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The "Good Man from Cologne": Heinrich Böll's Literary Ethics

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Due to his ethical views, which he expressed in his literary works, numerous lectures, essays, in addition, journalistic articles, Böll received his nickname "the good man from Cologne" quite early on. And quite rightly so, as it will be proven, even though literary critics and scholars – unlike the general public – have regarded this in more negative and critical terms (e.g. Stern, 1977) and even reproached him for it every now and then.

There is no doubt that Böll was a Moralist (Glatz, 1999, 1) because he has represented numerous ethical principles in his literary (and journalistic) works. Although he was faithful, believed in God, and was strongly under the impression of the Catholic milieu, his ethics is secularized and attached to this world and his own experiences.

World War II should not be transfigured but accurately described and explained

In Böll's works, there is no heroism or glorification of war. Even descriptions of battles, which in the public's opinion and even in German literature – of course with exceptions like Remarque – are mistakenly understood as the most important part of the war and even for THE war itself, are rarely found in Böll's works. And even then, these battles last briefly – such as the descriptions of battles in the novel *And Where Were You, Adam?* (*Wo warst du, Adam?*): the first battle in the first chapter takes a few minutes followed by Feinhals being wounded and carried away. In the sixth chapter, *Wehrmacht* soldiers are picked up on the road down to the front to bring the advancing Russian tanks to a halt: the action takes several dozen minutes, several grenades explode, and a few soldiers are killed. Then the *Wehrmacht* soldiers must pull back and as they are boarding the trucks, they are awarded military medals, that is, pieces of sheet metal.



What does the war, that is, World War II consist of in Böll's works? Mainly from hunger, thirst, marching, and absurd and stupid commands. It chiefly consists of the loitering in the barracks that have a specific barrack and canteen smell or of periodic visits to the pub or brothels. These descriptions make up at least three-quarters or even four-fifths of Böll's war novels and narratives.

World War II also consists of war crimes in which even the "simple soldiers" participate. In the seventh chapter of *And Where Were You, Adam?* Böll depicts the transportation of Jews to concentration camps and their subsequent murder. This insistence on the "realistic" view of World War II, in which Böll has spent six years of his life as a simple soldier – his formative years between the ages of 21 and 27 – and which he got to know quite well, forms the foundation of his ethics.

World War II should not be forgotten

Part of Böll's ethics was that World War II, during the period of the German economic miracle, should not be forgotten and the terrible events should not be swept under the carpet. This comes through only in Böll's novels and short stories, whose central theme is World War II, but also in those works that deal with the post-war period, only now it is in the form of the protagonists' memories: in *House without Guardians* (*Haus ohne Hüter*) from 1954, particularly pronounced in *Billiards at Half-Past Nine* (*Billard um halb zehn*) from 1959, but also in *The Clown* (*Ansichten eines Clowns*) from 1963 and again amplified in *Group Portrait with Lady* (*Gruppenbild mit Dame*) from 1971 in which he even incorporated parts of the protocols of the Nuremberg Trials.

Böll's intention was to remind the reader and the German society of the importance to repeatedly remember World War II, as a warning so that such a war never happens again. Through such remembrance, Böll became, along with some of his fellow writers such as Günter Grass, Siegfried Lenz and others, a pioneer of the onset of and – at least partially successful – of the dealing with the past in West Germany in the 1970s and 1980s.

Naming the culprits (institutions, organizations, groups) of World War II

Naming the culprits of the Nazi crimes in Germany, as well as in the lands conquered by the Third Reich, shapes the framework of Böll's works: the persecution of Jews and their deportation to concentration camps and their destruction there, tracking and destroying political opponents or anyone who speaks against the Third

Reich, and the defilement of culture in the service of Nazi ideology. In his works Böll mainly accuses the institutions and organizations, such as the Wehrmacht, which he clearly portrays as active perpetrators whereby he disagrees with the popular and prevailing theory among the general public in the 1950s that only the SS units had committed crimes. His criticism includes even the industrialists – for example, in *Group Portrait with Lady* those who had benefited from the Third Reich and on whose premises prisoners of war were found in inhuman conditions.

Böll attacked especially sharply the Church – mainly Catholic – and the intellectuals who had at times collaborated willingly and partly out of opportunism with the Nazis and even supported them – in particular in *House without Guardians* and *Billiard at Half-Past Nine*. Böll's criticism culminates in the fact that, in his works just like in social and political practice, many of these collaborators became "Pillars of Society" in the democratic West Germany and that the mentioned institutions and organizations after World War II continued to work and even became powerful, as if nothing had happened and they did not share responsibility for the events.

Complicity of the "simple man" in World War II

It has often been said that Böll relieves the so-called "ordinary people" of any complicity in Nazism and World War II, which is not the case. It is true that in Böll's works the "simple man" is often depicted as a passionate Nazi or a patriotic enthusiastic soldier, but who is indoctrinated and an opportunist that participates more or less involuntarily and never raises the issue of the inhumanity of his deeds. This is one of the most important topics in *And Where Were You, Adam?*. However, even parents, especially mothers, who happily and proudly send their sons (Greck's mother in *And Where Were You, Adam?*) and daughters to the first line of duty so they could "defend the sacred German soil" (*The Clown*, 24; translated by B. D.) are fiercely criticized. Precisely the middle-class families were proud of their uniformed sons and when they could not boast a son on the frontline, they felt ashamed.

Even the common people commit crimes: In *The Train Was on Time* (*Der Zug war pünktlich*) Willi sells vehicle parts to the Russians, soldiers drag gold teeth out of the dead, and when they are caught they do not face trial but are executed on the spot: one act of inhumanity is followed by the next, even worse inhumanity, so in the short story *In the Darkness* (*In der Finsternis*). Dealing with one's own guilt and feelings of guilt are important topics in some of Böll's works, especially those written in the immediate post-war period and even more so in the works published much later: *A Soldier's Legacy* (*Das Vermächtnis*), written in 1948 and published in 1982, and *The Silent Angel* (*Der Engel schwieg*), written 1949–1951 and published posthumously in

1992. Heinrich and Robert Fähmel, the two main characters in the novel *Billiards at Half-Past Nine* are even 13 years after the war's end dealing with the question of their guilt that mainly exhausts itself in their inaction and lack of resistance. This ends with them not reconciling with the West German post-war society, but at least with each other and with their family: They overcome "the lovelessness as a disruptive factor for a community" (Kovács, 1992, 50; translated by B. D.).

Commitment to "literature of the rubble"

The "Literature of the rubble" flourished right after World War II, but in the mid-1950s it was a thing of the past. But Böll held onto the rubble literature for a relatively long time and espoused it: It was important to him that these circumstances, the rubble of the immediate postwar period, are not suppressed by the economic miracle and are not so easily forgotten: Because the "rubble" on the streets and in heads and hearts was not just real, but also true (Vormweg, 2000, 15).

Quite a number of short stories and novels from the 1950s – *The Silent Angel* from 1951, *And Never Said a Word* (*Und sagte kein einziges Wort*) from 1953, *House Without Guardians* from 1954, *The Bread of Those Early Years* (*Das Brot der frühen Jahre*) from 1955 – are about life in the ruins of the destroyed (West) Germany and should be considered as "realistic" literature but also as documents on the period and the society¹. Böll described the hunger, unemployment, cramped living conditions, the misery of war veterans and invalids, often fatherless families with many children, and lone widows. He also described the rubble in the souls of people and in interpersonal relationships. This rubble and poverty are the sources of conflict within the family and of the suffering of men and fathers, wives and mothers, and especially the children. As a devout Christian and Catholic, for whom the family was particularly important as the very foundation of the society, this must have particularly bothered Böll.

The foundation of each society is based on solidarity, whose fading Böll described in the aforementioned works, in particular, the division of the (West) German society into poor and rich, winners and losers, "the successful" and the "failures". By using this description Böll intended for it to act on the reader as social criticism in which his ethical postulate of social justice is expressed, perhaps most prominently in his short stories like *Business is Business* (*Geschäft ist Geschäft*), *Lohengrin's Death* (*Lohengrins Tod*), both from 1950, and *The Balek Scales* (*Die Waage der Baleks*) from 1952.

1 Leszek Żyliński (1997) calls this "Zeitgenossenschaft".

Society vs. individual – the individual has priority

Social justice is for Böll no content-empty and general term that relates only to social groups such as workers, peasants, the unemployed, but a term that concerns the individual, that is, all individuals. Although people, as Böll represented them in his works, also belong to particular social groups, they should all be understood all unique and as individuals with their needs, rights to personal integrity and self-actualization (Vogt, 1987, 156), and not as representatives of these groups, e.g. the enamored or war-torn first-person narrator, that counts passersby on a bridge, in the short story *On the Bridge* (*An der Brücke*) from 1950. And in the case of conflict between the individual and the institutions – particularly the government or religious institutions – Böll always takes the side of the individual and criticizes the institutions, in fact he outright attacks them such as in the short story *My Costly Leg* (*Mein teures Bein*) from 1950, in which a clerk wants to deprive a war veteran, who has lost his leg, of his retirement and offers him a job as a shoeshine boy. Or in *The Clown* from 1963 when the wealthy members of the "Catholic Circle" discuss "poverty in the society" (18) or how much money "the simple man" needs to survive through the month.

Böll's hostility towards institutions draws its roots from the downright hatred against nationalist institutions like the Hitler Youth or the League of German Girls and especially against the Wehrmacht, in which – as in any army – the individual does not count and is worthless and is seen merely as a grain of sand in the desert and treated as cannon meat. Böll as a fanatic individualist (Böll, Schubert, 2002, 44) suffered extremely in the Wehrmacht. This animosity towards any army, which he was known for throughout his life, is best described in the story *Absent without Leave* (*Entfernung von der Truppe*) from 1964. It turned him in his later years to a downright pacifist: at the age of 63, he took part in demonstrations against the Pershing II missile deployment in Germany. He conveyed this animosity to all state institutions, inclusive to cultural institutions, and even schools, which he regarded less as humanistic educational institutions and more as institutions for ideological indoctrination of children and youth.

As a devout Christian and Catholic Böll was deeply disappointed by the Church. It is from this institution and the men of God that he expected active help. Instead, they took care of their own welfare. However, Böll depicted the "small" priests, pastors, and nuns found at the very bottom of the Church hierarchy mostly in positive terms (e.g. in *The Silent Angel* and *The Clown*) unlike the Church leaders and bishops, whom he showed very negatively (especially in *And Never Said a Word* and *House without Guardians*). In the 1960s, Böll was increasingly politically active, especially in 1968 by the protests against the "emergency law" in Germany (Sowinski, 1993, 18; Reid,

1991, 190f.). Because of the promise of social justice he harbored some sympathy for the Social Democratic Party of Germany, but his political commitment was more a commitment against the Christian Democratic Union (Hoffmann, 1986, 174–177; Linder, 1986, 198), which he held neither for Christian nor democratic: He laughs at CDU particularly in *The Clown* (215, 233). Böll was angry that instead of helping the people and serving them as auxiliary support, which is Böll's opinion is their duty and actually gives them the right to exist, the State and Church interfered in people's private, even intimate, affairs. These institutions even wanted to prescribe rules how people should live. That is why he opposed those institutions that had positioned themselves as superior in relation to the society and – somewhat anachronistically and idealistically – favored those societies which were founded on love or sympathy, voluntarism and solidarity: primarily the family as the fundamental and smallest society.

But during the 1960s, Böll became aware of the dubiousness and disintegration of even these societies so that he increasingly idealized other forms of society such as neighborliness and friendship, though not without skepticism, therefore from the beginning of the 1960s he increasingly spoke in favor of individualism and the freedoms and rights of the individual, especially in *The Clown* (1963), *Absent without Leave* (1964), and *The Lost Honor of Katharina Blum* (*Die verlorene Ehre der Katharina Blum*) from 1974. Especially in *The Lost Honor of Katharina Blum* Böll defends the right of the individual to self-realization, to be a subject and not just a “functional” object (Janssen, 1985, 164f.) or a useful instrument for the society, for institutions, or even for media.

Commitment to “waste”

Individuals living politically and socially opportune lives, and who behave accordingly, do not need protection and certainly not from intellectuals and writers. “The others” need it – those who are different, who live differently and follow different values and norms. These “others” belong to the dominant culture and have been renounced by a society that treats them as “waste.” In many of his novels and short stories, Böll describes how the society discriminates “the others”: invalids, deniers, atheists, women and especially mothers who live in an extramarital relationship etc. In *In the Valley of the Thundering Hooves* (*Im Tal der donnernden Hufe*) all people in the bourgeois small town dislike, avoid and mob the 14 years old girl Katharina Mirzow and her mother because they assert that Katharina is immoral and her mother is married to a communist.

This “theory” or “aesthetics” – although, strictly speaking, is neither a real theory nor aesthetics (cf. Schubert, 2011, 42), but are rather, to use Böll's own term, views – was

developed by Böll in the early 1960s. He made them public during his guest lectures which he held in 1964 at the Johann Wolfgang University in Frankfurt am Main (since 2008 Goethe University Frankfurt), which was both then and today a great honor. Böll's *Frankfurt Lectures (Frankfurter Vorlesungen)* were published later by Kiepenheuer & Witsch in 1966 and since 1968 in many editions by DTV publisher. In the third out of four lectures, he sharpened his aforementioned thesis: "It seems that literature can only deal with those topics which have been deemed as waste, as wasteful, by the society." (Böll, 1968, 82)

The prototype of an outsider has traditionally and in a cliché manner been the artist who lives on the fringes of the society that he criticizes. He is extraordinarily sensitive and somehow indefinably original and unique. He has extraordinary preferences and at times demonstrates peculiarities and often deviant behavior. In his famous novel, *The Clown* Böll selects a special and specific artist: the clown, "occupational description: comedian" (8), who by definition at the same time laughs and cries but also criticizes and mocks people and the society. Hans Schnier, the clown, like all artists, is allowed to rebel, although only hypothetically. Böll demonstrates in his longer narrative *End of a Mission (Ende einer Dienstfahrt)* from 1966 the fact that artistry and immanent right of opposition may also be extended to "ordinary people". Father and son Gruhl burn a military jeep as a sign of protest – here Böll's expresses once again his dislike of the army – they declared it as an expression of art and could not be prosecuted for it due to the legally securitized artistic freedom. In this novel, Böll goes so far that it could almost be understood as a call for civil disobedience and resistance against the state, the army, and other state institutions.

But in his next novel *Group Portrait with Lady* Böll postulates very explicit the right to civil disobedience and resistance against the state institutions when the dustmen strike and block the streets. Böll extends in this novel also the right to otherness to other people: to single women who enjoy sexual freedoms (Margret), to strange (Rachel) and less strange (Klementine) nuns, to single mothers (Leni), to "performance objectors" (Leni's son Lev), to social underprivileged people like dustmen, and even to foreigners (Turkish worker Mehmet, with whom Leni is expecting a child), whereby he acknowledged their differences and foreignness. His recognition and elevation of the humanity of the Russian prisoner of war and forced laborer Boris, with whom Leni is expecting their son Lev, particularly stands out. In this novel, Böll uses a conciliatory and humoristic tone and writing style, as well as in the exquisite short story from 1963 that postulates the right to a performance objection and the right to refuse the pressure to perform: *Anecdote Concerning the Lowering of Productivity (Anekdote zur Senkung der Arbeitsmoral)*.

Commitment to human rights

It must be noted that not only did Böll stand up for outsiders, especially for political opponents and dissidents – mostly for Eastern European – in his literary works, essays, journalistic articles, and public lectures, but he did so in “real life” as well, e.g. for Alexandr Solzhennitsyn and Lev Kopelev. Böll even went one step further when he stood up for, in the truest sense of the word, “the wasteful” namely the terrorist Ulrike Meinhof, the ideological leader of the Red Army Faction. He did it in the sense that in his essay *Does Ulrike Meinhof want grace or safe conduct? (Will Ulrike Meinhof Gnade oder freies Geleit?)* – published in the journal *Der Spiegel* in January 1972 – he acknowledged her the right to her own political values and attitudes and the right to freedom of expression. Since he acknowledged this right even to criminals and terrorists, i.e. to “the wasteful,” he was fiercely attacked by some members of the general public, in particular by the journalists of the highest-circulation German newspaper *Bild* (Sowinski, 1994, 11–15).²

Böll’s literary response to these attacks was just as sharp in *The Lost Honor of Katharina Blum* (1974). In this highly complex and biting story about a simple woman who falls in love with an alleged terrorist who – as this proves in the end – is not a terrorist at all but has “only” looted the safe of the Federal Armed Forces, in which he is doing his military service. She is helping him to flee from the police after only one night spent together in her apartment. Here Böll engages in a sharp criticism of the print media. It is clear that he was referring here to the newspaper *Bild* when he used the name ZEITUNG, whose slander and lying headlines lead to Katharina becoming a murderess: she shoots the responsible journalist whereby this murder, due to her “lost honor,” is partly planned as a form of revenge, partly a self-defense against rape, and partly a spontaneous reaction to the media violence inflicted upon her. Therefore it is presented as simultaneously immoral and if not justifiable then at least understandable.

Hopefully this article, which I will conclude with a quotation from Böll’s Frankfurt Lectures (third lecture), will make the connection between literature and ethics by Heinrich Böll and the genesis of this development somewhat more understandable: “Morality and aesthetics are congruent, also inseparable, even the same, regardless of how stubborn or relaxed, mild or angry, regardless of the choice of style and viewpoint which an author uses to bring forth the description or the mere depiction of the human [...]” (Böll, 1968, 84; translated by B. D.).

2 Kepplinger, Hachenberg and Frühauf (1983) made a very good analysis of the journalistic conflict between Böll and print media.

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»Dobri človek iz Kölna«: literarna etika Heinricha Bölla

Ključne besede: Heinrich Böll, etika, soočanje s preteklostjo, zavzemanje za posameznike, zavzemanje za obstrance

Etika, ki se je razvijala, krepila in postajala vse bolj jasna med 2. svetovno vojno in po njej, je kompleksna tematika, ki jo najdemo v delih Heinricha Bölla – »dobrega človeka iz Kölna«. Böllovo sporočilo je jasno, naj črpa iz izkušnje ali iz zavedanja (ki se vzajemno oplajata): vojne ne smemo poveličevati. Noben vidik vojne ni junaški, za nikogar od sodelujočih. Zakaj tedaj pisati o vojni? Ker je nikoli nihče ne sme pozabiti. Trpljenje naj bo prikazano na preprost način – kakršno je bilo, v svarilo in pojasnilo bralcem. Pojasnjevanje je za Bölla predvsem imenovanje krivcev, ki so dopustili grozote, npr. organizacije, ki so zaradi lastnih koristi sodelovale z nacisti. V svojih delih prikaže, kako se liki – neizobraženci in intelektualci, vsak zase kot posameznik – spoprijemajo s krivdo celo leta po koncu vojne. Tako izraža sočutje s preprostimi ljudmi, poudarja pa sovražnost do organizacij. Nemci so morali živeti s krivdo, pa tudi z veliko količino ruševin – v duhu, duši in fizičnem svetu. Zato Böll pri tako imenovani »književnosti ruševin« vztraja še dolgo po koncu vojne. Pomembnost natančnega opisa vojne kaže, kako močno se je Böll trudil, da bi osvetlil resnično podobo vojne. Njegova odločenost, da se bori za »šibkejš«, ki jih je glavnina družbe označevala kot »odpadke«, kaže visoko raven njegovih etičnih razmislekov. Naklonjen je družbi posameznikov, ki živijo v različnih življenjskih okoliščinah, imajo različen odnos do življenja ter različne načine delovanja in katerih glas govori o nenehnem boju za človekove in državljanske pravice.

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Moral ethics which developed and grew only to become stronger and clearer, during and after World War II is a complex and resourceful subject which can be found in the work from “The Good Man from Cologne” – Heinrich Böll. Even at first glance, Böll has a rather clear message that he sends to his readers, whether he writes from experience or his state of mind (one affected by the other): War is not to be glorified. There is not one aspect of the war that can or should be considered as pride or heroism, for no one participating (in example – honoring a soldier with a piece of metal, which is in war used to kill and destroy). Then, why write about war? Because no one should ever forget it. All the suffering and victims should be presented simply – as they were, to warn and clarify the readers. The clarification meant for Böll to name the ones that let this kind of horror to take place, like organizations that collaborated with the Nazis for their own interests. In his works, he shows how the characters – uneducated and the intellectuals – deal with guilt even years after the war has ended – every simple character for himself, as an individual. Therefore, he shows his compassion for the simple men but underlines his hostility towards organizations. Not only have Germans had to live with their guilt, but also with a vast amount of rubble – in their minds, souls, but also in their physical world. That is why Böll holds onto “Rubble Literature” for a long period after the war. The importance of the precise depiction of war shows how strongly Böll committed in his effort to shine the light only on the real side of war. His determination to fight for the “weak” that were by the mainstream defined as “waste” shows high levels of his morality and ethics. He enjoys a society full of individuals, whose life conditions vary from case to case, and therefore, vary in their (inter)actions towards life, and is their voice in the constant fight for human and civil rights.