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SOME OBSERVATIONS ON THE ROLE OF VIOLENCE IN THE LATE PROSE OF HEINRICH BÖLL

SOME OBSERVATIONS ON THE ROLE OF VIOLENCE IN THE LATE PROSE OF HEINRICH BÖLL

Mark E. Cory

We read *Frauen vor Flußlandschaft* conscious that it is Böll's last novel, alert for ways it might function retrospectively to clarify our understanding of his art. One of these ways lies in the role violence plays in his works, specifically the way violence helps define the fascinating and elusive middle ground between order and anarchy to which Böll repeatedly returns and which configures his shrouded Rhenish landscape.

Violence in the early works was part of a ubiquitous evil. Böll's men and women were caught up in the maelstrom of war and swept away by large, impersonal and basically anonymous forces.¹ Many of those forces acquired identifiable faces in the intervening years, and victims who once were simply destroyed began in later reincarnations to fight back. This development is linked to the increasingly active role given women characters. Whereas the early works were dominated by male protagonists who suffered from the inhumanity of war but rarely struggled against it,² these basically passive men become less and less conspicuous in the later novels. In their place, Böll created a number of "subversive madonnas,"³ women who combine beauty, an almost secular spirituality and a sometimes radical willingness to act in defense of their beliefs. A striking aspect of these new women, in fact, is the extent to which some of them resort to violence as they assume the mantle of responsibility for social protest in the later prose works. As a consequence of this development, violence is no longer the exclusive domain of hostile and immoral agents, but violent acts are committed by figures with whom we identify and from whom we want to learn. This development seems to reach its limit in *Die verlorene Ehre der Katharina Blum*, embroiling Böll in a bitter extra-literary controversy in the process. In the novels to follow, *Fürsorgliche Belagerung* and *Frauen vor Flußlandschaft*, violence is tempered and a new balance defined in the relations between men and women. The lessons this redefinition holds for a critical understanding of the role played by violence in the late works will be the subject of what follows.

An analysis of the way violence functions in its literary manifestations runs the constant risk of being confused with Böll's extra-literary position on war and human rights. In the public sphere Böll became a genuinely controversial figure. Many who suffered him gladly as a chronicler of the bitter post-war years and as a champion of fictional outsiders grew much less tolerant when he began publicly to champion the civil rights of real individuals who threatened an orderly, affluent German society. Some readers and conservative critics, obviously made fearful by the activities of the Baader-Meinhof Gruppe and the RAF, were unsettled by Böll's provocative 1972 *Spiegel* article on behalf of Ulrike Meinhof and took it and the subsequent *Die verlorene Ehre der Katharina Blum* as an endorsement of or apology for terrorism.⁴ While a dispassionate reading of the essays up to and including the

interviews given in the year of his death leaves little doubt as to the sincerity of Böll's plea for a democratic, non-violent and humane society, it is also clear that Böll's public posture grew increasingly political and controversial.⁵

Given the controversy over Böll's support for anti-establishment causes and people in the political arena, it is somewhat curious that there has been so little critical attention paid the escalation of violence in the works themselves. This escalation is transparent, for instance, in the contrast between Nella Bach in *Haus ohne Hüter* (1954), Johanna Fähmel in *Billard um halbzehn* (1959) and Katharina Blum (1972). Nella reluctantly abandons her plan to assassinate the man she holds responsible for her husband's death; Johanna carries her own plan out and actually wounds one of the politicians she holds responsible for the war; and Katharina kills her tormentor with four shots fired at close range. One of the few critics to even register the surprising fact that positive characters do engage in violent behavior, W. Lee Nahrgang, dismisses the "apparent contradiction" between this peculiar phenomenon of gentle women who kill and Böll's personal philosophy with a reference to the subtitle of *Katharina Blum*, "Wie Gewalt entstehen und wohin sie führen kann."⁶ Nahrgang argues, quite correctly, that Böll's moral purpose in depicting such acts is to criticize the social inequities perpetuating the suffering and violence. While adequate as an answer to any charge that Böll consciously advocates violence, it leaves largely unexamined several interesting questions raised by Böll's increasing reliance upon women protagonists and the increasingly aggressive roles these women are asked to play. Robert Conard more correctly frames the issue when he says that violent acts done to right wrong not to do wrong require "a distinction some readers will find difficult to accept."⁷

The 1959 novel *Billard um halbzehn* is a useful starting point for an examination of the changing role of violence. In her analysis of game playing in this novel and in *Fürsorgliche Belagerung*, Gertrud Bauer Pickar describes how the game of billiards becomes both an extended image for the social games of withdrawal and reentry and for the nexus between constructive and destructive forces in society.⁸ Robert Fähmel plays out of a cool fascination with the physical laws governing the movement of the balls and the expression of these laws in certain mathematical formulae. With these same formulae he had put his mathematical knowledge to use during the war as a demolitions expert, destroying the abbey his father had built and which post-war Germany has now rebuilt and will dedicate on the day on which the novel focuses. The violence of that past act is rendered abstract by this characterization of demolition as merely the reverse of construction, "Sprengung ist nur die Umkehrung der Statik," as Robert puts it. Though highly problematic, Robert is basically a positive figure. Much of the ambivalence surrounding him stems from the motives behind his destruction of the abbey. Because the destruction is depicted in purely abstract terms, however, and because his target was a physical object rather than another person, our sympathies for Robert are threatened only because he holds himself aloof from the friends and family gathering to honor his father. Most of the novel treats violence as a metaphor for the crisis brought on by the war and the subsequent reconstruction period. Robert's destructive act was a frustrated effort to find a middle ground between the compulsive order of a totalitarian society and sheer anarchy. The question the novel poses at its conclusion is whether Robert's son will be more successful in finding this third way.

Böll complicates the novel by adding a second conspicuous act of violence in the

closing. **Conc: Some Observations on the Role of Violence in the Late Prose of He** larger explosion of Robert's wartime protest, but Johanna's act marks a radical departure in Böll's fiction: her target is a fellow human being, rather than a physical object. As in the case of her son, Johanna's motives are complex. She has decided, as Pickar points out,⁹ to reenter an active life after withdrawal into an asylum, but her strongest motive is not the maternal gesture to make a safer world for her grandchildren Pickar cites, but rather the motive of revenge: "der Herr spricht: mein ist die Rache," she muses, "aber warum soll ich nicht des Herrn Werkzeug sein?"¹⁰

Johanna's attempted assassination has received relatively scant attention because Böll's fiction at the time of *Billard um halbzehn* was still dominated by his male figures and because her act of violence seems almost an afterthought to the central act of the abbey's destruction.¹¹ It takes on considerable significance, however, as a precursor to the most problematical act of violence in Böll's oeuvre, Katharina's murder of Tötges in *Die verlorene Ehre der Katharina Blum*.

The confrontation between Tötges and Katharina is loaded with overtones of honor violated and honor regained. Tötges is perhaps the most negative figure in Böll's fiction, Katharina surely one of the most positive. Tötges has not only destroyed Katharina's life, a life slowly put together out of the refuse of a disastrous marriage, but directly or indirectly he has hastened the death of Katharina's mother, destroyed long-standing friendships between Katharina's supporters, and jeopardized the careers and happiness of many good people. That profoundly human part of us that responds to the Old Testament version of retributive justice feels a kind of catharsis in the shooting and embraces the appropriateness of Katharina's act.

Aesthetically, Böll has prepared us for this response in large part by casting his victim as an attractive, vulnerable, sensitive woman. We recognize in Katharina a younger version of Johanna Fähmel. As in *Billard um halbzehn*, the motive of revenge is invoked with deliberate ambivalence. Both Böll's extra-literary voice and his cool, objective narrative style are at odds with revenge as a solution to the problem of evil. But one of the lessons in the study of violence is that Böll does not operate in simple dualistic terms, championing hegemonies of rationalism and non-violence as solutions to complex human social problems. A measure of anarchy is important to any social order, a measure of irrational behavior part of the complex fabric of human intercourse.¹² In one sense, Katharina's act is akin to a rite of purification, a sacrificial dimension underscored by her identification with St. Catherine and of course by naming her lover "Götten." As the recent studies by René Girard show, this dimension, too, tends to heighten our sense of ambiguity.¹³

Precisely because pain and violence and our reactions to them are complex phenomena, this measure of ambiguity represents a genuine advance over earlier, more simplistic portrayals. Yet as the fundamental crime with which the story deals, character assassination, is suddenly and purposely escalated into an attack on Katharina's physical person, some of this ambiguity is lessened. The confrontation between Katharina and her tormentor becomes charged with the erotic context of rape, intensifying the reader's empathetic desire for revenge. The ingredients which drew such large audiences to films like *Straw Dogs*, *Death Wish* and *Lipstick* in this country and in Germany during the 1960s and 1970s are invoked here in prose: an attractive woman violated, frustration with a system of justice which cannot protect and will not punish, and an explosive assertion of individual vengeance.¹⁴ By striking back at her tormentor in this context, Katharina becomes more a heroine

than a sacrificial victim, and her violent act begins to take on some of the gratuitous legitimacy of adventure cinema.

The debate over this novel has long been stymied by an over-reliance upon Böll's extra-literary statements. Hostile critics have been unwilling to read anything positive into the ambiguity surrounding Katharina's actions, and Böll's defenders have been equally unwilling to consider that part of the confusion stems from Böll's having suddenly reduced the ambiguity surrounding her motives.¹⁵ What controls and shapes our response to *Die verlorene Ehre der Katharina Blum* is the way a need for revenge is created and then satisfied. "Wie Gewalt entstehen und wohin sie führen kann" may be intellectually designed to teach us something about the evil of violence, but somehow Böll's own outrage at his personal animus (the Springer press) and his fascination with the heroic potential in the new assertive woman overcome his intention. The story leads us in one direction intellectually and in the opposite direction emotionally. Peaceful and violent attitudes are jumbled in a way that ultimately defeats reason and can be resolved only by the irrational force of retribution. While this may have been acceptable in the case of Johanna Fähmel, a woman who could claim mental instability,¹⁶ it is difficult to reconcile with the stress placed on Katharina's cool intelligence. John Fraser, writing on the subject of violence in the arts, observes that "the right kinds of violence in art are not only charged with meaning, but serve to block off, or at least make harder contrasting attitudes."¹⁷ The readers of *Die verlorene Ehre der Katharina Blum* may be shocked by the consequences of character assassination, but they may also be tempted to applaud the most violent of those consequences. Instead of supporting his stated intellectual message, Böll's escalation of violence in this instance runs the very substantial risk of confusing that message in its reliance upon an unfortunate measure of vicarious thrill in the heroine's resort to murder to restore her honor.

Böll's next novel, *Fürsorgliche Belagerung*, although it retreats significantly from the excesses of *Die verlorene Ehre der Katharina Blum*, poses some of the same questions regarding violence and the values we as readers are to associate with its functions in the novel. The author insisted that this novel be read as an extension of the earlier *Katharina Blum*.¹⁸ Indeed, much is again familiar, but, *mutatis mutandis*, *Die Zeitung* is now called *Das Blättchen*, and its representative Fritz Tölm now personifies grandfatherly goodness. The event precipitating the action in *Katharine Blum* was the spontaneous love between Katharina and Götten. So, too, in *Fürsorgliche Belagerung* an entire sub-plot is driven by the sudden and spontaneous consummation of a natural love, but in this latter story the young lover is a policeman, rather than a suspected criminal. Böll is still at odds with the large institutionalized interests in Germany, with the toll they take in terms of human happiness, and with the direction in which West German society has moved to compensate for the kind of terrorist threat introduced during the period of Katharina Blum. As Pickar points out in her study (p. 96), he returns to a familial setting reminiscent of *Billard um halbzehn* to cast his victims in this novel, and once again women figure prominently, both among these victims and among those who harm others.

In fact, the story in *Fürsorgliche Belagerung* issues from the threat of violence and the measures necessary to counteract this threat. Fritz Tölm needs governmental protection from terrorists not because he is in any way evil, but because he represents power, influence, success and wealth. He and his family live in a technically sophisticated but highly restrictive system of protective surveillance. One of Tölm's sons,

Rolf, in Cory. Some Observations on the Role of Violence in the Late Prose of He: in his case the surveillance is required because of what he as a former activist might do to others. Father and son and their respective families are prisoners; the one "überwacht" for the protection of society, the other "bewacht" for his own protection. Violence intrudes upon these imprisoned people in several ways. Ostensibly it intrudes as the threat of terrorism—not from Tolm's son Rolf, but from Rolf's former friend Heinrich Bewerloh and Rolf's former wife Veronica. The novel culminates in an actual assassination attempt by Bewerloh and Veronica, and the threat of this attack exerts a constant pressure on Tolm, his security people, and us as readers.

The most corrosive violence in *Fürsorgliche Belagerung*, however, is not so much the threat of terrorist attack, which functions mainly as a kind of metaphor for one of the hazards of wealth, prestige and success in contemporary society, but the more subtle pressure of the Orwellian *Bewachung* and *Überwachung* in that same society. Those who are genuinely harmed in this novel are those Böll calls the "Sicherheitsgeschädigten." These include of course Tolm and his wife, whose villa is actually destroyed by terrorists, but whose lives are also rendered sterile and artificial by the constant surveillance. They include Rolf Tolm and his family, whose simple life would be idyllic except for the suspicions of those outside the wall surrounding their cottage and for the fact that they stand barred from the pursuit of their professions. The "Sicherheitsgeschädigten" include both peripheral figures, like a neighbor whose adulterous affair was compromised and whose marriage was destroyed because of the security surrounding the Tolms, and central figures like Tolm's daughter Sabine, whose own marriage ends when she becomes involved with one of the security officers assigned to guard her.

Clearly Böll's interest in *Fürsorgliche Belagerung* is to expose this greater violence, to win our sympathy for these "Sicherheitsgeschädigten," and to suggest ways to counteract the spectre of an Orwellian society. The antidote he suggests is love. In this way, too, *Fürsorgliche Belagerung* is very much an extension of *Die verlorene Ehre der Katharina Blum*. Sabine and Hubert's relationship is described in terms highly reminiscent of Katharina and Ludwig's. In both cases there is a spontaneity and a depth of genuine feeling which immunizes the pair from the intolerance of the world around them. In *Katharina Blum*, Böll had to defend himself against charges of endorsing terrorism; in *Fürsorgliche Belagerung* he has been charged with championing adultery. His response is instructive for our purposes, insofar as it is an aesthetic, rather than a moral argument. Böll has articulated on several occasions his frustration with the absence of an adequate aesthetic for the depiction of genuine love. Medical, legal and theological expressions abound, but aside from vulgarity there is no vocabulary for authentic human physical love.¹⁹ His defense against the charge of championing adultery is to point out the way his language creates its own morality, a kind of "Vokabularium der Liebe" against the pornographic vocabulary of Sabine's grasping husband. This "Vokabularium der Liebe" was in fact prefigured in *Die verlorene Ehre der Katharina Blum*,²⁰ where it was contrasted with a grammar of power. The search for an alternative to a semantic of violence, for "eine Ästhetik des Humanen" as Böll has called it in his *Frankfurter Vorlesungen*, is one of the most distinguishing features of Böll's prose.

One consequence of the search for an "Ästhetik des Humanen," however, is that some very real and dangerous problems are made to appear almost trivial. As *Fürsorgliche Belagerung* gradually mellows to a love story, terrorism and genuine

physical violence are domesticated to a degree unparalleled in Böll's fiction, again raising significant questions about the credibility of the author's vision.

The domestication of terrorism is achieved largely through the characterization of Heinrich Bewerloh, former friend of Rolf Tolm, and present companion of Rolf's former wife Veronica, the only other hard-core terrorist of the novel. At various times mythicized as Saint George or as Siegfried, Bewerloh remains a shadowy figure, never poses a credible threat to the principals, and dispatches himself finally in a bizarre kind of suicide while buying shoes. Before his death, however, he has won our sympathy for his intelligence (the same "planische Intelligenz" which characterized Katharina Blum) and for his selfless dedication to the destruction of what he perceives to be a corrupt society.²¹

In addition to mythicizing Bewerloh and to building at least a measure of sympathy for the terrorists' cause,²² Böll domesticates violence by deliberately manipulating his lexicon. Rolf, whose earlier activities included burning cars and throwing stones, is described as having perpetrated only "Dummheiten." The explosives directed at the Tolms and their associates, either in fact or in their imagination, are concealed in everyday objects: a wooden duck, a shoe, a bottle of Sherry, a bicycle, a pastry. Moreover, these everyday objects are rendered more innocent, the potential damage less harmful, by the avoidance of hard demolition terms where we would expect them. A pastry concealing a bomb is "gesalzen," a letter having no explosives, on the other hand, is described as "Dynamit," a child "hoch explosiv." The effect of this deliberate redistribution of expected lexical items is to defeat our normal sense of danger, to prevent us from viewing the threat of terrorism as a legitimate excuse for the pressure of "fürsorgliche Belagerung." It is a technique already exploited in *Billard um halbzehn*, where Robert describes his destruction of the abbey as "Spaß, ein Spiel," but in the charged atmosphere of the 1970s it comes perilously close to trivializing real threats and reducing probable dangers to little more than cartoon caricatures.

The issue of the credibility of Böll's vision must be resolved in part by a willingness on the part of readers to accept a broader definition of humanity, one that includes not only love and justice, but (in Böll's own words) "Haß, Sünde und Schuld."²³ The editor of Böll's collected works, Bernd Balzer, in fact has noted that these very human, though not very popular elements contribute to Böll's "Ästhetik des Humanen,"²⁴ but our post-Enlightenment bias has been to idealize a much narrower and exclusively positive model for humanity. Certainly part of the resolution lies also in the extent to which sympathetic protagonists can bear such a heavy and potentially treacherous responsibility without sacrificing their credibility as characters. Not only must the Sabines, the Katharinas and Johannes bear the mantle of responsibility for social change, they must also be winning enough for us as readers to suspend our censure of the violence and hurt they will sometimes cause.

As if sensitive to these issues, yet determined to elaborate on his "Ästhetik des Humanen," Böll seems to seek a new balance in his last novel between the graphic violence of *Die verlorene Ehre der Katharina Blum* and the domesticated violence of *Fürsorgliche Belagerung*. Once again, the background action has to do with a change in political/managerial leadership and the shock waves set off by the resulting power struggle. In *Fürsorgliche Belagerung* Böll used the change in leadership of a powerful newspaper. In *Frauen vor Flußlandschaft* he satirizes power politics by casting top politicians as a race of insatiable giants warring among themselves.

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The gods have withdrawn in Böll's eschatology, leaving the giants to self-destruct, and their own children—good men and better women—to fend for themselves.

The Wagnerian overtones suggested here are in fact highly conspicuous in the text, so much so that the temptation to interpret the novel as an allegory of the *Nibelungenlied* is a constant mischief. References to "Drachenblut" and "Rache" abound. There are echoes of Hagen's betrayal in the secretive sinking at dawn, by Blaukrämer, Halberkamm and Wubler, of the mysterious "Klossowakten." And the figure of Ernst Grobsch recalls an embittered Siegfried, whose rhetorical skills can turn a weakling like Plukanski into a potent political force, and whose *Tarnkappe* is the cloak of obscurity worn by all public relations specialists: "Mein lieber Grobsch," beams Plukanski at one point, "Was würde ich ohne Sie machen?" "Nichts, dachte ich, ohne mich wärst du nichts."²⁵

But the novel is not an allegory. It strives to be both more and less than allegory. More, in that on the thematic level it invokes and embraces one of the enduring motifs of the saga—the failure of an old value system and the emergence of a new. And less, because on the formal level it consciously backs away from anything as tidy as allegory. Efforts to treat the novel as a *Schlüsselroman* and to decipher the characters in terms of actual Bonn identities have floundered on this very point. In simplest terms, the order shown to be collapsing, in what Reinhard Baumgart cleverly calls the "Götzendämmerung,"²⁶ is Böll's special vision of contemporary West German society: materialistic, spiritually impoverished, a society comprised of "edle Mörder" at the top and disaffected outsiders at the bottom, the former again "bewacht" for their own protection, the latter unemployed and "überwacht" because of their oppositional views.

The political giants whose jockeying for ever-increasing power provides the background action for this essentially static novel are unaware that their forty-year regency is imperiled. Their energies are taken up with either avoiding or engineering scandal, with manipulating, concealing or leaking secrets from the war years, with maximizing profit and minimizing risk, all depending upon the personal advantage of the moment.

The reader is permitted to see that resistance to these forces has been building to a critical point. Because it had become Böll's conviction that women, and not men, would be the instigators of meaningful social and political change, the first overt act of rebellion is Erika Wubler's refusal in the opening chapter to attend a commemorative mass for a highly placed political figure.²⁷ Instead, she sits on the balcony of her villa overlooking the Rhine. From across the river, from her own household staff, from the pantries and boudoirs of other villas along the river come the voices of other women who will no longer countenance the deadness at the center of their lives. Some commit suicide. Others dream in emigrating to Cuba or Nicaragua. They are pensive,²⁸ honest to a fault ("Gerechtigkeitsfanatikerinnen"), sensual, faithful, hardworking, tolerant of the weaknesses in the men they love, and absolutely intolerant of the grasping advances of the power brokers on the Bonn scene.

The function of these "Frauen vor Flußlandschaft" is in large part to define the new value system Böll hopes might replace the crumbling order of his race of venal giants. This definition marks a second distinct shift in the treatment of men and women in Böll's fiction. In her very perceptive analysis, Margarete Deschner

distinguishes between Böll's heroines, i.e., increasingly active women in a male-dominated ethos, and, from 1970 on, genuine female heroes.²⁹ This shift reaches its culmination in *Fürsorgliche Belagerung* with Sabine and Veronika (although already Veronika is permitted to turn away from her radical role by the end of the novel). In *Frauen vor Flußlandschaft* this distinction is transcended by a new vision of shared responsibility. For the first time since *Ende einer Dienstfahrt*, a highly positive male figure, Karl Graf von Kreyll, is responsible for the major social protest of the novel. Women step back, not behind the male figures, but alongside some of them to exert a shared pressure of righteousness and civic responsibility. As Deschner's analysis reveals, the men who can be partners to these women tend to be highly androgynous themselves, models of the sensitive new male, and yet another example of Böll's interest in an ambiguous third ground or middle way.

The barometer of this shift is once again the treatment of violence. Despite its superficial civility and glitter, Böll's Bonn is still a violent scene, albeit less explosive than that of the previous two novels. People are shot (Konrad Floh and Der Schwamm), slapped (Der Schwamm), and driven to suicide (Elisabeth Blaukrämer and Karl von Kreyll's mother) with distressing regularity. Resumed in this novel, moreover, is the theme of ritualistic or sacrificial violence introduced in *Die verlorene Ehre der Katharina Blum*. It exists in two distinct forms, both perpetrated as serial crimes by the same individual, Karl von Kreyll. Initially, Karl reacts spontaneously to the death of his friend Konrad Floh at the hands of the police by systematically destroying his grand piano with a hatchet. Following his act, the grand pianos of several prominent citizens—all bankers—are ceremoniously dismembered by an unknown intruder. Although Karl is suspected, nothing can be undertaken in the absence of proof. The readers' certainty comes largely from another series of quasi-ritualistic crimes to which Karl admits: we learn that he has been commissioned by the Federal Government to steal the famous symbol of German material success, the three-pointed star, from Mercedes autos belonging to certain high-ranking public officials as bait in a covert operation involving a Russian spy whose particular weakness it is to covet such stolen emblems. Karl is another Siegfried character, stealing a treasure, yet retaining his honor and integrity. In his destruction of the pianos he also reminds us of the Gruhls in *Ende einer Dienstfahrt*, whose incineration of a Bundeswehr jeep took on the significance of a protest "happening." Having experimented with protagonists who behave violently towards other people, Böll returns in his final novel to a limited violence directed at things. Originally a spontaneous reaction to his friend's death, "eine Art privater, stiller Gottesdienst, ja, eine Weihehandlung, eine Opferhandlung, ein Ritual" (p. 69), Karl's actions become an attack on the heart of materialism, "das Herz des Geldes," which for him is manifest in these expensive musical instruments and the link they represent between German culture and the moneyed class.

By the end of the novel, Karl realizes his original gesture has lost its sacrificial integrity; he decides to consider it an art form, and accepts a commission to destroy the piano of a banker who wishes to atone in some way for his materialistic excesses. The principle of creative destruction is a key to the novel as a whole. Karl's ritualistic violence becomes a kind of healing antidote to the traditional violence perpetrated upon people. Its liturgical character substitutes in part for the spiritual emptiness of the contemporary Church. And its artistic dimension, "diese wilde, zerrissene Melodie," releases energies otherwise trapped by an overdependence

upon material goods.

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By the same token, Böll may have structured his "Roman in Dialogen und Selbstgesprächen" to do creative violence to traditional narrative. Critics who complain about "the disjointed and essentially undramatic plot"³⁰ may have missed the point. Reinhard Baumgart, in his *Spiegel* essay on Böll's death and final novel, has taken better measure of the conspicuous awkwardness in the late works:

Damals [several works ago] sollten wir schon begreifen und hinnehmen, daß er uns die Kunst als Anstrengung und Höchstleistung zu verweigern, daß er nicht mehr "meisterhaft" zu schreiben und nicht in jedem Augenblick "die Sprache zu beherrschen" gedenke.³¹

In the context of *Frauen vor Flußlandschaft*, a well-constructed novel would be analogous to a grand piano, and as such suspect in a society whose cultural heritage has become a kind of material property.

The victims in Böll's early works, those soldiers and civilians in an unholy war, screamed with pain and registered indelibly upon our consciousness the fact that violence hurts. In the novels of Böll's middle period these victims begin to strike back, but their targets initially are things, not people. The battle lines in Böll's later fiction are less clearly drawn and map out a gray area where sympathetic victims not only are permitted to hate, but can seek revenge against people, and even kill. Böll's attempt to recognize the complexity of violence and to deal honestly with that complexity is one of the more underrated aspects of his "Ästhetik des Humanen" and of the later works in general. The point of these observations, however, is that Böll's attempt is not without risk. By concentrating in *Fürsorgliche Belagerung* on some of the subtle violences of a proto-Orwellian state, he risks trivializing other kinds of violence. And by having unambiguously violent acts prepared and perpetrated by characters like Katharina Blum for whom our sympathies are perhaps over-engineered, he risks having a complex aesthetic blur into moral ambiguity.

Critics who ignore these risks and the occasional excesses of character and action they produce out of deference to Böll's extra-literary contributions to non-violence obscure his development as a writer in general and the magnitude of his achievement in the final novel in particular. By the close of *Frauen vor Flußlandschaft*, Karl and the post-war generation for which he stands have forsaken violent activities, his father (Böll's generation) has decided against suicide, and the women who sit by the banks of the Rhine have abandoned their ideas of emigration to Cuba or Nicaragua to dedicate themselves instead to helping their own. The result is a vision of a new nobility, a society of men and women who challenge us to rethink our traditional categories of right and wrong, and whose goal is a tolerant and just world, rather than a perfect and orderly one. It will be interesting to see how a critical public accustomed to reading Böll as exponent of outlaw literature will respond over time to a final ethical stance which insists upon working within the system, and a final formal approach which violates many of the conventions of the establishment novel.

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- 1 W. Lee Nahrgang, "Nontraditional Features of Heinrich Böll's War Books: Innovations of a Pacifist," *Studies in Twentieth Century Literature*, 4 (1979): 49–61.
- 2 Nahrgang points out that even in the war novels and stories, Böll's men are basically passive: "He stresses situations in which the men are exhausted, have no useful tasks to perform, and are inactive" (p. 51).
- 3 From the title of the critical anthology edited by Renatte Matthei, *Die subversive Madonna* (Cologne: Kiepenheuer & Witsch, 1975). See also the analysis in Aleidine Kramer Moeller, "The Woman as Survivor: The Development of the Female Figure in Heinrich Böll's Fiction," diss., University of Nebraska, 1979. The more recent treatment by Margareta Neovius Deschner, "Heinrich Böll's Utopian Feminism," *University of Dayton Review* 17, no. 2 (1985): 119–127, is referred to later in this study.
- 4 See Frank Grützbach, ed. *Heinrich Böll: Freies Geleit für Ulrike Meinhof—Ein Artikel und seine Folgen* (Cologne: Kiepenheuer & Witsch, 1972). See also Rhys Williams, "Heinrich Böll and the Katharina Blum Debate," *Critical Quarterly*, 21, No. 3 (1979): 49–58.
- 5 See, for instance, Böll's "Gegen die atomare Bedrohung gemeinsam vorgehen. Rede auf der Friedensdemonstration am 10. 10. 1981, Bonn, Hofgartenwiese" in Böll, *Vermintes Gelände* (Cologne: Kiepenheuer & Witsch, 1982): 262–267. From the more recent collection *Die Fähigkeit zu trauern: Schriften und Reden (1983–85)* (Bornheim-Merten: Lamuv, 1986) see the provocative "Steht uns bei, ihr Heiligen!" (61–70).
- 6 W. Lee Nahrgang, "Heinrich Böll's Pacifism: Its Roots and Nature," *University of Dayton Review* 17, No. 2 (1985): 107–118.
- 7 Robert C. Conard, *Heinrich Böll* (Boston: Twayne Books, 1981): 137.
- 8 Gertrud Bauer Pickar, "Game Playing, Re-Entry and Withdrawal: Patterns of Societal Interaction in *Billard um halbzehn* and *Fürsorgliche Belagerung*" *University of Dayton Review* 17, No. 2 (1985): 83–106.
- 9 Pickar 88.
- 10 Böll, *Billard um halbzehn* (Cologne: Kiepenheuer & Witsch, 1959): 150.
- 11 The exception is Georg Lukács: "Der 'sinnlose' Schuß einer Verrückten, mit dem *Billard um halbzehn* endet, ist eine der wenigen menschlich echten Bewältigungen der faschistischen Vergangenheit in Deutschland, gerade weil in diesem Bewältigungsversuch auch die Vorgeschichte und die Nachgeschichte Hitlers mitgemeint ist." In *Sachen Böll* (1968), cited in Klaus Schröter, *Heinrich Böll mit Selbstzeugnissen und Bilddokumenten* (Reinbek: Rowohlt, 1982) 136. In recent studies both Conard (p. 138f) and Pickar (p. 88f) have given Johanna's act appropriate emphasis.
- 12 See Rainer Nägele, "Heinrich Böll. Die große Ordnung und die kleine Anarchie," in *Gegenwartsliteratur und Drittes Reich. Deutsche Autoren in der Auseinandersetzung mit der Vergangenheit* ed. Hans Wagener (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1977): 183–204.
- 13 See René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, trans. Patrick Gregory (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins, 1972); also the more recent *Violent Origins. Ritual Killing and Cultural Formation* ed. Robert G. Hamerton-Kelly (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987).
- 14 In fact, the film version of Böll's story accentuates the suggestion of imminent rape, reducing what ambiguity is left in the prose original. The fact that the story has also inspired a version for American television (*The Lost Honor of Kathryn Beck*) further illustrates the cinematic affinities. See the interesting analysis of the American reception of Böll's work

by Mary Ann Govea, "The Lost Honor of Katharina Blum: The Heroic Epiphany of a German Best-Seller in the USA," *German Quarterly*, 59, No. 2 (1986): 252-269.

- 15 Böll himself insisted, in an interview with Manfred Durzak (cited in Conard, p. 191), that the killing of Tötges is "an almost exclusively erotically determined act."
- 16 Whether or not Johanna is insane or one of the few really sane figures in the novel is open to interpretation. Conard argues that she uses insanity as a kind of shield (p. 139).
- 17 John Fraser, *Violence in the Arts* (Cambridge, London, New York and Melbourne: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1974): 152.
- 18 In an interview with Robert Stauffer, Böll stated that *Fürsorgliche Belagerung* should be understood not in contrast to *Katharina Blum*, but rather "als eine Fortsetzung oder Weiterentwicklung einer ähnlichen Thematik." This interview is reproduced in Bernd Balzer (ed.) *Materialien zur Interpretation von Heinrich Bölls Fürsorgliche Belagerung* (Cologne: Kiepenheuer & Witsch, 1981): 23-35.
- 19 See Alex Fritz, "Heinrich Böll's neuer Roman *Fürsorgliche Belagerung*," *Muttersprache*, 74 (1979): 139-145.
- 20 Balzer 77f.
- 21 Charlotte Ghurye misreads Böll when she says in her study "*Fürsorgliche Belagerung: A Bloodless Novel of Terrorism?*" *University of Dayton Review*, 17, No. 2 (1985): 77-82, that "Böll's stance viv-à-vis his character Bewerloh, the indoctrinator of Holger 1 and the plotter of violence, is entirely negative" (p.80).
- 22 In his *UDR* article, Nahrgang correctly observes that "[i]n keeping with Böll's tendency to sympathize with individuals within practically all groups, . . . it is possible for him to sympathize even with individual Fascists on the one hand and contemporary urban terrorists on the other" (p. 108).
- 23 From Böll's interview with René Wintzen, "Eine deutsche Erinnerung" in Böll, *Werke* ed. Bernd Balzer, *Interview 1* (Cologne: Kiepenheuer & Witsch, 1977-1978): 18.
- 24 Balzer, "Ausfall in die Sorglosigkeit? Heinrich Bölls *Fürsorgliche Belagerung*," in Balzer, *Materialien*, 51.
- 25 Böll, *Frauen vor Flußlandschaft. Roman in Dialogen und Selbstgesprächen* (Cologne: Kiepenheuer & Witsch, 1985): 141.
- 26 From the title of Baumgart's review article in *Spiegel* (Sept. 2, 1985): 188-192.
- 27 This is of course strongly reminiscent of Robert Fähhel's refusal to attend the dedication of the restored abbey in *Billard um halbzehn*.
- 28 Curiously, Pickar discounts intelligence in her summary of the common qualities in Böll's women. See her Note 73, p. 105.
- 29 Deschner 120.
- 30 From the review by Michael Butler in the *Times Literary Supplement* (February 14, 1986): 173.
- 31 Baumgart 192.

