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The American Reviews of Heinrich Böll: A Note on the Problems of the Compassionate Novelist

Keith Stewart

It would not be difficult to arrange a rhetorical battle—or at least a series of skirmishes—among certain of those reviewers of Heinrich Böll's novels who have taken positions since the appearance in America of *Acquainted with the Night* in 1954. W. J. Schwartz, reviewing *Children are Civilians Too* for the *Saturday Review*, could field his opinion that Böll is essentially a writer of short stories against D. J. Enright's in *The New York Review of Books* that both that volume and *18 Stories* suggest a writer who needs "more elbow room than the genre affords him." Or those who find the symbolism of *The Train was on Time* "unobtrusive"¹ might be set against those who find that the author has unwisely submitted to the temptation of allegory.² And so on. It would all be somewhat like Swift's Big-Endians and Little-Endians, though such is the tolerance of the Land of Reviews that it is unlikely that any would be finally exiled. Or there might simply be a parley of comparisons developing the published, and perhaps passing, impressions that although Böll has worked with recollections he is unlike Proust, but in specific ways and in particular works like the early Hamsun, de Maupassant, Bellow, Kafka, John Horne Burns, Dostoevsky, Remarque, Heinrich Mann, Thomas Mann, Henry Fielding, Robert Musil and Charles Dickens,³ and relatively often like Hemingway (whom he is occasionally unlike), Faulkner, and J. D. Salinger.⁴ He has also been commended (here one must admit surprise) as the "Rabelais of postwar Germany" and as an impressionist whose works should be viewed like those of Monet and Pissaro.⁵ Such comparisons have bulked especially large in earlier reviews when the unknown was being identified by the possibly known; they may suggest ultimately a dozen M. A. theses, several of which would very likely be unacceptable.

Any consideration of the periodical reviews of a writer's work is likely to reveal directly more about contemporary taste than about contemporary literary criticism, and more about procedures in reviewing than about the nature of the writer's work. It is, however, the assumption of this paper—by one who is neither Germanist nor comparatist, but who is interested in Böll and has worked with 18th- and 19th-century British critical reviews, that such a survey may help formulate certain questions which are raised by the nature of the work itself. It must first be said, however, that I have not read all the reviews of Böll published in the United States, though I think that I have read most of them within limits which have excluded trade journals as well as professional academic ones. I have not excluded scholars when their reviews

were published in generally available periodicals on the assumption that they might be explaining a writer to a public beyond the scholarly community. Although I have otherwise attempted a large and heterogeneous sampling, I have no doubt missed some points. In any case, my impression has been re-confirmed that reviewing is chancy at best. Expectably, the tendency of popular reviews is to be short and only perhaps to the point, which in any event is unlikely to be substantiated. And there have been two special problems in reviewing Böll. Nominally, all the reviews which I have read were of translations, and it is possible that numbers of their writers had access only to the translations. In any case, the question of the quality of the book in relation to its original seldom arises in any serious way; and until the appearance of *Group Portrait with Lady*, with a few exceptions (such as remarks on the clumsiness of the rendering of *Absent without Leave* and *The End of a Mission*⁶) Leila Vennewitz's translations are referred to, when at all, as "smooth" or "admirable." When *Adam* and *The Train* were re-issued by McGraw-Hill in her translation in 1970 to replace the earlier ones by Merwyn Savill and Richard Graves which Criterion Books had published in 1955 and 1956, there was no concern that I have discovered with their comparative quality. Then again, as several early reviewers observed, the difference in order of publication between originals and translations posed a problem for readers who had been attracted by a writer and were following his work, or for the reviewer who might not be fully aware of the original order of Böll's publications. There is little that can be done about such chronological dislocation except to hope that readers suitably informed by informed reviewers are able to maintain some historical sense when it appears aesthetically useful.

What interested American reviewers generally about Böll in the beginning of his career in English translation was his position specifically as a writer about postwar Germany. The books early appeared in companion reviews with such mixed fare as Gert Ledig, Willi Heinrich, Christine Gessler, and Arnost Lustig—and, of course, Grass, Johnson, and Lind; there was some disagreement about their relative merit and about whether Böll was more or less read in Germany than other novelists were. Whatever exceptions might be taken, however, he was seen from the beginning as a morally serious and capable writer. What is also evident is that his reviews have always been mixed: there have been particular publications judged by particular reviewers to be complete successes, but no single work has been generally acclaimed. This is hardly surprising, given the nature of literature and of its reviewers; it is the particular reasons for a division of opinion which are interesting.

Particular points in question from publication to publication would return us to the Big- and Little-Endians. A brief consideration of the reviews of *The Clown*, which appeared in the United States in 1965, may epitomize the whole and suggest the central question which the reviews over the years have developed regarding Böll's work. To my knowledge, until *Group Portrait*, no other of his books commanded the attention in the United States as did this one, which the relatively unfriendly journal *America* identified in reporting the author's Nobel Prize as his "recognized masterpiece" (disregarding its own earlier low opinion of the novel, Feb. 6, 1965). It was

also the book which made necessary the recognition of Böll's religious position. Except for an early review of *Acquainted with the Night* by Paul Pickrell,⁷ Böll's Catholicism had been disregarded by American reviewers, so far as I have been able to tell, though one had noted generally the "implicit religious point of view" which had unified *Acquainted with the Night*,⁸ and another the "truly religious character" of the protagonist of *The Train was on Time*.⁹ Bruce Cook, in his review of *The Clown* for *Commonweal* (Feb. 12, 1965, p. 645-6) identified Böll specifically as a Catholic writer and noted that he was not generally recognized as such in the United States nor, he added, "often claimed by the Catholic Intellectual Establishment in Germany." Daniel Stern, in *The New York Times Book Review* (Feb. 11, 1965, pp. 4, 34) called the book "surely the most direct and sustained attack on the Roman Catholic Church in recent years," but he and others agreed in finding with George Steiner, writing in *The Reporter* (Feb. 25, 1965, pp. 53-54) that the immediate subject of *The Clown* was "the Germany of the Volkswagen and Christian Democracy" generalized by the protagonist, whom Steiner took to stand "for the possibilities of love in a world in which these possibilities are embarrassingly or ludicrously unrealistic." The Jesuit journal *America* (Feb. 6, 1965, pp. 196-7) simplified matters by considering the "whole purpose" of the book to be "to sneer and rip and claw at the Catholic church"—an artistic purpose which it acknowledged to be valid but which it found severely flawed in execution by Böll's "errors about the subject of Catholicism" and the "pathetic" childishness of the novel "in its spiteful bias." But such an opinion was singular.

It is characteristic that reviewers said relatively little in detail about the methods of the novel. F. J. Warnke, in *The New Republic* (March 20, 1965, pp. 17-19) discussed at some length the reasons for reading it as a satire, and it was identified as such by several others.¹⁰ There was some comment upon Böll's success with the monologue,¹¹ here regarded by some reviewers as skillfully developing a character at once symbolic and vital in his individuality. And there was approval for what *The New York Times Book Review* called its "hard-surfaced prose" and its structure, which was "simple to the point of starkness."

Even among reviewers who wrote with the highest regard for Böll's art and for this particular book, however, there were questions about his ethical position and its embodiment in his art—questions of a kind which, reiterated over the years and increasing with his publications, suggest a more general problem in interpretation and evaluation. The problem is indicated by the glibly reductive dismissal of *The Clown* by Anthony West in *The New Yorker* (Nov. 20, 1965, p. 241) as "an even shallower affair than his war novellas—a maudlin work about the exquisite distress suffered by a professional enemy of cant and hypocrisy." Other reviews of *The Clown* suggested related but more complex positions. J. P. Bauke (*The Saturday Review*, Jan. 30, 1965, p. 27) spoke of the bothersomely "pat assumption that the rich are bad and that goodness is limited to people with little money and an interest in socialism," and D. J. Enright (*The New York Review of Books*, Feb. 11, 1965, pp. 11-12) of the perhaps too insistent irony, sentimentalism and "stridency"—suggesting that the sentimentalism might be a protection against the irony. Whatever the validity of these re-

sponses, they occurred with some frequency, and they occasionally led to statements of significant critical problems. Patrick Crutwell, for instance, in *The Hudson Review* (Autumn, 1965, pp. 447-8) found *The Clown* "moving in an acrid, self-pitying way," adding that "the self-pity, valid enough as part of the character himself, seems at times to reach into, and throw doubts on, his role as symbol of conscience: as if the conscience were pitying itself (and enjoying doing so) for feeling so deliciously guilty—and so safely helpless." And F. J. Warnke, in his much fuller and more laudatory review, remarked on the possible confusion between the manner of realistic fiction and the "non-realistic, extravagantly hyperbolic manner of traditional satire."

Such comments as these suggest a problem defined with increasing clarity by Böll's American reviews—that of the author's finding a form in which to balance his sympathies with his ethical judgments. From his first appearance in America there were those who found immediate reassurance and hope in what has persistently been called Böll's "humanity" and his capacity for arousing "compassion" for mediocre beings. But compassion has always been capable of being easily extended to sentimentality. J. P. Bauke (*The New York Times Book Review*, Oct. 16, 1966, p. 4) commenting upon *18 Stories*, questioned Böll's belief that "goodness is where the heart is: left of center" as naive and productive of a slight smugness about his heroes; and E. M. Potoker (*The Saturday Review*, Dec. 10, 1966, pp. 50-55), reviewing the same collection, referred to his attachment to lower-middle-class people as "somewhat romantic." Such opinions may only suggest a division between literary Federalists and Republicans; they also imply the literary problem which Victor Lange (*The New Republic*, Nov. 27, 1965, p. 38) identified in *Absent Without Leave* when he commented that the novel indicated the difficulties which any "didactic novelist must face—of keeping allegory and pathos in a plausible balance." Lange continued, summarizing the point which I have been suggesting, by remarking that Böll's strengths and weaknesses were made obvious in the book, i.e., all his human feelings and perceptions about humanity are "explored with the fervor of a born story-teller . . . at times . . . in danger of being swayed by his own compassion into melodrama and sentimentality." D. J. Enright's review of *Children are Civilians Too* (*New York Review of Books*, Mar. 26, 1970, pp. 42-44) similarly made the point that most of the stories in the collection are ones in which anger "impels to satire" which "is always being softened by compassion, a sense of common hardship and of shared guilt" but again, as in *The Clown*, the effect is blurred by an "occasional decline into sentimentality."

The publication of *Group Portrait with Lady*—the reviews of which have perhaps not all been written—has so far generally produced the same patterns with one interesting and one minor exception. Reviews are still mixed, veering from the highest praise of the dense vital richness of its humanity (*The National Observer*) to Geoffrey Wolff's conclusion in *Time* that it is a "stillborn" fiction and Pamela Marsh's frivolous reaction in *The Christian Science Monitor* that it is an overly-long, complex set of "mini-biographies," so scatological as to embarrass the reviewer. The minor exception to past comment is that praises for the Vennewitz translation are numerous (perhaps this is partly a function of Böll's elevation to the Nobel Laureateship with

its implications for the importance of translating his work). The more interesting development is in the number of reviewers who find either that the book is without Böll's earlier tendency to sentimentality or who have come to terms with one evident source of that impression. It has been suggested (by D. J. Enright again, *The New York Review of Books*, May 31, 1973, p. 35) that the reportorial method of the novel has preserved the author "from that faint sentimentality . . . to which he has inclined in his handling of put-upon characters." It is the opinion of others that Böll's making the central "put-upon" figure in *Group Portrait* a woman is a full affirmation of what his position has been all along. Melvin Maddocks, writing for *The Atlantic*,¹² has stated this point most fully, commenting that it is the women in Böll's novels who as "loving, nursing, forgiving" characters offer "the only sanctioned self-assertion" in what has been a constant "scrupulous recoil before the horrors of self-assertion." Taking the novel as a demonstration, through Leni Pfeiffer and her friends, of the author's hope for "the possibility of good in a world whose possibilities for evil require no testimony," he concludes that the reader "can now like Böll . . . for 'having heart,' or dislike him for 'being sentimental.' But he can no longer fail to put him quite in focus. . . . Böll's lines of argument . . . have found their culmination in *Group Portrait with Lady*. He has finally disclosed what he had to say all along. . . ." Nearly twenty years after his first appearance in America, that is, during which time he has been reviewed regularly and fully, and always with the questions raised in one way or another of whether our sympathies were being appropriately aroused or his were appropriately placed, he appears to have produced a work in which some reviewers can find the questions answered specifically and affirmatively

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NOTES

¹ E. S. Pisko, *Christian Science Monitor*, June 28, 1956, p. 13.

² Anthony West, *The New Yorker*, 16 June, 1956, pp. 113-14.

³ The Proust comparison is by Paul Levine, *Hudson Review*, Winter 1965-6, pp. 588-9; the others follow. Hamsun: E. S. Pisko, *Christian Science Monitor*, Dec. 22, 1955, p. 11; de Maupassant: Richard Plant, *The New York Times Book Review*, Oct. 17, 1954, p. 42 and *The Saturday Review*, June 12, 1956, pp. 12, 28; Bellow: George Steiner, *The Reporter*, Feb. 25, 1965, pp. 53-4 and Stephen Koch, *The Nation*, May 3, 1965, pp. 484-6 compare *The Clown* specifically with *Herzog*; Kafka: E. M. Potoker, *The Saturday Review*, Sept. 11, 1965, p. 42; Burns: Richard Plant, *Ibid.*; Dostoevsky: Richard Plant, *The New York Times Book Review*, Oct. 17, p. 42, and Nov. 13, 1955, p. 4; Remarque: Richard Plant, *Ibid.*, and E. S. Pisko, *The Christian Science Monitor*, July 20, 1962, p. 9; Heinrich Mann: Siegfried Mandel, *The New York Times Book Review*, August 5, 1962, p. 4; Thomas Mann: Donald Heiney, *The Christian Science Monitor*, Sept. 30, 1965, p. 11; E. S. Pisko, *Ibid.*, July 20, 1962, p. 9; Fielding: E. M. Potoker, *The Saturday Review*, Dec. 10, 1966, pp. 50, 55; Musil: Charles L. Markmann, *The Nation*, July 30, 1973, pp. 88-90; Dickens: Richard Locke, *The New York Times Book Review*, May 6, 1973, pp. 1, 20, 22.

- ⁴ On Hemingway: Edwin Kennebeck, *Commonweal*, Jan. 6, 1956, p. 360; Stephen Koch, *The Nation*, May 3, 1965, pp. 484-6; J. P. Bauke, *The Saturday Review*, July 28, 1962, pp. 39-40, and *The New York Times Book Review*, Oct. 16, 1966, p. 4. Faulkner: LaV. J. Rippley, *The Saturday Review*, Sept. 12, 1970, pp. 32-3; Edwin Kennebeck, *Commonweal*, Nov. 1, 1957, pp. 134-5; Stephen Koch, *Ibid.*; Salinger: LaV. J. Rippley, *Ibid.*; Paul Levine, *Hudson Review*, Winter 1965-6, pp. 588-9; F. J. Warnke, *New Republic*, Mar. 20, 1965, pp. 17-19; J. P. Bauke, *The Saturday Review*, Jan. 30, 1965, p. 27.
- ⁵ On Rabelais, D[onald?]. H[einey?], *The Christian Science Monitor*, Oct. 20, 1966, p. 10. On the impressionists, "Briefly Noted," *The New Yorker*, Oct. 7, 1967, p. 191.
- ⁶ By respectively Victor Lange, *The New Republic*, Nov. 27, 1965, p. 37, and T. L. Vince, *America*, April 20, 1968, pp. 549-50.
- ⁷ *The Yale Review*, n.s. 44 (1954-5), 315-16. The review remains impressive in its early understanding of Böll's work.
- ⁸ Edwin Kennebeck, *Commonweal*, Jan. 6, 1956, p. 360.
- ⁹ Richard Plant, *The Saturday Review*, June 2, 1956, p. 12.
- ¹⁰ George Steiner, *The Reporter*; Robert Kiely, *The Christian Science Monitor*, Feb. 11, 1965, p. 7; Daniel Stern, *The New York Times Book Review*, Jan. 24, 1965, pp. 4, 34.
- ¹¹ William Barrett, *The Atlantic Monthly*, April 1965, p. 158; Warnke, *Ibid.*; Robert Kiely, *Ibid.*
- ¹² July, 1973, pp. 95-97. Others of comparable opinion are Charles L. Markmann, *The Nation*, July 30, 1973, pp. 88-90; Richard Locke, *The New York Times Book Review*, May 6, 1973, pp. 1, 20, 22; D. J. Enright, *The New York Review of Books*, May 31, 1973, pp. 35-36; Michele Murray, *The National Observer*, June 23, 1973, p. 25.