

*Dan Jacobson*

## Request Stop

THE door of the aeroplane opened, and the hostess's voice rang in the dazed silence: "All passengers out, please." There was a pause, then a stir among the passengers. Slowly they stood up, stretched themselves, felt the stillness of the plane swaying beneath them like the sea. Then they began filing out, stepping carefully down the ladder that an African had wheeled to receive them. At the door another African squirted them with some sort of insecticide. They gasped a little at it, smiled shakily. Then they stepped out on the runway and looked around them. But hastily they looked back at one another; they could not face the desolation of the bush. All round them was bush, just bush, and one road leading from the airport to God knows where, disappearing very shortly in the bush. The airport itself was long and clean and almost entirely deserted. There were a few buildings, a control tower, a small refreshment room, and the rest was the concrete runway, and a long stretch of grass, and the bush. A small two-seater plane, bright red, was parked near a corrugated iron hangar.

Heat hung over the airport, as heavy as water, and the passengers' limbs moved slowly through the heat as though they were dragging them through water. The air was quite still, it almost seemed to sag within the heat-bound, bush-bound space that had been cleared to receive the silver planes dropping out of the sky.

The passengers moved in a bedraggled little group across the runway towards the refreshment room. An African sat at a table and took their passports. He was very neatly dressed, and

very cool, paging through each passport, and then putting them aside in a little heap. Another African, perhaps an apprentice, sat to the side and watched him. A white South African passenger stared for a long time at the two Africans: he still had not recovered from being squirted by a black man. He looked around for someone to talk to, but the few fellow South Africans on the plane seemed too sunken under the heat to take any notice of who took their passports or who squirted them with insecticide. He did approach one, and gestured towards the trim black man looking through the passports: "Wouldn't have that sort of thing in our country, would we?"

"No," the other replied, staring listlessly at the black man. "It's their funeral, not ours." But whether it was a funeral for the whites or for the blacks in the country they were flying over, he did not say. Carrying his jacket slung over his shoulders, and with his shirt hanging out of his trousers, he walked into the refreshment room. The other South African was still staring at the African, then his gaze shifted to the passengers still straggling across the runway, a ragged little troupe in bright colours, but all walking wearily. Then across the bare length of the airport, then to the bush, and then to the great exhausted sky, where high up, two birds circled against the yellowish frame, two small lazy specks gyrating meaninglessly and frighteningly in the desert of air.

THE African was querying a passport possessed by a small hairy Greek who could only speak Greek. He was flying back to

Greece. No one among the passengers or anyone on the airport could speak Greek. So they all stared accusingly at him, and he stared back at them deprecatingly. He wore black steel spectacles, the sort less attractive schoolgirls wear to match their gyms, and his false teeth moved uneasily within his closed mouth. The African went on with the other passports, only leaving the Greek's out of the little pile, and keeping the Greek waiting in the shade. He stared sadly at the airport. His eyes were quite expressionless, as dull as leather. He said nothing. The other passengers filed past him, going into the refreshment room. They stared at him without pity, without any emotion at all. It was too hot, and in any case, he did seem to be impossible, in his neat black suit that spoke of poverty among the coloured rags of the other passengers, speaking at least of comfortable circumstances. Yet he did not ask for pity: he was quite blank. The gauze door clattered behind the last of the passengers, and then the crew, consciously casual, like all air-crews, sauntered across the tarmac. One remained behind, to watch the Africans disinfecting the plane, standing with his hands in his pockets and his cap on the back of his head. Another, also with his hands in his pockets, was walking to the control tower. The door clattered again, and now only the Greek was still outside, with the two Africans.

Inside the refreshment room it was very crowded. The passengers drooped on the wooden benches, too fatigued even to get the cool drinks that an African was offering behind a counter. Another African stood behind the counter too, behind a little collection of wood-carvings: little elephants, lions, queer drooping faces. There was another room behind the main one, separated from it by a bead curtain. The women passengers looked at it inquiringly. At last one of the bolder approached the plane's engineer who was nursing a bottle of green cool drink in his hand. "Is that the ladies' lavatory?"

"No, that's where they make tea." He was a big, red-faced man, and his stomach bulged beneath his khaki shirt, and long khaki trousers.

"Where—then?" She gestured questioningly.

"Outside I suppose."

"Oh." The woman hesitated. "Well, I'll go and ask outside," she said. Uncertainly she moved to the door. With a great heaving, another woman got up to follow her, and then another. The plane engineer put the bottle to his forehead, to get the coolness from the glass, and rested like that.

Then the bead curtain rustled aside and a tall Englishman came into the room. All the passengers looked up at him. He stood with the beads swaying slightly behind, and a small smile flickered for a moment across his face. He said in a strained, rather tired voice: "Is everybody being attended to all right?"

"Yes," they said. He looked like a *Punch* caricature of the Englishman in the tropics. He was tall and thin, dressed in khaki, with khaki hose pulled up neatly just below his knees, and he had a long thin face, with a drooping brown moustache beneath his prominent nose. His skin was sallow, quite washed out by the heat, and the hair on the back of his thin, bony hands was burned to yellow. He looked around the room, his eyes jerking from point to point, from passenger to passenger. They were very lonely eyes. He had been looking at too little for too long. At last he walked behind the counter and stood next to the African there. His smile still flickered now and again. He did not seek to open a conversation, but stood still and upright.

With a few guffaws, some of the male passengers got up to go to the lavatory outside. The men seemed to recover from their flight more quickly than the women still remaining in the rest room, who were all drooping and haggard, clutching lace handkerchiefs in the palms of their sweating hands, their blouses and tailored linen suits in disorder. The softness of their flesh seemed softer and more disorganised than ever.

STILL, some of them were quite unaffected, just as some of the men were drained with sickness and heat, and leaned their faces on their hands, resting elbows on the stained, plain table tops. One woman was negotiating with

the African selling the wooden curios. "Will he take my money?" she asked in a high shrill voice, that scratched like a loose fingernail against wood through the heat-drugged room.

The Englishman's smile flickered again on his face. "He'll take any sort of money," he said. Even his upper-class, orthodox accent sounded faded, wearing through in that country like a jacket that had been used for too long.

Automatically, the woman smiled archly back at him. She flirted without thought, as a cat arches its back. Even there, lost in the bush and dependent on the aeroplane alone on the runway she arched an eyebrow, leaned slightly forward and smiled, running through her repertory of tricks as water runs when released down a gully. The Englishman noticed it, and his own will stirred to the woman. He looked at her, and one hand came forward on the counter and beat a couple of raps on the flattened zinc sheet. He said suddenly: "I wouldn't buy them, you know."

"Oh—why not?"

"They're not the real thing," he said a little jerkily. "It's tourist stuff." He made an indecisive gesture with his hand. He smiled at the woman. She was hovering, with her hand-bag open, wondering whether to buy or not. She took out her purse, and cast an appealing glance towards him. She came to her decision.

"They're cheap enough." And she took out some silver.

He said in a disinterested voice, "Yes, they're cheap enough." And he did not look again while the woman made her purchase. Once she had done so others among the passengers came forward and toyed with the carvings. But few of them bought, out of inertia perhaps. Nothing seemed important but the heat and the continuation of the flight, awaiting them. It was impossible to take a tourist's interest in what was going on around them. No one snapped anything, though one or two carried cameras, and those who were outside were looking only for a lavatory, and were not aware at all of the bush and the heat and the banana trees, except as an oppression. So they bought practically nothing, and soon drifted away from the counter and went back to the benches and their sickness.

Then for a little while there was silence. The passengers talked quietly to one another, and a fly that had managed to get in despite the gauze buzzed loudly above the opened but unused cool drinks. The African waved his hand at it and it flew off. "Don't send it to me!" a man said and got up waving his hands. A few people smiled. The fly buzzed against the gauze, until the door opened with a bang, and the air hostess stood there: "All aboard for Entebbe," she cried.

A general moan went up from the passengers, complaining, humorous. "Goodness me!" the hostess said. "You wouldn't like to stay here, would you?"

"Christ, no," someone said fervently, and they all began filing out. The gauze door swung open, leaving behind the cool drinks and the Africans and the tall and lonely Englishman. The glare struck at them; they flinched before it, and then went on towards the plane shining like a mirror on the whitish tarmac. The last of the crew was entering the plane. Nearer at hand, the Greek still stood in the shade.

"The hostess will return your passports on the plane," the one official enunciated. He still held one passport in his hand, waving it as he spoke. He looked at it, looked at the Greek, who now had clear drops of sweat on his forehead, and sliding slowly down his cheeks. He turned and said something to the younger man next to him, and then pushed the passport away from him. The Greek stepped forward and took it and began walking to the plane. The two men watched him walk away. One smiled with all his white teeth.

**B**UT surprise! Someone was staying there. Look, they were in a jeep, with all their baggage, and two people had come to meet them. The travellers were easily recognisable, the man was wearing long trousers, while the others who had come to meet them were in khaki shirts and shorts. One or two of the airport officials in peaked caps were also standing round. The jeep was pointed towards the road that led to the bush, and the passengers stared in wonder at the two people who lived here, and yet had not simply been found at the airport, who were thus not fixtures of the place,

but real people. A gear grated in, and with a whine, the jeep was off. As it turned into the impenetrable-seeming bush, the woman passenger half-turned and waved, but whether at the airport officials whom she knew, or just farewell to her former fellow-passengers, no one could say. The jeep was out of sight, but through the sluggish air they still heard its noise as they dragged slowly towards the plane. One man had his hand on the back of his neck, shielding it from the sun. A passenger came from behind a banana tree near the refreshment hut, and hurried after the others. They had all climbed into the plane, except for one woman passenger. She stood hesitating for a moment before the flight of steps, and then went to the side of it, looking up at the plane. She turned her head and was violently sick. The hostess stood bored at her elbow, then helped the gasping woman into the plane. The bright silver door swung closed, and now the plane was sealed, ready to travel, with all the passengers sealed inside it.

The plane taxied to a far corner of the field, and then tested its engines, each of them rising

to a great roar, and slackening off again. Dust and bits of grass blew wildly, brown and white, in a funnel of wind, towards the bush. The last engine slackened off, and from the control tower strange sounds thundered across the runway. Then slowly, moving slowly at first, but gaining speed quickly, moving like some great unknown insect, moving on black round legs, the plane roared across the airport, and lifted, and swung up towards the sky. The sky, that yellow daze of space, roared with the noise of its engines, until it was far away, far above the bush, and the refreshment room where the one Englishman stood in the doorway and watched it go, far above the control tower and the limp windsock, above the white tarmac, far away from the streak of vomit that had been left, a human mark on the ground.

Vibrating in their padded shell, the passengers undid their safety-belts and stared at their *Readers' Digests*. The airport was a white strip in the bush beneath them, but soon that too disappeared, and there was only the bush, meaninglessly scarred, and later some cloud near to hand.

Michael Hamburger

## Art and Nihilism: The Poetry of Gottfried Benn

GOTTFRIED BENN'S status in post-war Germany is very nearly as high as T. S. Eliot's in post-war England; like Eliot, Benn is a critic as well as a poet and has done much to create the taste by which his work is judged and appreciated. But here the comparison ends; for while Eliot's criticism is a re-examination of other poets' work and a re-discovery of tradition, most of Benn's is a direct or indirect commentary on his own practice. As for his criteria, they are as different as possible from Eliot's Christian humanism, being anti-Christian, anti-humanistic and—if we accept them at their face value—exclusively æsthetic. Though he has lately been described as “one of the grand old men of literary Europe,” Benn retains all the characteristics of an *enfant terrible*. As a poet, he has been obliged to consolidate, if not to retreat from, a position reached nearly thirty years ago; but his critical utterances remain provocative because they form part of a lifelong campaign of aggressive self-defence. This may be one reason why “literary Europe” has not yet endorsed the German valuation of Benn's work; another is that his best poetry, by its very nature, is untranslatable.

The fact that Gottfried Benn is alive at all has something to do with his high reputation; for he is the sole survivor of a generation and a school of poets who were doomed to exile, silence, or early death. Benn was born in 1886; his first book of poems appeared in 1912, a year that seems more remote to most

Germans than to most Englishmen. Of the leading poets of Benn's generation, Georg Trakl, Georg Heym, and Alfred Lichtenstein have been dead for forty years. It would be foolish to pretend that a living writer's reputation is not affected by circumstances of this kind, largely irrelevant as they are to his work. Much of the interest that attaches to Benn's writings and utterances is the interest aroused by the sole survivor from a great shipwreck.

BENN'S present status cannot be understood without a rather long glance back at the movement of which he is the last active representative. This movement is Expressionism; and it dominated more than two decades which were extraordinarily rich in promise and excitement. If I have spoken of doom and shipwreck, it is because so much of this promise remained unfulfilled when the events of 1933 brought Expressionism to a sudden end. It is true that the movement was already in decline; and, in a certain sense, it had been doomed from the start, because “begotten by despair upon impossibility.” But the banning and dispersal of its members had the effect of once again disrupting the continuity of German literature and of suppressing the new growth that would certainly have followed this organic decline.

The years between 1914 and 1933 were a period of astonishing activity in German literature; there was such a wealth of talent and originality that it is no exaggeration to speak of a literary renaissance. The comparison