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The Catcher on the Rhine: *Heinrich Böll, 1917-1985*

JOSEPH HYNES

Heinrich Böll's posthumously published *Women in a River Landscape: A Novel in Dialogues and Soliloquies* (1985) offers a new format for his fiction, as suggested by the subtitle. The subject matter, characters, setting, and substance of the book evoke, however, four decades of Böll's work. Once again the author gathers a group of characters in Bonn, on the Rhine, to meditate upon, denounce, lament West German history since 1945, and to elicit no clear responses from themselves to their questions about how to improve the moral-social-political climate. Members of the older generation, whether in monologue or in dialogue, explain how they seized opportunity presented in the postwar vacuum, rode it to quite comfortable status, and now are too weak or involved or inept to get themselves or their country out of the palpable corruption that they have helped to effect. Social tradition, orthodox Catholicism, the generation gap, stability of affection, "law and order," and indeed the very idea of *organized* activity confuse, dismay, or disgust these prosperous instigator-survivors. As we have learned from earlier Böll novels, hope for the future resides in some kind of unspecified anarchy. In the present book, this familiar stance is taken by Karl von Kreyl, who rejects his father's Catholicism and aristocratic title, and by Lore Schmitz, age twenty, who declares that, as one required to scratch a living, she cannot "afford" such things as "law and order" and "religion," and who states that "love and loyalty—not faith" are the only things that matter (194). We know this to be where Böll himself "lived," not only because Lore's rhetoric persuades Heinrich von Kreyl, the seventy-year-old Catholic Count, but also because Lore's attitude is implied and posited in Böll's other books. In the end, the characters of this final novel remind one of the characters at the end of George Bernard Shaw's *Heartbreak House* in their general disillusionment. Both clusters of characters are waiting for the end, having argued against or drifted away from all discernible roots, and each work highlights a young woman who hopes strongly but vaguely for a better anarchic tomorrow. Admittedly, Shaw's Ellie Dunn craves death, while Lore Schmitz wants a meaningful life; but the analogy between the two works is nonetheless striking.

Böll's untimely death and his last novel prompt me to attempt a summing-up of his important and heroic achievement. Trying to draw together the qualities of Böll's fiction—or at least of that considerable quantity of it now available in English translation—is a strenuous task rendered even more interesting by virtue of the otherwise incidental knowledge that Böll published, in 1962, a translation of J. D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951).¹ Awareness of this seemingly casual fact has assisted me in understanding certain characteristic

¹ Robert C. Conard, *Heinrich Böll* (Boston: Twayne, 1981), 209.

interests and motifs of Böll's work from early to late, as well as in discerning important differences between Böll and Salinger. I wish not to make a case for the influence of Salinger upon Böll, but to move among the longer fictions of Böll's career, and especially to discuss *The Clown*, in order to show some similarities and differences between the two writers, but also and primarily to show the issues which continued to preoccupy Böll for about forty years. Salinger is my springboard to reflections upon Böll, then, rather than a co-interest.

Anyone who has read *The Catcher in the Rye* will recall that it is a first-person narrative delivered by an American teenager named Holden Caulfield. Holden is regularly dismissed from expensive prep schools on the East Coast, and is at the time of narration (we eventually surmise) telling his story for therapeutic reasons. Coming from an affluent background, Holden is not worried about making ends meet and indeed never frets much about what he is to do for a living if he does not return to school. Rather, the very affluence of his family and his schoolmates and of that part of American society known to him in the late 1940s is at the heart of what troubles him. What drives him wild, in particular, is the virtual ubiquitousness of "phoniness" and the "phony." His eye and ear for their many signs are renowned and doubtless explain in large and happy part the continuing popularity of the book, in high schools and elsewhere. He has a wonderful satirist's awareness. One part of his character, then, is this instinct for what ails his world.

Another prominent characteristic of Holden's narrative is his ingrained wish to preserve innocence from becoming conscious of and tainted by the hypocrisy and other evil in which he sees all of us immersed. The title of the book, for instance, is Holden's home-made metaphor for keeping good people (usually children) from falling out of the rye field of innocence and into the larger world he sees the rest of us inhabiting and perpetuating. Of course he is undergoing psychiatric treatment because his mission proves predictably impossible. He cannot hope to erase all the "'Fuck you' signs" even in New York, but what is he to do instead? The novel is a case history and the reader is the implicit doctor. Holden's problem becomes ours.

The humor of *Catcher* stems from its narrator's acute sense of what is to be seen and heard in America, especially during his 1940s New York weekend, but also today. Holden captures beautifully the fulsome speech-patterns of the financially successful alumnus, the helplessly insincere manners of parents to children, the New York cabbie's abruptly offensive defensiveness, the advertising world's built-in lying and smarminess. On the other hand, regularly if inexplicably using the epithet "old" to indicate approval of someone, he vividly recalls those acts which he cherishes: e.g., "old Jane" keeps her kings in the back row at checkers; "old Allie" (Holden's deceased, red-haired younger brother) copied poems onto his baseball glove, which Holden treasures; "old Phoebe" (Holden's ten-year-old, "roller-skate skinny" sister) is always open and straightforward about what she means and wants; James Castle leaped from a dormitory window to his death rather than submit to the bullying of other students. Such details as these regularly indicate that Holden

wants people not only to avoid cruelty and viciousness, but also to be truthful and forthright in all they do. Moreover, when he likes or loves someone, he does not explain his affection. If we do not feel what is endearing about Jane or Allie or Phoebe or James, that failure on our part is a symptom of how our society coarsens us. The problem posed by Holden may in fact be expressed as that of how to sensitize America and the commercialized Western world to our collective dehumanizing sickness and to the need for change. Finally, Holden must be seen as possessed of the zeal of the youthful idealist, one who is not at all concerned with thinking things out or understanding them, but who is taken up entirely with the obviousness of what hits the senses as looking, sounding, *feeling* wrong or evil. How we are to act upon the taking of his point is not discussed. His implied faith is that once we see and feel aright, we will readjust our actions in accord with our awakened sensibility.

Holden is not only preoccupied with “morons” and “phonies” and “bastards” and “hot-shots.” He is equally aware, in spite of his pronouncements to the contrary, that he must eventually find some way to live with the rest of the world: he is torn between antisocial acuteness and his natural need for life with others. There is a lot of Thoreau and Huck Finn in him. Moreover, he frequently veers from denunciation of someone or of some occurrence to saying that in the long run he feels sorry for a person caught in a position such as that of Ernest Morrow’s mother (whose son is cruel and insensitive), or of girls whose brains he says he can almost watch dissolve as their passions rise, or of “old Ernie,” the skilled pianist whose tampering with the melody-lines may have rendered him incapable any longer of knowing real playing from fakery, or of any number of persons whom he imagines just as sensitive to the human condition as he is. In sum, he longs to escape others, whom he denigrates, even as he feels compassion for them and longs to rejoin them.

Such idealism is likewise what consistently motivated Heinrich Böll. In *The Train* (1949) and *Adam* (1951), for instance, the reader is at once and throughout conscious of how events are calculated to catch up with and crush idealistic young people afraid of occurrences over which they seem to have no control. The war will and does grind them down. Indeed, the war and the social, political, and economic forces that brought it on are thought of by the protagonists as somehow existing apart from their own wills. The implication is that the forces—on both sides in the war—that have induced such waste and destruction are a sickness in need of remedy. The stories are not at all polemical. Rather, they are concerned from first to last with effects rather than with such causes as we are compelled to ponder and possibly act upon.

In later works the war remains important, but primarily as a decisive event coloring the postwar recovery depicted in time present. The main point in this juxtaposing of past and present is usually that the same economic and moral structure that gave rise to the war is still at work, at least as dynamically as before 1939, and with results predictably inhuman and corrosive. *And Never Said a Word* (1953) is the struggle of one father and mother to live as practicing Catholics in the postwar economy of few haves and many have-nots, and of the torment wrought by this set of circumstances. Caught between the unbending

Roman Catholic strictures on artificial birth control and the forces of the so-called economic miracle which saw Germany recover with remarkable speed in the decades after 1945, Fred and Käte Bogner must choose between violation of conscience and violation of parental responsibility, or between the unnaturalness of artificial birth-control devices and the unnaturalness of separation from each other and of father from children. And of course the poverty-level income available to Fred, one of the millions of underprivileged in this rebirth of capitalistic free enterprise, soaks the Bogners' dilemma in contemporary reality of the sort that consistently inspired Böll (as distinct from Salinger, whose post-war stories attack a society created by capitalist values but never take direct issue with those values).

Again, in *The Bread of Those Early Years* (1955) Böll's first-person narrator, like Fred Bogner and Holden Caulfield in their first-person narratives, lays out his sudden vision of contrast between immersing himself in the capitalist system in order to live comfortably and make money for its own sake, and, contrarily, starting from his sudden love for Hedwig and letting that fact dictate all other values. Walter is transformed by love, and thereby exemplifies Böll's code and Holden's. Moreover, once he is thus converted, he vigorously attacks the values of his former employer and of that employer's daughter, Walter's own former fiancée. In other words, this novel is much more overtly didactic than previous works. Walter manifests the same sort of conversion-by-feeling that characterizes Holden. As Robert Conard says, Walter is as dramatically altered as was Saul on the road to Damascus.² Walter doesn't think about Hedwig, but simply must love and marry her—although this instant alteration in his feelings induces him to think subsequently about the workings of the economic system to which he had heretofore given himself wholeheartedly.

The force of emotion also dominates *Billiards at Half-Past Nine* (1959), probably Böll's best-known book and certainly a major achievement. Once more it is feelings which inspire the main characters, members of the Fählmel family, to act as they do, and it is their actions and motives which constitute the novel. Robert's compassion for Schrella and contempt for Nettleinger, like Robert's instinct for blowing up an abbey or whatever stands for the system and has made the system a reality, and like Johanna's wish to shoot any member of any political party at all (parties are seen to look alike), again as a representative of the entire system—all such reactions typify Böll's procedure in this book as elsewhere. *Billiards* tries to account for fifty or sixty years of German history by focusing on part of one day in the lives of the Fählmel family, a financially comfortable clan of architects extending from the generation of eighty-year-old Heinrich through that of the principal character, Heinrich's son Robert, to that of young Joseph, Robert's son. Each chapter consists of the overtly spoken and the indirectly or mentally spoken or remembered monologue or dialogue of individual characters. (This artistic practice is economically extended, of course, in *Women in a River Landscape*.) Thus there is no central or controlling or external narrative point of view. The result of this technique is that we are

² Conard, 114–15.

drawn effectively into a number of separate psyches, and that we have no difficulty recognizing enemies and friends of the characters thus rendered. Therefore we, like Schrella, Robert, and Johanna, for instance, approve of *The Host of the Lamb* (those who represent Böll's kind of Christianity), and just as readily disapprove of *The Host of the Beast* (the Anti-Christ or representatives of that power, ecclesiastical or civil, which Walter rejected and which heavily repressed the Bogners). However, we have no way of discerning what an entire society—apart from the members of the Fählmel family—can do about the wretched social and political situation that is Germany (and by implication the West) in the 1950s. Once more Holden Caulfield's problem is clear: while it is essential to spot what's wrong, what can we, collectively, do about that wrong? Are we limited to family isolation from the society at large, or can we possibly change the nature of the whole system? *Billiards* settles for an enlightened single family and in this respect rather surprisingly resembles less the work of a long-time leftist than that of Evelyn Waugh, as in his depiction of the Tory quietist Guy Crouchback, another prosperous Catholic whose illusions have been shattered and who retires to the country, *Candide*-fashion, to raise family and crops and to avoid the world at large.

In a number of thematic ways, then, the similarities between Böll and Salinger obtain. It is in *The Clown* (1963), however, that such similarities are not only thematically clear, but also stylistically important. Once again Böll uses a first-person narrator, this time the clown Hans Schnier, the twenty-seven-year-old son of a prosperous industrialist whose fortune is in coal. Hans is like Holden not only in having wealthy parents and siblings important to his narrative, but also in being deeply disillusioned with the state of the world at large and with his own little world. In time present—part of one day in the early 1960s in Bonn, the Schnier family's home base—Hans occupies an apartment supplied by his grandfather and furnished with one day's rations by his friend Monika Silvs. He briefly encounters a neighbor and confronts his father, but these are the only occasions of his actually facing others. For the most part he narrates his recollection of crucial occurrences in his life, and talks on the telephone with a number of persons.

Hans's immediate state is attributable to his failures in recent professional appearances. These failures, in turn, he traces to the fact that Marie Derkum has left him and is reported to have married "Züpfner, that Catholic." Hans's phoning is to some who know both him and Marie, as well as to his brother, Leo (a seminarian training for the priesthood), his mother, and his father's mistress. Hans drinks heavily, eats poorly, and has fared so badly on stage of late that his rather sympathetic but realistic manager confides that nobody will again hire Hans until he has reformed and regained his prowess.

Already several Salinger overtones are apparent. For one thing we have here a loner, one who is acutely sensitive to the society around him and to the individual human characteristics which he sees as traceable to that society. As in Holden's case, so in Hans's, humor is ironic, exaggeratedly sarcastic, and decidedly at the expense of everyone and everything else. Hans, like Holden, is anything but pleased with himself and his present shape, but he is also in-

clined to stress the faults and weaknesses of others. Moreover, like Holden, Hans is also quite capable of suddenly recalling something good or touching or affectingly sad or glaringly genuine. For instance, he remembers his mother as she clandestinely bolted a piece of carefully rationed ham, or his father's courage in calmly standing up for Hans and other children being bullied by a Nazi Youth leader, or even Züpfner's evident embarrassment at the hypocritical preaching of another Catholic discussing poverty while eating and drinking lavishly.

As in the *Catcher*, so here, the narrator-protagonist hits evil hard and only occasionally provides an instance of goodness and virtue. Holden's sister, Phoebe, or his former teacher, Mr. Antolini, tries to shift Holden to seeing something positive and worth at least endorsing, and to some extent Holden responds, even without their prodding. He remembers how Jane clams up and refuses to talk about her stepfather. Instead, she drops a single tear onto the checker board and breaks Holden's heart. Boredoms are a menace, but Holden remembers one particular bore who was a marvelous whistler of even the most complex jazz tunes. Parents are a drag, but Holden recalls his mother's insomnia and nervousness induced by his brother Allie's death. Catholics are a pain because sooner or later they get around to asking him whether he happens by chance to be Catholic; but he likes the two nuns he meets in a fast-food place because they stand for hours on corners and wear no makeup and beg money for others, and also because one of them has a terrific smile and shares his interest in *Romeo and Juliet* (even though he has trouble seeing how she handles the sex in that play). Sir Laurence Olivier seems always conscious of how great he is; but Olivier's *Hamlet* has that nice touch where Ophelia plays with Laertes' dagger while Polonius is going on about how Laertes is to comport himself away from home. Such moments are far from plentiful, and in fact the reason for Holden's general state of depression is that he finds so few and is unable to make a pattern of them. But they do sustain him in his usually grey condition.

Just as Holden values what others regard as "digressions," Hans thinks of himself as "a collector of moments." The term reminds us that this is precisely what a clown is. As a mime, he focuses wordlessly upon this or that affecting incident and plays it up for amusement, for pathos, or even for praise, often didactically. Like Holden, Hans has few general or theoretical ideas, and stands for no -isms. He is not a dealer in abstract notions. Rather, he remembers his sister, Henrietta (much like Allie and Phoebe), not as a paragon of virtue or a cornerstone of the Girl Scouts, but as one who played tennis beautifully, who swore seldom but effectively and innocently, and who wore a blue hat and waved as she left on the streetcar to join the Hitler Youth Group to which she belonged at her parents' request and from which she never returned. She died at sixteen—Holden's age. Similarly, Hans remembers Marie's father, Martin Derkum, who was a communist and therefore an outcast in Bonn society. The Catholic school children passed by his shop without buying candy. Hans also recalls that after he and Marie had consummated their love, Derkum broke down, but, rather than curse Hans for taking advantage of Marie, simply said "I'm sorry" and gave Hans some pocket money and two packs of cigarettes for

his flight from scandal. Or Hans remembers that, despite his frustrations at the hands of Catholic dogmatists, certain Catholics besides Züpfner are good people. Among these, with no rationale offered, are Pope John XXIII, Alec Guinness, Gary Cooper, a Black boxer named Gregory, Marie, and an apostate priest named Heinrich Behlen. Monika Silvs is another Catholic exception. Perhaps the most pronounced instance of a Catholic approved by Hans is the old goodnatured priest or brother who answers the phone at Leo's seminary. This cleric (who tells Hans that he is not in the good graces of the others at the seminary) advises the stranger, Hans, not to worry about his non-belief and invites him to read Romans 15:21 (which is Böll's epigraph): "To whom he was not spoken of, they shall see: and they that have not heard shall understand." Just as Holden ran berserk when Allie died, and tore ligaments in his hand by driving it through a window, so Hans went temporarily crazy when the Schniers were informed of Henrietta's death. He tore apart her bedroom and in minutes made a bonfire of her possessions. These are among the moments collected by Hans, and they are the only experiences which give him hope for humanity as well as for himself. Feeling is first; spontaneity dominates his values.

The upshot of so much stress upon what one is to cherish in this or that moment, person, or incident, then, is that Böll necessarily and no doubt quite consciously leaves the book unfinished—if the reader looks for solutions to complex issues. Indeed in Böll's novels, this lack is noticeable—just as in Salinger, whose Holden wants to call up "old Thomas Hardy" or "old Isak Dinesen" because he likes Eustacia Vye and *Out of Africa*. Holden exists as a character, however, precisely for the reason that Hans Schnier exists: because he has no answer to the questions of how to get beyond the concrete incident (always unique, past, unrepeatable) to some kind of general formula for viable community life. In fact, these Böll novels through 1963 may be read as though their narrators were all in a sense clowns; were striving to specify the quality of selected occasions but without attempting to comment further upon them as examples of general conduct. Böll's novels offer us characters who expect us to like or to dislike isolated events or bits of behavior. If we see the point, fine. The narrator-clown refuses annotation or commentary.

A deadpan expression and conscious impersonalism are requisites for clowning-narrating. The clown, according to Schnier, must convey no emotion, must never laugh or cry, must deliver his moment and let his audience take things from there. Self-pity won't do, nor is any other loss of control permitted. We have to know how the character-clown feels, but only about selected items. Like any writer of satiric reformer's bent, he means us to confront the problems implicit or explicit in those individual instances about which he finds himself unable to generalize.

A clown, like a narrator, is a loner, but a miming loner who needs an audience to bring him back to the world and out of that mirror in which he practices his acts—mimed *exempla* intended for us, after all. A clown-narrator infiltrates by delighting us. Böll's clown is self-exiled but uses his chalk-faced detachment to touch us as he could not if he were one of us. In the same way, and for the same

reason, Böll creates a situation wherein Hans Schnier gets in touch with his outside world by telephone almost exclusively. What this fictional device ingeniously accomplishes is the means by which both Hans and Böll can have things both ways: they can communicate with us by way of a first-person narrative, but while Hans can use the phone as the means to connect himself to others, he likewise can disconnect himself whenever it proves convenient, and he can also monopolize a conversation and turn it into nearly the monologue that is the remainder of the book. Those whom Hans calls are his "straight" men and women. The implication is that just as the narrative is Hans's means of trying to touch that humanity which collectively disgusts him and which he needs, so Böll appears to be using Hans as Böll's own telephoning clown. Each communicator wants out and needs in. The phone, like this novel, is both a connecting device and a separator. If we have any happier method to suggest, we are challenged to provide it in our own lives.

Such a procedure is clearly desperate in some ways, and it reminds us that idealism bears a close resemblance to cynicism. Moreover, idealism is of various sorts. Hans indeed tells us that his plutocratic father is an idealist, but not of Hans's stripe. What he means is that the elder Schnier lives with money as a kind of abstract god not to be spent but to be accumulated and used for power. This is a materialistic idealism which separates the father from Hans's brother, Leo, for Leo has "gone over to the Catholics" and intends to live for the spirit. Thus Hans can sympathize with his father because he sees his father faced with a counter-idealist (Leo) as well as with Hans, who appears to embody spiritualism of a secular variety hostile to his father's. Hans's own plight is that of someone who cannot go the way of his father into orthodox materialism (i.e., capitalism) and who similarly cannot follow Leo into orthodox spiritualism. Another way to say this is that Hans condemns neither idealism but longs to find a third way to combine them. If his father could import into his views some more concern for the particular—if his father were not an absolutist—and if Leo and most of the other Catholics whom Hans knows could tone down or abandon some of their own absolutism in order to look at concrete realities surrounding them, Hans might be able to realize his secular blend of spirit and matter, I and thou, individual and institution. Inability to find such a middle way (an inability very like Holden's) can of course lead beyond cynicism to despair, as Hans remarks. His narrative, which includes the phone calls, is a struggle to preserve contact even as he denounces nearly everyone and everything that comes to mind. Notably, as I have said, Hans's father is the only significant character whom Hans confronts in person. Hans's father *faces* him to say that the mark of a mature person is the ability to "accept the situation" (133). These are not merely empty words coming from the father, in Hans's view, because Hans suspects how much it has cost his father to live with the death of Henrietta on his conscience, and because the father tells him how it hurt even more when Leo became a Catholic and a seminarian: materialism clearly has its own blind spots. On the other hand, Leo's having entered the seminary means for Hans that Leo has sold out to a system that largely blunts awareness of exactly what Christianity is meant to see and attend to. Leo's

brand of spiritual institutionalism Hans sees as riddled with rules that effectively prevent attention to this or that instance requiring compassionate and loving action. His father and his brother are archetypal examples of what is wrong with institutional economics and politics and religion, and furthermore Hans sees the two failures as cooperating culturally and permeating German and Western mentality and conduct. Conversely, Hans's particularism, like Holden's, offers little with which to counter or replace such thinking, because Hans's style by definition is that of the outsider who sees, shows, comments either silently or narratively, but cannot talk about ideas behind what he sees. He cannot "accept the situation," which he sees as institutional and poisonous, and he perceives that those who, even in good faith, urge him to do so can accept the situation only because they fail to see what it is. His career—his art—is devoted to making them see that very situation which they accept, embody, perpetuate. His only hope, which he does maintain in spite of all, is that he may communicate as a clown, a street singer, or a narrator, in which case he may make an individual convert here and there. Presumably, Böll's own career was motivated by that same aim. Awareness and art are not solutions, then, but means to possible solutions to be found by us as *we* become aware.

This signifies that Böll's function and Hans's are quite like Salinger's and Holden's. These authors and narrators focus on vivid instances satirically designed to awaken us to take some action. What do we think *we're* doing with our lives? Whom do *we* want to call on the phone, to sound out, and to test ourselves against? Have *we* any ideal at all, or do we merely drift into the *status quo*? If we have principles what are these and are they viable? When is naiveté stupid? and when is it good, whether stupid or not? Is innocence such as Holden's and Hans's the only alternative to commitment to the system which is evil in its workings? To what extent is "realism" or acceptance of the situation a measure of maturity, and can such maturity continue to be seen as good? Is a good human life—with good conceived of as personal *and* collective—possible only if we forget details of the past? And if so, what are we to conclude about an existence which is possible because we sever ourselves in large part from our own history? What are we to think of a way of life which inherently precludes generalization? which is all trees and no forest? Is it better to live solely on the nourishment supplied by this or that determinedly recollected moment, like Edgar Wieneken's running a 10.1 hundred meters or Henrietta's waving goodbye? Or is it better to bury the moments which constitute one's own and one's society's past, in order to survive? Is it good or evil to forget monstrous failings such as Nazism? Is it possible to reconcile the way Hans ends one paragraph by saying that "Strangely enough I like the kind to which I belong" with the way he begins the next paragraph: "When one of my kind dies, I am sad. I would weep even at the grave of my mother" (211)?

The answers to such questions are in some sense implicit in the very fact that we have a text at all. Hans, like Holden, cannot live as cut-off as his hostile insights would seem to demand. He senses this, of course, and that merely makes him more frantic to keep a wall between himself and what Twain called "the damned human race." But Hans has to narrate and telephone even as he

has to mime and as he plans to sing at book's end. These forms of communication all require whoever gets the point to take such action as Hans is unable to specify. His rejection of others is a cry for help. His innocence (noted by Father Sommerwild) shows up particularly in his assumption, explicit and implicit, that he can live unto himself even as others support him and give him purpose. That he rejects the race and loves John, Peter, or Thomas marks both the hole in his argument and the hope for his redemption. Böll's hope, of course, was that it might mark the start of our own redemption as well.

Hans relishes *silence* and *nothing*, two of his thematic terms, and he reveres the work of Beckett. He persists in his conviction that words lead to ideas, which in turn erect intellectual systems, which are possible only because we deny or forget or ignore those particular moments which are the roots of worth. So words are bad unless, like those of the litanies, they are not your own but merely the means of conveying sympathy or some feeling for the beautiful. Feeling is fine; it is essential. Abstract thinking is destructive (we recall Lucky's hilarious and horrendous "thinking" in *Waiting for Godot*). Yet Hans implicitly begs for assistance in bringing things together, in thinking his way to a common life of value, in making ideas out of all the randomly felt moments. The clown insists that he is thinking "nothing," for he wants (like all such innocent idealists of the spirit, whether sacredly or secularly impelled) to clear himself of involvement with that rationalism which he sees as *our* tool and the very implement that has built the systems which he targets. "Silence is a good weapon" (12) because it makes the viewer ponder what Hans's mime signifies. Don't think, he self-contradictingly urges; instead, see, hear, recall, smell (as Hans "smells" through the telephone), come alive in your senses.

Hans's position reminds us once again that intelligence is hyperactively at work denying its own value, and that the feeler is in fact speaking ideas. Moreover, the feeler is being supported, if only in a minor way, by that society which he denounces. Industry paid Thoreau's bills. Holden is supported by his father's practice of corporation law. The English romantics (like the German Böll) needed to sell books. Hans lives on food supplied by Monika and his audiences, and in an apartment furnished rent-free by his grandfather. As usual, the idealist needs what the system offers if he is to live to reject that system. That he knows this very well intensifies Hans's plight for us, as he tells us what is wrong with his mother, for instance, and then demonstrates that he needs to call her up, and then that he must, to be consistent now that he has called her, hurt her to tears. Irony and sarcasm are the only weapons left when he has violated his condition of silence, his commitment to "nothing."

Hans's commitment to others, however tangential, may be seen best in his relationship with Marie Derkum. She is mentioned at first only briefly (except for his telling us that she has left him in favor of Züpfner), until he tells us that he simply could no longer endure his celibacy and therefore arranged spontaneously, with her obvious consent, to do with her "everything that men do with women" (17). The first-person nature of the narrative gives us almost nothing directly of what Marie thinks in her several years with Hans, but it is clear that she returns his affection and that she wants to marry him in the

Church and to raise children with him. Because he offers little of her thinking, we may be nearly as surprised as he when she leaves him. But our surprise cannot endure, because his continuing narrative drills into us his one-sided view of his own and the human condition. We know that she continues to believe as a Catholic, that she relishes those few occasions when Hans's tour enables the two of them to visit some of her Catholic friends whom Hans telephones in this narrative, and that she suffered at least one miscarriage or abortion.

Knowing even this much about Marie helps us to understand why she left Hans and why she married Züpfner, although it does not tell us anything about why she yielded to Hans so suddenly in the first place, or how she conceives of Hans's sense of love as distinct from whatever affection she and Züpfner may share. Still, we know enough to let us see what Böll wants us to see—which is how his protagonist sees Marie and himself.

Hans's perception of Marie and of their relationship is conditioned primarily by his raw need, no questions asked by either her or himself, and by his assumption that they were and are together in a bond that he feels and that he maintains she really feels too. In fighting the priests, Hans reverts to the Catholic doctrine that the couple bestow the sacrament of matrimony upon each other, so that no formal ecclesiastical or civil ceremony is needed. That is, Hans tries to turn the institution's argument against the institution, to insist that he and Marie are irrevocably married in their own eyes and thus in the Church's eyes as well. He will not listen to anything said to qualify this doctrine, as indeed his entire career depends upon his not listening and not entering into conversation or discussion on any subject—such as why Marie has chosen to marry Züpfner, for instance. As I see the book, it is exactly this attitude—and the consequence of it for Marie, who obviously needs to live within the social or institutional frame of the Catholic religion and to have her marriage consecrated publicly and her children born and raised within that same system—that accounts for Marie's having to leave Hans, even if Hans cannot see or face this fact. Father Sommerwild, one of several persons on the phone whose points of view Hans will not allow to be expressed in any detail to himself or to us, says that he does understand Hans and that he would like to help him and that it is possible to love someone without living with him or her. Hans has to admit the truth of this, and that Sommerwild *does* merit respect as a priest, even though Hans continues—must continue—to think of Sommerwild as one of the institutional conspirators against his “marriage” to Marie.

It is this religious problem that lies at the heart of Hans's grief. Politics and economics, the CDU and big business, are of course institutional enemies of this or that collected moment, but institutional religion is the primary enemy because Marie is perceived by Hans as having sold out to the Church instead of having honored her commitment to the individual whose recollected moments both present his views and prevent his contemplating hers. To set up this conflict, Böll created Hans as one born to non-practicing Protestant parents who sent him to Catholic schools out of either liberalism or indifference. Hans is therefore trained in the Church's beliefs and liturgy, and uses his training to lash out at Catholicism's monolithic image. The point is that Hans, like

Holden, is nowhere. He is neither Catholic nor Protestant, although he loves a Catholic woman and carefully sees to it that she gets to Mass on time even though he fails to credit the seriousness with which she observes this duty. Small wonder that Hans is vulnerable. His basic trouble stems from his refusal to accept the notion of original sin. Sommerwild tells him that he is an innocent, and Hans himself tells Marie that "such a thing as innocence really does exist" (47). Like Holden, who cannot sit still but must keep moving from place to place within a general social scheme to which his vision is alien, Hans may be seen as admirable for holding out and for miming the prophets in his performances, or as immature for not "accepting the situation" and then trying to live with integrity—or whatever might approximate integrity—within the system, or as pathetic and even tragic in his seeing/unseeing progress toward self-destruction. We are able to see him in each of these ways, largely because he can see himself but singly; that singleness proves the truth of Sommerwild's remark that Hans is an innocent.

The greatest difference between Salinger's book and *The Clown* is Böll's inclusion of religious considerations, of a theological dimension. It is true, of course, that Phoebe or Antolini or "old Spencer" can recommend Holden's accepting the situation (a secular one) and can encourage his striving to meet it halfway. It is also true that introducing the theological element enables Böll to imagine the problem as fixed in human nature. The interesting complication is that Böll has given us a Catholic idealist in spite of Hans's denial that he believes in anything remotely resembling Catholic doctrine. Like the image of innocence in Graham Greene's books—the blind leper proceeding without warning-bell through crowded streets—Hans is the non-believer, the outsider, whom Böll uses to manifest or at least intimate what true Christianity ought to be. Hans is a trouble-making paradox for the essential reason that he is meant to exemplify what a Christian should see and how a Christian should feel, even though at the same time he rejects original sin as the innocence-breaker that explains the personal and institutional need for Christ and Christianity. The goodnatured cleric who answers the phone at the seminary knows intuitively (since knowing intellectually or rationally would make him part of the problem rather than a hint of the solution) that Hans is one of the good ones, and he also senses that Hans's non-belief is closer to the real thing than is many an instance of orthodoxy. We are expected to endorse this attitude. The problem arises when we ask why we should accept it. We obviously need not doubt the good faith of non-believers. But how are we to think at all of Christianity as having a serious mission if we are to begin from the premise (felt, not thought) that innocence can and does exist irrespective of calendar-age, and furthermore that it ought to be the keystone in our somehow reforming the world to fit innocents' views of what the world should be?

This is both the first and the last question that *The Clown* requires us to face—the question that includes all the other questions raised in these pages. It seems to me symptomatic of Böll's own idealism as expressed in earlier books, and it is evident in his later novels as well. I do not suggest that this is an artistic defect. Rather, I mean to indicate that, like all idealists, Böll appears to

throw the problem into our laps—as does Salinger—and then to disappear. This is admirable problem-tossing, but it may well stop us in our tracks if we come to realize that we are asked to posit the compatibility of innocence and a fallen world. Later books manipulate narrative point of view differently, and they take on a number of other issues apart from those of *The Clown*. *Group Portrait with Lady* (1971), *The Lost Honor of Katharina Blum* (1974), and *The Safety Net* (1979) nonetheless remain true to the early ideal vision. These late books also lead inexorably to the posthumous *Women in a River Landscape* and thereby reinforce the poignance of Böll's lifelong quest.

Katharina Blum is driven to violence against institutional journalism, which in turn, as in Ibsen's *An Enemy of the People*, is shown to be inseparable from the corrupting force of institutional big business and politics. Moreover, Katharina, like Hans and Walter, simply, suddenly, unquestioningly, romantically falls in love forever, in a flash. Where politics of any shade had impressed Johanna Fähmel as justifying her shooting whatever politician came within her range, and within range of that good which she saw in her family, in Katharina's case the threat is personal: a slandering journalist assaults not only her reputation but also her person and her very vital sense of love. Her shooting of the reporter is presented as inevitable and regarded sympathetically (by the reader, not by the judge) in view of society's disinclination to stop yellow journalism. Society is in fact shown to encourage such practices in the name of a free press and the public's right to know—which is plainly the company's need to fill all its pages daily and to sell more papers than its competitors can sell. The lightness or severity of Katharina's sentence—like the verdict reached in *The End of a Mission* (1966)—is of course not the issue. What we are asked to face and act upon is our own (German or other national) use of false ideals to destroy human lives.

In *The Safety Net*, a technically more complex and ambitious book, Böll gives us another family-centered microcosm of Western capitalistic prosperity and the fruits thereof. The Tolm family are so wealthy, following Germany's economic miracle, that they live in constant terror of being bombed, shot, or otherwise assaulted. The novel is a most successful manifestation of how this form of economic endeavor succeeds in trapping and dehumanizing rich and poor alike. In the midst of the paradoxical maze formed by protectors and protected, one of Fritz Tolm's children, Sabine Tolm Fischer, leaves her husband and takes as her lover one of her security guards. That each of them is married to someone else is a complication, but what emerges from the entanglement is that for all the pain given on both sides when the economic miracle proves to be an occasion of sin, true love is again romantic and hardly to be denied when it strikes. This truth as well as the price it exacts are both faced, as are countless humorous and terrible confusions between freedom and captivity.

For all the impressiveness of *Katharina Blum* and *The Safety Net*, however, it is only with Böll's most ambitious novel, *Group Portrait with Lady*, that we are encouraged to explore answers to some of those questions provoked by *The Clown* and the other works. Once again the religious dimension is of consequence, and we are challenged to unearth what the authorial intelligence behind the novel

suggests as some kind of solution larger than what might be offered by a given society in its own unaided right. This religious consideration is not in itself an artistic good and its absence from *Katharina Blum* and *The Safety Net* does not diminish those novels. Rather, the point is that the problem posed by all of Böll's books meets the same dead end on the social level, and it is because some of the books venture beyond that carefully rendered level in search of answers that I single out *Billiards*, *The Clown*, and *Group Portrait* as instances of Böll's speculation where Salinger does not tread.

In *Group Portrait* Böll splendidly combines the history of Leni Pfeiffer with that of modern Germany. Böll adroitly manages point of view so that the book is almost entirely comprised of the journalistic findings of an anonymous narrator. That the narrator ceases to be objective and detached is important in the end, but for the most part it is not a major point. We still have the familiar Böll narrator who talks and lays bare what he thinks and discovers, but whose vivid individuality and eventual involvement do not supply that omniscience for which we and Böll long.

Once more the capitalistic system that bred and cooperated with and has succeeded the Nazi movement is a prime target. Leni's capitalist father and various groups of employees before, during, and after World War II are Böll's means of depicting the intricacies of the social-economic-political scheme of things—every bit as twisted as in *The Safety Net* or *Billiards*, for example. Leni was raised and educated formally as a Catholic, but very early in her life gave up the practice of her religion because of what she saw as institutional barriers to individual charity or compassion. Böll complicates matters by giving us Leni as symbol of violated goodness (like Katharina) and Leni as emblem of what one should be and do. Böll typically cuts the legs out from under whatever "normal" expectations of a solution we might entertain. He gives us romantic love true in its spontaneity and rooted in compassion as well as in libido, and of course opposed to institutionally sanctioned sexual union. He gives us Leni's best friend, Margret Schlömer, as the woman whose heart melts for any man who wants to sleep with her (the "Sweet Charity" with the heart of gold who is no whore at all, but a Böll secular saint). He gives us a saintly Jewish nun, a blend of Edith Stein and Simone Weil, whose presence is an embarrassment to her colleagues in Hitler's Germany and whose grave cannot be stopped from breeding roses in all seasons—as in medieval saints' legends and Bergman's *Virgin Spring*. He sees to it that Leni's true loves are a cousin who dies young, a Russian communist prisoner of war, and a poverty-level Turk in postwar Germany. He arranges, in short, for the novel to offend just about anyone with conventional biases of some sort. He even sees to it that a handsome nun interviewed by the narrator-reporter leaves the convent because she prefers the reporter's company to her vocation.

All of these anti-conventional details, which are by now recognizable as Böll's own conventions, are given us in the presentation of a Germany gradually overcome by Allied pressures. The reason for my attending to this book, however, is that in it Böll makes his fullest attempt to resolve his perennial questions. Leni Pfeiffer, together with her friend Margret, Boris her Russian lover,

Rahel the Jewish nun, and Klementina the narrator's nun, constitute Böll's intimation that society might be able to solve its problems and get out of its own mess if it were willing and able to give up capitalistic free enterprise, organized religion, party politics, and other such institutional components of what we regard as Western culture. Instead we need an idealistic revival of individualism based on compassion and humane consideration of the person and the unique situation, and dedicated to the open-hearted distribution of the world's goods according to individual need. Those goods in turn would be manufactured or grown not in accordance with the advertising industry's need to increase its own wealth and that of its sponsors, but with attention to the supply of natural resources and to the needs of consumers rather than of producers. In other words, Böll's book may be hostile to German free enterprise and other forms of current collective behavior, but we are by no means free to compliment ourselves as citizens of some other Western society, for Böll is out to expose our social and thus our moral faults in the lump. Like Solzhenitsyn, in fact, Böll rejects his own country's values but likewise berates those of his other Western readers. Also like Solzhenitsyn, Böll wants a religious awakening. But of what kind?

As I read *Group Portrait*, Böll seeks a Christianity that is paradoxically both individualistic and communistic or at least socialistic. The little group of flower-growers who survive the Allied bombings of Köln in 1945 create a world in the catacombs. They rig up lighting and refrigeration, beget new life, and experience vitality in the midst of the death all around them—and in the graveyard wherein they dig their new-old temporary homes. This primitive life—like that of the early Christians, like Thoreau's, and like that which Holden envisions in Vermont and "out West"—is the typical idealist's effort to start over. Whereas Solzhenitsyn in his New England retreat wants a return to Russian Orthodoxy, Böll appears to yearn for a new amalgam. The difficulty is less in our seeing how the effort works for his characters than in imagining how to make it work for the world.

That world for Böll is not the same as Salinger's world. Each writer is obviously dead serious in his concern for moral overhaul, but Salinger limits himself predominantly to a basically comfortable middle-class America that has been spared the moral erosion, cultural disillusionment, and physical devastation constituting Böll's first premises. Assumptions tied to power, ignorance, and complacency control the commercial super-power depicted in Salinger's telling and memorable detail. For Böll, on the other hand, as we have seen, loathing of the mercantile mentality and its social effects is symptomatic of a malaise lying deeper than Salinger's and extending farther. When one builds in the extra dimension of religion, as Böll does, such phenomena as national totalitarianism and surrender of will, church-state collusion, genocide, economic hypocrisy, and reversion to pre-war standards of greed take on significance beyond Salinger's interests. Böll sees the problems on display in *Catcher*, but sees them as bigger and as involving the nature of humans rather than exclusively the issues of this time or place. That means that religious faith as well as great effort is required to make solutions feasible, and it means as well that the ramifications of failure and success are even vaster than for Salinger. *Group Portrait*

implicitly supports Hans Schnier's statement that "the children of this world are not only smarter, they are also more humane and more generous than the children of light" (14). Similarly, the narrator and the small gathering of principal characters whom he eventually joins when he comes in from the objective cold appear to agree with Hans's reflection that Edgar Wieneken was right: "the only faith he had was faith in certain people—the others believed in more than people: in God, in abstract money, in things like nation and Germany" (204). And yet Böll gives us in *Group Portrait* extra-institutional small-group involvement among outsiders both lay and clerical. Religious faith and commitment are set at odds with organized religion, but such great protest intimates that Böll was still driven by the need for religion rightly understood.

In Böll's view, true religion must regard with suspicion all generalizations, even those pitting seers against non-seers, and children of light against children of this world (see James 1:27). Indeed, even in one of his last interviews, Böll was still trying to separate an individual, instinctive, compassionate, primitive, uncoded Christian moral awareness and practice from institutional, impersonal, rationalized, authorized, cumulative, tabulated, monolithic absolutism which he always viewed—together with its economic and political extensions and counterparts—as the Anti-Christ or "Host of the Beast."³

Group Portrait, then, like Böll's other books, is a denunciation and a cautionary tale, but it also works desperately toward solutions. That it will not be read by those who might effect change is only the typical trouble. We also have to ponder how it might be possible to construct a collective world upon potentially anarchic premises. The fact is that Böll, like many an idealist, knew well the brands of scurrilousness that have made us what we are today, and yet beneath that awareness drew upon the faith that our status as innocents is sufficiently intact or recoverable for us to reshape the world. We are to give up on rational codes and systems of all kinds and to cultivate the good heart and real feeling, the "love and loyalty—not faith" espoused by Lore Schmitz, the Leni Pfeiffer of Böll's last book. In the end I believe Böll was stuck with this perceptively depicted paradox or contradiction. He often took it beyond the social map given us by Salinger, but when he got to the theological realm he fudged on original sin. The basic question remains: How can one posit both the eating of the apple and the possibility of un-eating it? Böll saw massive evidence of the eating. It is difficult to see why the failure of this or that collective enterprise reduces or removes the need for collective activity. It is equally difficult to see wherein collective failure leaves significant room for individual successful "moments" of the kind demanded by these heartbreakingly idealistic novels.⁴

³ See Karl-Josef Kuschel, ed., *Weil wir uns auf dieser Erde nicht ganz zu Hause fühlen* (München and Zürich: Piper, 1985), 64–76. For a critique of this problem in a different context, see Eugene Kennedy, *Tomorrow's Catholics, Yesterday's Church: The Two Cultures of American Catholicism* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988).

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