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Heinrich Böll's Essays as Art Forms: An Interpretation of "The Moscow Bootblacks"

by ROBERT C. CONARD

Böll's essays¹ comprise a valuable part of his oeuvre. Four volumes are available in hardback editions² and many more essays have appeared in newspapers and periodicals. In sheer quantity alone much of Böll's time, effort, and creativity has gone into this genre. But it is not their number which is important, nor alone the insights which they provide into the major short stories and novels, it is their quality of expression, their artistry which makes them indispensable reading for a full appreciation of Böll's work.

A short piece written in 1970, dedicated to the philosopher Ernst Bloch on his eighty-fifth birthday, is brief enough and typical enough to analyse here as a demonstration of Böll's skill in this genre.

THE MOSCOW BOOTBLACKS³ Ernst Bloch on His 85th Birthday (1970)

The Moscow Bootblacks — male and female — have plenty of time and they take it. Their huts, tall as a man, lockable, covering as much ground as a narrow bed, are small temples of dignity, which if called human dignity, would only be the definition of the prerequisite of dignity, for in these holy halls one is already further along. Those who are there engaged in a seemingly inferior occupation all resemble one another, as if they were mothers and sons, brothers and sisters. I recognized their eyes, narrow faces, long noses, and their profiles from reproductions of vases and frescoes. I thought: Syrian or perhaps Assyrian. From school books with brief articles about the history of Asia Minor. Later I heard: it wasn't certain, that they came from what is now Lebanon, Maronites, expellees from one of the great expulsions after World War I. Polishing shoes appears to be their privilege, their confession, an unwritten law, as it seems in Rome the selling of roasted chestnuts is the privilege of the Apulians.

In their huts the passer-by can have more than his shoes polished; spot remover is available to tidy up his appearance; he can borrow needle and thread to replace a button, or find a pair of scissors to clip threads, and doctor up his briefcase or shopping bag. The polishing of shoes, the main occupation, progresses without haste, with no obsequiousness or courting of favor. Customers in a hurry who show impatience to have the ritual shortened are invited by serious looks from dark eyes to just sit back and let the ritual take its course.

Consecration is consecration, dignity is dignity, shoes are shoes. Here one learns the meaning of the word "application," which probably approaches the best translation of the word sacrament. (Marriage would then be in the application of love.)

Carefully, as it should be, the shoestrings are tucked away, the socks protected by cardboard cuffs. Left shoe on the platform: with brushes of different hardness the dirt and dust are removed, liquid shoe-creme from a bottle is rubbed on; right shoe on the platform: the same procedure; left shoe: quick polishing with a special rag for the liquid shoe-creme, the same to the right. Left shoe on the platform, thick shoe-creme rubbed on from a can, the same to the right. Left and right foot: polished to a gloss with a soft brush. Nodding of the head, soft request of the eyes: once again both shoes, one after the other, go up on the platform: from a special bottle the final polishing agent is applied, once again — left foot, right foot — brushed to a high gloss.

The solemn application is over. The time, which one thinks he has lost, comes back doubled from those dark eyes. Won, not lost.

That is all I know about the Moscow bootblacks; they are expellees who have found a home here; they give you your lost time back double; I recognized their profiles from reproductions of vases and frescoes which I saw in school books, I would like to know more about the Moscow bootblacks, everything, and I will try to find it out. I envy them.

Die Moskauer Schuhputzer⁴
Ernst Bloch zum 85. Geburtstag
(1970)

Die Moskauer Schuhputzerinnen und Schuhputzer lassen sich Zeit und haben sie. Ihre Kabinen, mannshoch, verschließbar, mit knapp soviel Grundfläche wie ein schmales Bett, sind kleine Tempel der Würde, die, nennt man sie Menschenwürde, nur die Definition der Voraussetzung von Würde wäre. In diesen heiligen Hallen ist man schon weiter. Die dort eine scheinbar untergeordnete Tätigkeit ausüben, gleichen sich alle, als wären sie Mütter und Söhne, Geschwister. Diese Augen, die schmalen Gesichter mit langen Nasen, diese Profile kannte ich von Vasen- und Freskenreproduktionen. Ich dachte: syrisch, vielleicht assyrisch. Aus Schulbüchern mit knappen Abhandlungen über die Geschichte Kleinasiens. Später hörte ich: Man weiß nicht genau. Wahrscheinlich aus dem jetzigen Libanon, Maroniten, Vertriebene aus einer der großen Vertreibungen nach dem ersten Weltkrieg. Das Schuhputzen scheint ihr Privileg, ihr Lehen zu sein, ungeschriebenes Gesetz, wie der Verkauf gerösteter Kastanien in Rom das Privileg der Apulier zu sein scheint.

In ihren Kabinen kann der Vorübergehende nicht nur seine Schuhe putzen lassen, Fleckwasser ist vorrätig, um verschmutzte Kleider zu reinigen, Nähzeug kann entliehen werden, um abgerissene Knöpfe wieder zu befestigen, Scheren, um Fransen abzuschneiden, an Akten- und Einkaufstaschen herumzudoktern. Schuhe putzen, die Hauptbeschäftigung, geht ohne Hast, ohne auch nur die Andeutung von Unterwürfigkeit, ohne Anbiederungsversuche vor sich. Eilige Kunden, die Ungeduld zeigen, das Ritual abgekürzt haben wollen, werden durch einen ernsten Blick aus dunklen Augen und durch sanftes Kopfschütteln aufgefordert, das Ritual ungekürzt über sich ergehen zu lassen. Weihe ist Weihe,

Würde, Würde, Schuhe sind Schuhe, und hier kann man lernen, was das Wort 'Anwendung' bedeutet, das möglicherweise die annähernd rechte Übersetzung für Sakrament wäre. (Die Ehe wäre dann die Anwendung der Liebe.)

Sorgfältig, wie es sich gehört, werden die Schnürsenkel weggesteckt, die Strümpfe werden durch Pappmanchetten geschützt. Linker Schuh auf den Kothurn: Mit Bürsten verschiedener Härte werden Schmutz und Staub entfernt, flüssige Schuhcrem aus einer Flasche wird aufgetragen; rechter Schuh auf den Kothurn: die gleiche Anwendung; linker Schuh: kurze Politur mit einem Speziallappen für die flüssige Schuhcrem, das gleiche widerfährt dem rechten. Linker Schuh auf den Kothurn: Feste Schuhcrem aus einer Dose wird aufgetragen, das gleiche geschieht mit dem rechten. Linker und rechter Fuß: Blankwachsen mit einer weichen Bürste. Kopfschütteln, sanftes Gebieten mit dunklen Augen: Noch einmal müssen beide Schuhe hintereinander auf den Kothurn: aus einer Spezialflasche wird ein besonderes Glanzmittel aufgetragen, das wieder — linker Fuß, rechter Fuß — blankgerieben wird.

Die feierliche Anwendung ist vorüber. Die Zeit, die einer verloren zu haben glaubt, kommt aus den dunklen Augen verdoppelt zurück. Gewonnen, nicht verloren.

Mehr weiß ich nicht über die Moskauer Schuhputzer; sie sind Vertriebene, die hier Heimat gefunden haben; sie geben einem die verlorene Zeit doppelt zurück; ihre Profile kamen mir bekannt vor, aus Vasen- und Freskenreproduktionen, die ich in einem Schulbuch gesehen habe. Ich möchte mehr über die Moskauer Schuhputzer wissen, alles, und ich werde versuchen, es zu erfahren. Ich beneide sie.

In the essay one immediately notices the praise of the "little man," concern for ritual, interest in history and religion, and the declaration of the humanity of all peoples. The bootblack is here a craftsman, a man of position. Although his task is often considered minor and unimportant, he is not an inferior individual. He is not obsequious and does not court favor. He performs a valuable social service much broader than, and more useful than, merely polishing shoes. In the confines of his "holy halls" he restores the exterior and interior of men. The time the passer-by spends in the hut is time absorbed in a religious experience for which he is physically and spiritually rewarded. His clothes and appearance are revitalized as his spirit is renewed. "The time, which one thinks is lost comes back doubled . . . won, not lost."

The sacramental quality of the bootblack's work lies in the application of oils and ointments by consecrated hands, made holy by useful social work "carefully" and lovingly performed. The reader is reminded of the scene with Christ at the feet of St. Peter, who requests of Jesus that if he must be cleansed to become a disciple, for Jesus to wash not only his feet but his head and hands as well (Jn. 13:8-9). The bootblack performs this same symbolic function. He brushes away the dirt and dust and revives the appearance of his client from hat to shoes, jacket to briefcase, coat to shopping bag. He administers the sacramental outward signs necessary for the bestowal of grace.

To Böll the essence of the sacrament administered by the bootblack is in its ritual, its magnificent routine, its care, its disregard for time in a rushed world. This point of view recalls Böll's attitude in *Acquainted with the Night* where Kate and Fred Bogner

criticize the priests who become irritated by the lines at their confessionals and say masses in twenty minutes.⁵ The bootblack's activity is like a priest's at mass; he cannot omit any of the essential elements, cannot neglect the demands of the rite, or there is no mass and no sacrament. Böll intensifies the association with the priest and the mass by the inference that the bootblack's reverential behavior exemplifies not the ritual of a single man, but the dedicated actions of the entire class of Maronites who ply the bootblack's trade; i.e., the ritual is the same in every "temple of dignity." The passer-by may desire to rush: leave quickly by cutting short part of the liturgy, but if he, like the believer, does not grow impatient, remains in good faith until the service is completed — lets the rite wash over him — he is doubly recompensed with peace and purification.

In Böll's world the priest is not above the bootblack; the minister is no more important than the garbage collector; the factory owner is not superior to his wreath makers; the wealthy man is not above his domestic help; even the humblest broom-maker is a lord in his own way (examples taken from Böll's work). There are no inferior positions in Böll's democratic concept of the world. Böll's social ideal is seen here based on the religious-socialist idea that each man should contribute to society in every occupation to the best of his skill. When he does, he is a man of nobility, the equal of all men, for he helps create a society in which one can live with dignity, to which one can feel attached; he produces the missing element in modern living: *Heimat*. The evil of society is not, therefore, that the worker does not "carefully" and lovingly perform his task (the reader sees that he does), but that the lowly are not respected, not treated with dignity, "which if called human dignity would only be the definition of the prerequisite of dignity." To Böll it is a misfortune that society is not classless. He believes Western man unfortunately derives his worth from feeling above his neighbor, his position in the social hierarchy determines his value. The poor are, therefore, always despised and dispensable: employed, deployed, and unemployed.

Böll's bootblack becomes in this essay more than the prototype of the "little man" and archetype of the priest. He also symbolizes a patient, suffering Job, an exile, a refugee from oppression. Böll stresses that the bootblacks in Moscow are Maronites, Arabic speaking Catholics who hold to their ancient customs and Syriac rite; they are men who fled to the lands of Europe and the Americas from religious persecutions. They, like most displaced persons, were forced to begin new lives in strange countries, learning new skills, and struggling with a foreign tongue to earn a living doing work they had never done before. In many ways they are like the millions of foreign workers in West Germany for whom Böll has shown such strong sympathies in the novel *Group Portrait*.⁶ When the author says: "I would like to know more about the Moscow bootblacks, everything, and I will try to find it out," Böll is expressing a curiosity in history and its effects on human destinies that has already led to two important historical novels.⁷

Böll's tendency to see the world in religious terms of ritual, sign, and sacrament⁸ permeates his entire oeuvre. In the works *Bread of Our Early Years*, *The Clown*, *Group Portrait*, and *Hausfriedensbruch*,⁹ Böll demonstrates that the sacrament of marriage is effected not by the clergy but by the ritual of "the application of love." Or from the vantage point of this essay — as the bootblack anoints the shoes with oils in an act of

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"laying on of hands" so too is the sacrament of matrimony administered by the act
of "applying" love.

In the essay "Gesinnung gibt es immer gratis"¹⁰ Böll claims that an author's views come free and that no artist should be blamed or praised for his attitudes. He insists further that it is the structure of a work: its harmony between form and ideas, which constitutes art. "The Moscow Bootblacks" can serve as a model for Böll's thesis. The dominant concern in the essay for the dignity of man is interwoven inextricably into the religious fabric of the language. The bootblack's hut becomes a "temple," his "holy halls" a church. The bootblack himself is a descendant of an ancient people whose majesty is preserved on vases and frescoes, and whose name is synonymous with a religious rite. Although humble, the bootblack is privileged by unwritten laws, and is within the limits of the essay chosen from a priestly race, transformed in the course of the exposition through the performance of a human service from a modest worker into a sacred ministrant. Inside his hut there is "consecration," "application," and "sacrament."

In the third paragraph, which Böll dedicates to the ritual itself, he carefully structures the rhythms of his language to correspond to the solemn action. He does this by taking liberty with formal punctuation, using few periods, frequent dashes, colons, semi-colons, and commas; he thereby fashions a cadence that flows forward without interruption and which is in accord with the liturgical content — the periods being reserved for the divisions of the ritual. The first sentence introduces the preparation for administering the sacrament; the second begins the symbolic act of polishing shoes. The third, with the identical opening as the second ("left shoe on the platform"), indicates not only that the first part of the ritual is over, but also unmistakably introduces the following stages. The German word *Kothurn*, representing the shoe-rest and alluding to Greek tragedy, calls forth formal, classical, dramatic, even religious associations; it is itself an uncommon replacement for the more natural word *Schuhbank*; it here designates the altar. After the two applications of cremes, the fourth sentence recounts the cleansing of both feet (the verb *putzen* implying to clean as well as to polish). The fifth sentence completes the bootblack's task, which culminates in a high gloss.

The following paragraph, consisting merely of three short sentences in triple rhythms, simply introduces a necessary reverential quiescence, and thus belongs structurally to the preceding paragraph as its conclusion. It declares the completion of the ritual: "The solemn application is over. The time . . . comes back doubled. Won, not lost," and corresponds to the final announcement in the Catholic service: "The mass is ended. Go in peace."

The final paragraph of the essay summarizes the first paragraph and with it forms a frame for the three central paragraphs dedicated to the liturgy. The second last sentence is a confession of the author's changed consciousness, and the final words, "I envy them," a conclusion which returns the experience to the necessary level of daily reality. These concluding words, again fortifying the tripartite structure of the work, demonstrate Böll's lack of fear of sentiment and his willingness to carry emotion to the beginning of sentimentality. It is a characteristic trait in Böll's work which accounts in part for his popular appeal among ordinary readers and the occasional disdain of critics. It exemplifies

Böll's peculiar formula of romantic feeling and everyday realism. In a sophisticated world where detachment, black humor, the tone of Beckett, Grass, Vonnegut, Robbe-Grillet, and Brecht dominate, where aesthetic distance is synonymous with art, Böll does not eschew the grand gesture from the heart.

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NOTES

1. Böll uses the term essay to refer loosely to many types of writing: polemics, book reviews, speeches, feuilleton, lectures, political and literary commentaries.
2. *Erzählungen, Hörspiele, Aufsätze* (Cologne: Kiepenheuer & Witsch, 1961), *Frankfurter Vorlesungen* (Cologne: Kiepenheuer & Witsch, 1966), *Aufsätze, Kritiken, Reden* (Cologne: Kiepenheuer & Witsch, 1967), *Neue politische und literarische Schriften* (Cologne: Kiepenheuer & Witsch, 1973).
3. Translated by Robert C. Conard and published with permission of Joan Daves, Böll's literary agent for the U.S.A. Copyright 1976 by Heinrich Böll.
4. From *Neue politische und literarische Schriften*, pp. 188-189.
5. *Und sagte kein einziges Wort* (Cologne: Kiepenheuer & Witsch, 1953), p. 20 and pp. 118-119.
6. *Gruppenbild mit dame* (Cologne: Kiepenheuer & Witsch, 1971).
7. *Billard um halbzehn* (Cologne: Kiepenheuer & Witsch, 1959) and *Gruppenbild*.
8. Carl Amery sees in Böll's works an attempt to restore to society the loss of unity between "sign" and reality; hence, he equates Böll's work with an effort to rediscover the sacramental quality in daily life, "Eine christliche Position," *In Sachen Böll*, ed. Marcel Reich-Ranicki (Cologne: Kiepenheuer & Witsch, 1968), p. 126.
9. *Das Brot der frühen Jahre* (Cologne: Kiepenheuer & Witsch, 1955), *Ansichten eines Clowns* (Cologne: Kiepenheuer & Witsch, 1963), *Hausfriedensbruch* (Cologne: Kiepenheuer & Witsch, 1969).
10. "Gesinnung gibt es immer gratis," in *Aufsätze, Kritiken, Reden*, pp. 147-150.