmacht, M.D. Benn."²⁵ That is why he must have been among those very few Germans who knew about the secret development of the first fighter jet in history. But since the mass production of this machine, the Messerschmitt 262-A, commenced only in 1944, and since the very word "jet" was obviously not used on the German side, stratospheric bombers in their empty spaces went in Benn's prose under the title of "Flammenstrahlbomber"²⁶ (II 190) and in his poetry under the ciphers of "flight" or "flame-throwing."

Thus, the proximity of jet-experts to poets is proven and throws its flaming light on poetics. Heidegger's suspicion that a "creative transformation" is more likely to produce space satellites than poems, holds literally true, at least when satellites are tracked back to their origins, the *Wehrmacht's* "experts on rocket development and fighter jets" (II 190).

In 1939, the Department of Propaganda and People's Education had stated that radio as a new means of total mobilization brought down the number of people not addressable by the Führer's command to four or five per hundred of the population.²⁷ At the same time, the U.S. Navy started research to test whether Orson Welles' radio-simulated invasion from Mars could be turned into a technique of general military mobilization. Poetry coping with such strategic transmission ranges would have to issue orders capable of bringing the sun to a standstill and everybody, even in outer space, to gather around its command. But this, precisely, is what Benn's rewritten first stanza did claim. It identified, absolutely not by chance, the absolute and, that is, final word with a "cipher" that, notwithstanding all its romantic literary connotations, had a precise military meaning in World War Two. Just as Germany's military FM system—without which the *Blitzkrieg* would have been an impossibility—culminated in a secret enciphering typewriter named Enigma, so did Benn's poetics. As to the absoluteness of encoded radio commands, the transmission of poems competed with lightning wars. Finally, all data, all addresses, and all commands imploded in one and only one word.

Only this technological ecstasy of 1941 can motivate Benn's new and all-too-understandable postwar modesty in competing henceforth with hits in the charts. It was not only a departure from decisionism or fascism, but a renewed technical separation between data, addresses, and commands.

In Benn's early expressionism, the data had been found in everyday talk, the addresses in an associative brain, and the commands on the side of his doctor (II 324), whose whip called for the unending output of words

or texts. The poetics of radio transferred a miniature of this command power to a consumer who could switch transmissions on and off. At the end, however, Benn's second and last radio drama surrendered all power to a distant God who commands two bells. "The high one is called: 'faster, not too many details!', the second one: 'not too fast, more depth!'" (II 412). Because God has disappeared behind a curtain, only "able to do what he may do, in the dark" (II 440), he has been left only the acoustical channel to command his test persons in front of the curtain, the *accelerandi* and *ritardandi* of their never-ending associations. This is again the exact method Ziehen applied in 1898 to reach his psychophysiological "findings concerning the track of association and its speed under certain conditions (such as fatigue)."²⁸ But whereas Benn's first superior used labs and elementary schoolrooms, Benn's final God shifts to technical media. "The Voice behind the Curtain" is a radio drama squared, a radio drama that transmits its own separation of commands and data, of transmission control and recording studio. In a mere acoustic world, as described by Nietzsche, the first philosopher of media,²⁹ and implemented by BBC's Richard Hughes in the very first radio drama (which was about the darkness of a Welsh pit disaster), in an acoustic world like this even the optical channel between control room and recording studio (usually a window and some red lights) must be replaced by bells if it is to be transmittable at all. But instead of requesting once again the power to control and command by his words, the writer of the radio drama remains as modest as all his fictitious doubles in front of the curtain: a subject subjected to technical media. Not the author but the discourse that the other—or "God"—transmits is the radio voice behind the curtain.

At least, as a radio consumer, Benn had reached the reachable. It was others at the controls who transmitted his essays, radio dramas and poems. A recursive loop between input and output had been closed, especially when the voices in front of the curtain publicly performed and demonstrated the production of lyrical poetry out of hits and Sunday paper cut-ups (II 432f. and II 439). Even the dream of the poem "Radio" became true, that request for female radio voices instead of professorial "science as such." Summa summarum: since he knew of the existence of "experts, for instance authors of radio dramas" who "lived for a year on the payment for one radio play of an hour's length and even bought cars and houses" (IV 354), Benn was able to solve his financial problems. Whereas "the Nazis had occupied every place where there was money and even kicked him out of the radio,"³⁰ the Adenauer administration bought one of Benn's radio typescripts "for the highest price ever paid for one and

a half-hour's worth of radio literature. At least in this regard it was a success."³¹

One day after his seventieth birthday the radio poet Benn—who had mentioned TV only once, in a radio-drama poem about the death of an American newspaper czar (II 433)—gave his first TV interview. Two months later he was dead. "The skies change their stars—you have to go!" (III 344). The media changed their stars; he had to go.

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NOTES

1. Cf. Michel Foucault, "Passe-frontières de la philosophie." *Le Monde* 6 Sept. 1986:12.

2. Here and throughout, the Roman and Arabic ciphers refer to the volumes and pages of Gottfried Benn, *Gesammelte Werke*, ed. Dieter Wellershoff, Wiesbaden 1959-61.

3. Cf. Jürgen Schröder, *Gottfried Benn: Poesie und Sozialisation*, Stuttgart-Berlin-Köln-Mainz 1978, and Oskar Sahlberg, *Gottfried Benns Phantasiewelt: "Wo lust und Leiche Winkt..."*, Munich 1977.

4. Martin Heidegger, *Unterwegs zur Sprache*, Pfullingen 1959, 207.

5. Cf. Friedrich Kittler, *Gramophone Film Typewriter*, forthcoming (University of Minnesota Press).

6. Cf. Niklas Luhmann, "Das Problem der Epochenbildung und die Evolutionstheorie." In: *Epochenschwellen und Epochenstrukturen im Diskurs der Literatur- und Sprachgeschichte*, ed. Hans-Ulrich Gumbrecht and Ursula Link-Heer, Frankfurt/M. 1985, p. 19-21.

7. Cf. Sigmund Freud, *Die Traumdeutung. Gesammelte Werke*, vol. II/III, p. 284, London 1942.

8. Gottfried Benn, letter to Kurt Wolff, April 22, 1916, in: G.B., *Den Traum alleine tragen. Neue Texte, Briefe, Dokumente*, ed. Paul Raabe and Max Niedermayer, Munich 1969, 27.

9. Cf. Ursula Nienhaus, *Berufsstand weiblich. Die ersten weiblichen Angestellten*, Berlin 1982, 45-48.

10. Benn, letter to Ellinor Büller-Klinkowström, Jan. 1, 1937, in *Den Traum alleine tragen*, 184-186.

11. This is how Enright's marvelous poem "The Typewriter Revolution" typescribed Blake's famous line. Cf. Dennis Joseph Enright, *The Typewriter Revolution and Other Poems*, New York 1971, 101.

12. Cf. Benn, letter to Ellinor Büller-Klinkowström, Feb. 6, 1937, in: *Den Traum alleine tragen*, 193.

13. Cf. Irmgard Keun, *Das kunstseidene Mädchen*. Roman (1932). Düsseldorf 1979, 94f.

14. Cf. Winfried B. Lerg, *Die Entstehung des Rundfunks in Deutschland. Herkunft und Entwicklung eines publizistischen Mittels*, 2. ed. Berlin 1970, 188.

15. Cf. for instance Benn, letter to Ellinor Büller-Klinkowström, Jan. 31, 1937, l.c. 190: Benn, letter to Kaethe von Porada, Sept. 19, 1933, in: *Den Traum alleine tragen*, 140.
16. Cf. Siegfried Kracauer, *Die Angestellten. Aus dem neuesten Deutschland* (1930). In: *Schriften*, ed. Karsten Witte, Frankfurt/M. 1971-79.
17. Benn, letter to F.W. Oelze, Feb. 5, 1944, in G.B., *Briefe an F.W. Oelze*, ed. Harald Steinhagen and Jürgen Schröder, Wiesbaden-Munich 1977-1979, vol. I, 192.
18. Cf. Elizabeth Eisenstein, *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change*, Cambridge 1979.
19. Cf. Richard Alewyn, "Eine Landschaft Eichendorffs." In: R.A., *Probleme und Gestalten*, Frankfurt/M. 1974.
20. Cf. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Jenaer Realphilosophie*, ed. Johannes Hoffmeister, Hamburg 1931, 180.
21. Benn, letter to Friedrich Wilhelm Oelze,
22. Cf. Klaus Theweleit, *Buch der Könige*, vol. I: *Orpheus und Euridike*, Frankfurt/M. 1988. Death cult psychoanalysis is placed at the controls of this media connection in Laurence Rickels' *Aberrations of Mourning: Writing on German Crypts*, Detroit 1988.*
23. Cf. Pink Floyd, "The Final Cut. A requiem for the post war dream," London 1983 (EMI LP).
24. Cf. Claude Elwood Shannon,
25. Benn, letter to Oelze, 04/10/1941, vol. I, p. 267.
26. All three typescripts of Benn's "Roman des Phänotyp" which were probably typed by his wife and are kept at the Marbach literary archive (to which I owe thanks) show the spelling "Flammenstrahlbomben" instead of "Flammenstrahlbomber." But these bombs simply did not exist.
27. Cf. Heinz Pohle, *Der Rundfunk als Instrument der Politik: Zur geschichte des deutschen Rundfunks von 1923/1938*, Hamburg 1955, 339.
28. Theodor Ziehen, *Die Ideenassoziation des Kindes*, Berlin 1898-1900, vol. I, 6.
29. Cf. Friedrich Kittler, "The Mechanized Philosopher" in *Looking After Nietzsche*, ed. Laurence Rickels, Albany (forthcoming).
30. Benn, letters to F.W. Oelze, June 21, 1941, in *Briefe*, vol. I, 276.
31. Benn, letter to F.W. Oelze, August 6, 1950, in *Briefe*, vol. II, 55.

*Cf. Friedrich Kittler, "Vorwort," Rickels, *Der unbetracrbare Tod*, Vienna 1989.