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The world from afar

Heinrich Böll's early infatuation with windowsills

After the unspeakable traumas of war, language does come back – but it cannot be trusted anymore. Heinrich Böll's early novels and short stories, written shortly after the war's aftermath, are infused with a traumatic, revolving, regurgitating prose that every so often repeats the same set of words and sentences, returning like a prayer to their familiar incantation in search of refuge and meaning, to little or no avail. Language in Böll's texts becomes an almost circular affair, obsessively retracing its own steps, exposing its contradictions, searching for a meaning that seems to constantly elude his characters – searching for a meaning that always seems to be elsewhere.

The fictional world created by this revolving prose is one of few certainties, and one in which language plays a contradicting role: on the one hand it fuels mistrust and trauma by trying to convey the unspeakable, while on the other it provides a measure of comfort by simply conjuring familiar sounds and rhythms, the way a mother's humming soothes a tired child. From the debris of language Böll tries to make sense of a world that is undoing itself around him and his characters, and one of the most intriguing ways that he does so, in his achingly understated style, is by regularly describing the landscape which his characters inhabit – and this with a growing sense of suspicion and mistrust.

Böll's words are the politest of guests: they never overstay their welcome. They are also the weariest: watchful, suspicious, approaching the world from oblique angles and geometric openings, through windowsills and cracks on the wall. The outside, in Böll's fiction, is always kept at an arm's length, as if it carried close to heart W. G. Sebald's assessment of the post-air-raid anesthesia to which the German population succumbed in 1943-4: life was sucked out of everyday language and replaced instead by clichés, saturated with them to the point where language's main function was not so much to convey information, but to “cover up and neutralize experiences beyond our ability to comprehend”: “The apparently unimpaired ability – shown in most of the eyewitness reports – of everyday

language to go on functioning as usual raises doubts of the authenticity of the experiences they record.”<sup>1</sup>

Böll’s language inhabits precisely this post-war atmosphere of an everyday language that is not to be trusted anymore, for the reality to which it adheres ceases to be a reality to which one subscribes, or to which one would like to subscribe. And yet – as the cliché has it, and clichés are powerful things – life goes on, the war is over and everybody has lost, and yet somehow the outside seems to be thriving, nature seems to have found a second wind and is now perversely blooming again. Sebald remarks on nature’s indifference to human suffering by way of Böll’s posthumous *Der Engel schwieg* (1992), which he discreetly incorporates in his assessment:

At the end of the war, some of the bomb sites of Cologne had already been transformed by the dense green vegetation growing over them – the roads made their way through this new landscape like ‘peaceful deep-set country lanes.’ In contrast to the effect of the catastrophes insidiously creeping up on us today, nature’s ability to regenerate did not seem to have been impaired by the firestorms. In fact, many trees and bushes, particularly chestnuts and lilacs, had a second flowering in Hamburg in the autumn of 1943, a few months after the great fire.<sup>2</sup>

What we get from Böll’s early novels and short stories is partly a sense of indignation and resentment at nature’s selfish indifference to human suffering, but most of all a deep and quiet feeling of abandonment and solitude that prompts a retreat indoors, a reevaluation of the world as we know it – or thought we did. Therein lies the basic philosophical stance of Böll’s entire oeuvre: in this guarded, understated, mistrustful, but fundamentally humane retreat indoors. What this article seeks to show, through a close reading of Böll’s early novels *Der Zug war pünktlich* (1949) and *Wo warst du, Adam?* (1951), and his collection of short stories *Wanderer, kommst du nach Spa...* (1950) is the enactment of this retreat indoors and its logic within Böll’s narrative strategies.

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1 W.G. Sebald. *On the Natural History of Destruction*. Trans. Anthea Bell. London: Hamish Hamilton, 2003. P. 26.

2 Ibid. P. 39.

### *Der Zug war pünktlich*: an entry point to Böll's worldview

Human solitude is accentuated by landscape's intangibility, by its teasing appearance: like a furry cat that recoils when someone reaches out for it. Andreas, the main character in Böll's debut novel *Der Zug war pünktlich* (1949), watches the landscape roll by through a train window, but the sight of the landscape is without comfort. Instead, he turns to the Blond and the Unshaven, the two other soldiers with whom he shares a train compartment "towards death":<sup>3</sup> "Then he looked out again but saw nothing... only that Polish horizon, away in the distance beyond an endless plain, that intoxicating, wide horizon that he would see when the hour came... It's a good thing I'm not alone, he thought."<sup>4</sup>

The three soldiers, alongside the rest of the troops, are bound to Poland in a train leaving the outskirts of Dortmund, a destination where Andreas is convinced he shall meet his fate and die. His entire non-heroic journey is informed by the ticking of the clock, and every train that teutonically insists on departing on time deprives him of precious minutes of life. Cornered against the train window, Andreas helplessly watches the "glorious gardens, gentle hills, smiling clouds"<sup>5</sup> of the passing landscape, all the red trees and green houses and blue skies and golden suns he shall never again see.<sup>6</sup> At first sight, the landscape at least adds saturation to the otherwise gray world that seems to engulf Andreas, a color that crops up along the novel no less than thirty-four times, echoing in its ashen hue the equally recurrent German adjective '*grausam*' [gruesome]: the gray railway tracks, the gray faces of

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3 "Aus dem leichtfertigen Geplätscher unbedachter Rede, meist jenen furchtbar schweren und matten Worten beim Abschied an Zügen, die in den Tod führen." Heinrich Böll. *Der Zug war pünktlich*. München: dtv, 1972. P. 6. The three soldiers – along many others – are actually travelling from just outside Dortmund to the Polish city of Lemberg (Lwow).

4 "Dann blickt er wieder hinaus, aber er sieht nichts... er sieht nur fern irgendwo diesen polnischen Horizont hinter einer endlosen Fläche, diesen berausenden, weiten Horizont, den er sehen wird, wenn die Stunde da ist... Es ist gut, denkt er, daß ich nicht allein bin." Ibid. P. 35. The English translation is taken from Heinrich Böll. *The Train was on Time*. Trans. Leila Vennewitz. New York: Melville House Books, 2011 (e-book, no page numbers).

5 "[H]errliche Gärten, sanfte Hügel, lachende Wolken." Ibid. P. 21.

6 "Es ist wunderbar draußen, fast noch sommerlich, Septemberwetter. Bald werde ich sterben, diesen Baum dahinten, diesen rotbraunen Baum vor dem grünen Haus dahinten werde ich nie mehr sehen." Ibid. P. 22.

soldiers, the gray darkness behind him, the gray coffee and the gray milk, the gray skin, the gray collar, the gray night... The more colorful shades are only to be found outdoors, but none of the characters ever seem to be allowed outside.<sup>7</sup> Instead, the landscape is either seen at a distance, from train compartments, restaurant windows and brothel rooms, or recalled from childhood memories. Although luring, the landscape is not to be indulged, for therein lies nothing but despair:

It was summer, and the harvest stood golden in the fields, thin blades, some of them scorched black, that had been eaten up by the summer, and I hated nothing so much as to die a hero's death in a field of corn, it reminded me too much of a poem, and I didn't care to die like in a poem, to die a hero's death like a propaganda picture for this dirty war...<sup>8</sup>

Böll's novel is primarily concerned with life, with how one proceeds with life when all around seems to point at death and despair. The colorful life Böll nevertheless identifies in the landscape (the landscape between 1944 – when the narrative is set – and 1948 – when the book is finished) is no longer a human life, and although plants are blossoming, man is not thriving. Tellingly, the novel thus seems to progressively turn indoors, to religion – Andreas constantly tries to pray, despite being repeatedly interrupted or losing himself in his own anguished thoughts<sup>9</sup> – and to music.

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7 “Aber ich stehe hier am Fenster und bin wie aus Blei. Ich kann mich nicht bewegen, ich bin ganz starr, dieser Zug gehört zu mir, und ich gehöre zu diesem Zug, der mich meiner Bestimmung entgegentragen muß, und das Seltsame ist, daß ich gar keine Lust verspüre, hier auszusteigen und am Ufer der Elbe unter diesen reizenden Bäumen spazierenzugehen.” *Ibid.* P. 25.

8 “Es war ja Sommer, und die Frucht stand golden auf den Feldern, magere Halme, manche schwarzverbrannt, die der Sommer gefressen hatte, und nichts war mir so sehr verhaßt, als auf einem Ährenfeld den Heldentod zu sterben, es erinnerte mich zu sehr an ein Gedicht, und ich mochte nicht wie in einem Gedicht sterben, nicht den Heldentod sterben wie auf einem Reklamebild für diesen dreckigen Krieg...” *Ibid.* P. 37.

9 “Jetzt ist es endlich Zeit, denkt er, daß ich bete. Die vorletzte Nacht meines Lebens will ich nicht verpennen, nicht verdösen, nicht mit Schnaps besudeln und nicht versäumen. Ich muß jetzt beten und vor allen Dingen bereuen” *Ibid.* P. 75. Moreover, one should not completely overlook the young Böll's very Catholic worldview, a matter that shall not be pursued in this article, but which certainly informs the early quest for interiority in his oeuvre. On the Christian motif of the soul's interiority and its connections to such a distinction between the indoors

When Andreas is led by the Blond and the Unshaven to a Polish brothel, he finds himself asking for music: “‘Music,’ stammered Andreas, ‘do you sell music here too?’”<sup>10</sup> He is thus taken to Olina, whose facial traits Andreas likens to a Fragonard painting<sup>11</sup>, and who in the past had studied piano at a Warsaw conservatory before the war came and the Germans destroyed all that was dear to her.<sup>12</sup> Upon hearing it, Andreas admits he himself would have liked to become a pianist, had his life not been interrupted by the Arbeitsdienst and Hitler’s war, and he sits by the piano and plays Olina a Beethoven sonatina: “She had imagined he would play something crazy, some wild piece by Tchaikovsky or Liszt or one of those glorious lilting Chopin pieces, because he had attacked the keys like a madman. No, he played a sonatina by Beethoven.”<sup>13</sup> In retribution, Olina plays some Bach, something she had never managed before, and somehow, through Beethoven and Bach, Andreas and Olina find a shared humanity, something they may hold on to.<sup>14</sup> It is not through Tchaikovsky, Liszt or Chopin, but ironically through two German composers – a nationality Olina claims to despise – that a minuscule spark of human hope is ignited. And acting upon this spark Andreas and Olina decide to run away from his death, run away from the war. They retrieve the Blond and the Unshaven from their respective brothel rooms

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and the outdoors, as it is being posited in this article, see Campe and Weber, “Rethinking Emotion: Moving beyond Interiority”. *Rethinking Emotion: Interiority and Exteriority in Premodern, Modern, and Contemporary Thought*. Ed. Rüdiger Campe/Julia Weber. Berlin: De Gruyter, 2014. P. 1-18.

10 “‘Musik,’ stammelt Andreas, ‘kann man hier auch Musik kaufen?’” Böll. *Der Zug war pünktlich* (see footnote 3). P. 94.

11 *Ibid.* P. 98, 103.

12 “‘Der Krieg kam neunzehnhundertneununddreißig. In Warschau wurden meine Eltern unter den Trümmern unseres großen Hauses begraben, und ich stand allein da im Garten des Konservatoriums, wo ich poussierte hatte, und der Direktor wurde verschleppt, weil er Jude war. Und ich, ich hatte einfach keine Lust mehr, Klavier zu lernen. Die Deutschen hatten uns alle irgendwie vergewaltigt, alle, uns alle.’” *Ibid.* P. 113.

13 “‘Sie hat gedacht, er wird etwas ganz Verrücktes spielen, etwas Wildes von Tschaikowskij oder Liszt oder einen dieser herrlich tanzenden Chopins, weil er wie ein Wahnsinniger in die Tasten geschlagen hat. Nein, er spielt eine Sonatine von Beethoven.’” *Ibid.* P. 118.

14 “‘Er steht plötzlich auf, und sie ist froh, daß seine Stimme jetzt wieder menschlich wird, eine Menschenstimme, die leidet und lebt. [...] Sie hat Bach gespielt, bis an die Grenzen des Menschlichen.’” *Ibid.* P. 125, 135.

and, together, in a hurry, in the middle of the dark, gray night, they get into a stolen car and head to the mountains, where the car is blown up to pieces by Polish partisans.

Böll's début novel is exemplary not only because it contributes to the departure of post-war German-language literature towards new beginnings, but also because it does so by decisively moving the characters' actions and fates indoors, both physically and mentally. There is a degree of mistrust in Böll's early works that subsides in his later writings, as if both the young author himself and his early characters were taking stock of the world, cautiously assessing it from indoors before engaging with it in a more hopeful way. The apparent indifference of the landscape – of this outside where Andreas, Olina, the Blond and the Unshaven meet their tragic fate – generates a sense of abandonment and detachment that underscores Böll's language and narrative atmosphere. If the importance of landscape representation once rested on "the relationships between the physical environment and human society", thus underlying the engagement of people "with the world around them"<sup>15</sup>, Böll's début novel questions that certainty by alienating the representation of the landscape and by casting doubt on nature as a whole – a doubt that is gradually redeemed throughout Böll's career, as he consolidates his reputation as an arch-humanist and resorts, as Walter Sokel puts it, to more sophisticated narrative strategies.<sup>16</sup> Nature, seems to be Böll's early thesis, is still engulfed in the fog of war: it must be carefully observed, studied, mapped out, it must be once again discovered and understood – that may be perhaps the only way to placate the unsettling feeling of randomness it inspires, blossoming amidst the rubble and burning under hostile fire. The randomness of nature, or its indifference, might explain the very arbitrary sense of destiny that prevails in Böll's début novel and early texts: one survives because one is lucky; one perishes because one is not.

Böll's début novel uses landscape to posit a dichotomous worldview between the inside and the outside, a narrative strategy he then employs more systematically in his two subsequent publications: *Wanderer, kommst du nach Spa...* (1950), and *Wo warst du, Adam?* (1951), a strategy which is central – albeit little explored – to his early output. We shall focus here on three facets of such a strategy, as already foreshadowed in the brief analysis

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15 Ian D. Whyte. *Landscape and History Since 1500*. London: Reaktion Books, 2002. P. 7.

16 Cf. Walter H. Sokel. "Perspektive und Dualismus". In *Sachen Böll*. Ed. M. Reich-Ranicki. München: dtv, 1994. Pp. 256-265.

of Böll's début novel: (1) the framing of the landscape; (2) the dynamics between indoors and outdoors; and (3) the deceptions of landscape and fate.

## The framing of the landscape

There is a painterly sensibility to Böll's landscape descriptions which lies not so much in his choice of words – by all means subdued and precise, words that never overstay their welcome – but rather in how he frames these landscapes. Already in *Der Zug war pünktlich* the reader is presented with a series of windows through which fleeting and at times painfully melancholy sceneries are framed<sup>17</sup>, to the point where Andreas starts referring to the world outside as “this segment [*Sektor*] of sky”<sup>18</sup>: a fittingly geometric perspective. Andrea del Lungo, in her comprehensively semiologic typology of windows and their literary representation, posits “framing” [*cadrage visuel*] as the first of the window's main functions within literary texts: as a foundational device that determines the outermost limits of a given work<sup>19</sup>, an exploratory pact that the author and the reader agree upon. The definition seems to be quite fitting for Böll's début novel, as he is precisely and yet tentatively dimensioning his fictional world, with the window functioning as this liminal space mediating his still quite dichotomous worldview. The window as a framing strategy, however, seems to become more layered and deliberate in Böll's follow-up opus, *Wanderer, kommst du nach Spa...*, and particularly in four of the collection's short stories: “Über die Brücke”, “Kumpel mit dem langen Haar”, “Auch Kinder sind Zivilisten”, and the homonymous “Wanderer, kommst du nach Spa...”.

The short stories, which are not chronologically ordered, appear instead to be circling in on a theme, trying to find the best possible angle to tackle it, working by repetition and accumulation. It is thus quite telling that the

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17 “Am Fenster zogen die finsternen Silhouetten der Stadt vorüber” Böll. *Der Zug war pünktlich* (see footnote 3). P. 8. “Er blickt nach draußen und sieht, daß die Sonne untergegangen ist und daß nur noch ein kleiner Rest von Licht über diesen Gärten liegt.” Ibid. P. 104.

18 “Nichts mehr, nichts mehr werde ich sehen, nicht mehr diesen Sektor des Himmels, der voll ist von sanften graublauen Wolken, nicht mehr diese kleine, sehr junge Fliege, die am Rande des Fensters sitzt und nun wegfiegt, irgendwohin nach Radebeul...” Ibid. Pp. 22-23.

19 Cf. Andrea Del Lungo. *La fenêtre. Sémiologie et histoire de la représentation littéraire*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2014. Pp. 25-26.



opening story, “Über die Brücke”, focuses on the back-and-forth motion of a train going over a bridge, and on the obsession that a passenger aboard this train develops for a house on the other side of that same bridge.<sup>20</sup> The passenger’s obsession slowly shifts from the house itself to an unknown woman that seems to be at all times, and following a very strict schedule, cleaning some of the house’s windows – a symbolically very significant fact in light of Böll’s recurrent use of windows as a narrative framing device in his early stories. Neither do the two characters ever meet, nor is the reader ever given to know what the woman is trying to see through impeccably clean windows<sup>21</sup> – although knowing it exactly would defeat the purpose of Böll’s linguistic aporia, the way Böll sees language as a symptom of larger, looming, unsettling and unsettled issues. The impeccably clean windows, and the fact that the reader is not allowed to peer through them, are an example of Böll’s understated style, of his inclination towards patiently framing a situation rather than hastily spelling out its contents.

The landscape thus begins its incursion in *Wanderer, kommst du nach Spa...* as a static point outside a train window, that is to say: the movement is still located indoors – it is rather the train that animates the landscape, and not the other way around. In the following short story, “Kumpel mit dem langen Haar”, however, the movement is stabilized and the landscape is now

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20 “Mit einem leisen Bangen im Herzen nahm ich jedesmal das leise Schwanken der Brücke wahr, dieses schauerliche Wippen sechshundert Meter lang; dann kam endlich das vertrauenerweckende dumpfere Rattern, wenn wir wieder den Bahndamm erreicht hatten, und dann kamen Schrebergärten, viele Schrebergärten – und endlich, kurz vor Kahlenkatten, ein Haus: an dieses Haus klammerte ich mich gleichsam mit meinen Blicken. Dieses Haus stand auf der Erde; meine Augen stürzten sich auf das Haus. Das Haus hatte einen rötlichen Bewurf, war sehr sauber, die Umrandungen der Fenster und alle Sockel waren mit dunkelbrauner Farbe abgesetzt.” Heinrich Böll. “Über die Brücke”. *Wanderer, kommst du nach Spa...* München: dtv, 1975. Pp. 7-11, here pp. 7-8.

21 A hypothesis to the mystery of the short story’s impeccably kept clean windows may be found once again in Andrea del Lungo, who posits that the window itself – endowed with a melancholy sentiency of its own – may be watching, as a portal to one’s own self-discovery: “La fenêtre elle-même, d’ailleurs, *regarde*; selon une métaphore ancienne, elle figure l’œil d’un corps-maison, qui observe l’extérieur autant qu’il sonde sa propre intériorité: lieu d’un repli du sujet sur lui-même, de l’ordre de la contemplation mélancolique ou de l’analyse de la conscience, par la fenêtre l’être humain entreprend le voyage en quête de son propre déchiffrement.” Del Lungo. *La fenêtre* (see footnote 19). P. 8.

framed by a stationary train station: “Ahead of them, dark blue and tranquil, yawned the great semicircle of the sky, punctured by the iron latticework of the station roof”<sup>22</sup>, much as the cold Russian landscape in “Auch Kinder sind Zivilisten” is framed by a crack in the wall:

Quick as a wink she had slipped away, and when I stuck my head sadly through the gap in the wall, she had vanished, and I saw only the silent Russian street, dismal and empty; the snow seemed to be gradually entombing the flat-roofed houses. I stood there for a long time, like a sad-eyed animal looking out through a fence, and it was only when I felt my neck getting stiff that I pulled my head back inside the prison.<sup>23</sup>

A momentary balance between the dichotomy of the indoors and the outdoors, between humankind and nature, between past and present is achieved, albeit a fragile one: nature, by way of landscape description, is still on probation in Böll’s early oeuvre, it is not yet to be fully trusted. It is thus not surprising that slowly but surely the landscape is endowed with movement, a menacing, procession-like flow parading outside a window – a phenomenon that starts taking place, quite tellingly, in the homonymous short story “Wanderer, kommst du nach Spa...”: “To the right, through the window, I could see fire reflected, the whole sky was red, and dense black clouds of smoke filed past in solemn procession...”<sup>24</sup> The early Böll seems to be alluding here to the fact that nature appears to be continuing on while people suffer

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22 “Dunkelblau und ruhig gähnte vorne der große Halbkreis des Himmels, vom eisernen Gitterwerk der Halle durchstoßen.” Heinrich Böll. “Kumpel mit dem langen Haar”. *Wanderer* (see footnote 20). Pp. 12-16, here p. 14. The English translations from “Across the Bridge”, “My Pal with the Long Hair”, “Children Are Civilians Too”, “Stranger, Bear Word to the Spartans We...”, “That Time We Were in Odessa” and “And Where Were You, Adam?” are taken from Heinrich Böll. *The Collected Stories*. Trans. Leila Vennewitz/Breon Mitchell. New York: Melville House, 2011 (e-book, no page numbers).

23 “[G]anz flink war sie weggehuscht, und als ich traurig meinen Kopf durch die Mauerlücke steckte, war sie schon verschwunden, und ich sah nur die stille russische Straße, düster und vollkommen leer; die flachdachigen Häuser schienen langsam von Schnee zugedeckt zu werden. Lange stand ich so da wie ein Tier, das mit traurigen Augen aus der Hürde hinausblickt, und erst als ich spürte, daß mein Hals steif wurde, nahm ich den Kopf ins Gefängnis zurück.” Heinrich Böll. “Auch Kinder sind Zivilisten”. *Wanderer* (see footnote 20). Pp. 55-57, here p. 57.

24 “Rechts sah ich durch das Fenster den Feuerschein, der ganze Himmel war rot, und schwarze, dicke Wolken von Qualm zogen feierlich vorüber...” Heinrich Böll.

senselessly, which only aggravates the dynamics between the indoors and the outdoors in his early oeuvre; it pits them against each other, as if the indoors were both a safe haven from the nightmarish world outside<sup>25</sup> and a prison from which one wishes to escape but cannot.

## The dynamics between indoors and outdoors

There are rules in place that prevent patients from ever leaving the hospital, or civilians from entering it.<sup>26</sup> There are soldiers almost driven insane by their barrack's walls, "those great, black, grimy walls", but the moment they are outside they wish to be inside once again.<sup>27</sup> Already in *Der Zug war pünktlich* a friction between the indoors and the outdoors was in place, but the indoors in Böll's debut novel was not yet as claustrophobic as it became in his subsequent efforts – it was rather the frame through which the outdoors was seen, studied, and kept at arm's length. It is in his second novel, *Wo warst du, Adam?*, that the perversity of this dynamics surfaces in force, with characters constantly looking outside while trapped inside, waiting for the best

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"Wanderer, kommst du nach Spa...". Wanderer (see footnote 20). Pp. 35-43, here p. 36.

25 "[A]chtlos in Pfützen tretend, schritt ich immer hastiger der fernen, zerrissenen Silhouette der Stadt zu, die in schmutzigen Dämmerwolken am Horizont hingestreckt lag wie ein Labyrinth der Trübsal. Schwarze riesige Ruinen tauchten links und rechts auf, seltsam schwüler Lärm aus schwach erhellten Fenstern drang auf mich ein; wieder Äcker aus schwarzer Erde, wieder Häuser, verfallene Villen – und immer tiefer fraß sich das Entsetzen neben meiner fieberischen Krankheit in mir fest, denn ich spürte etwas Ungeheuerliches..." Heinrich Böll. "Steh auf, steh doch auf". Wanderer (see footnote 20). Pp. 27-29, here p. 28.

26 "Es geht nicht", sagte der Posten mürrisch.

"Warum?", fragte ich.

"Weil's verboten ist."

"Warum ist's verboten?"

"Weil's verboten ist, Mensch, es ist für Patienten verboten, rauszugehen." Böll. *Auch Kinder* (see footnote 23). P. 55.

27 "Wir hatten ja nichts gewollt als aus den großen, schwarzen, schmutzigen Mauern heraus, und nun, als wir draußen waren, wären wir fast lieber wieder drinnen gewesen." Heinrich Böll. "Damals in Odessa". Wanderer (see footnote 20). Pp. 30-34, here p. 30.

opportunity to – reluctantly – go out. As if the entire novel were leading up to this paralyzing yet inevitable realization: “Outside, the slaughter began.”<sup>28</sup>

Böll’s novel feeds off this tension between a claustrophobic indoors and a mistrustful outdoors, and the one element mediating this tension are the countless windows through which the characters obsessively assess the world outside: “Schneider stood by the window”; “Schneider continued to look out of the window”; “The sergeant major turned to Schmitz and Schneider, but Schneider was looking out of the window.”<sup>29</sup> There is once again an incantation-like rhythm to the occurrence of windows in Böll’s novel, how the word is repeated over and over again to the point where it is made invisible, annulled by its very transparent function. In Böll’s novel, windows are turned into the embodiment of the tension his narrative aims at creating – they foreshadow the helplessness and frailty of civilians and soldiers alike in face of war. *Wo warst du, Adam?* is ultimately a novel about windows, about looking out through windows, about waiting and expecting and observing, about being neither indoors nor outdoors but in a liminal space in-between.

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28 “Draußen fing die Metzerei an.” Heinrich Böll. „Wo warst du, Adam?“. *Werke*. Bd. 5. Ed. Árpád Bernáth et al. Köln: Kiepenheuer & Witsch, 2004. Pp. 180-329, here p. 287. And also: “Draußen war es sehr still – er lauschte gespannt und erregt auf die Stille, in die nur manchmal dieses Wort plumpste. Aber die Stille war stärker, erdrückend stark, und Schmitz stand langsam, fast widerstrebend auf und ging hinaus.” *Ibid.* P. 196.

29 “Schneider blieb am Fenster stehen”; “Schneider blieb stehen und blickte hinaus”; “Der Spieß wandte sich Schmitz und Schneider zu, aber Schneider blickte zum Fenster hinaus” *Ibid.* Pp. 202, 206. The examples are countless: “Der Schreibtisch stand so, daß Schneider mit dem Rücken zum Fenster saß, und wenn er nichts zu tun hatte, stand er auf, drehte sich herum, und er konnte auf die schmale staubige Landstraße sehen, die nach links ins Dorf und rechts zwischen Maisfeldern und Aprikosenbäumen in die Pußta führte. Schneider hatte fast nichts zu tun. [...] Schneider konnte stundenlang zum Fenster hinaussehen: draußen war es schwül und dunstig, und die beste Medizin gegen dieses Klima war gelblicher Aprikosenschnaps, mit Selterswasser gemischt. Der Schnaps hatte eine milde Schärfe, war billig, rein und gut, und es war schön, am Fenster zu sitzen, in den Himmel oder auf die Straße zu sehen und betrunken zu werden; die Trunkenheit kam sehr langsam, Schneider mußte bitter um sie kämpfen, es bedurfte – auch am Morgen – eines ziemlichen Quantums Aprikosenschnapses, um in einen Zustand zu kommen, in dem der Stumpfsinn erträglich wurde” *Ibid.* P. 199; “An jedem Fenster, an dem er vorbeikam, sah er hinaus, um sich zu vergewissern, daß Szarkas Wagen immer noch vor der Ausfahrt stand.” *Ibid.* P. 207.

It is thus quite telling, as the novel approaches its climax and a desperate attempt at capitulation is made, that the windows of an entire neighborhood are turned from outlook posts into peace brokers – they are all covered with white flags: “[...] and the white flag hanging from his parents’ bedroom on the second floor was extra large, larger than the white flags he could see hanging from the windows of other houses. The linden trees were already green. But not a soul was in sight, and the white flags hung stiff and dead in the windless air.”<sup>30</sup>

The windows are blinded as they lose their original function of mediators between the indoors and the outdoors, as they desperately try to convey one last message against the unsettling randomness of war. The perverse genius of Böll’s novel lies in that it ends in a conceptually brilliant bloodshed: Feinhals, the novel’s main character, returns home to his parents’ house to find himself surrounded by white flags hanging on windows and by shells falling from the sky, seven of which hit his parents’ neighborhood and one of which kills him, and he dies neither indoors nor outdoors, but exactly in-between: “he screamed at the top of his voice until the shell struck him, and he rolled in death onto the threshold of the house.”<sup>31</sup>

Feinhals’ tragic, unexpected death is exemplary of Böll’s early worldview: both random and liminal – the lucky survivors, the unlucky victims; the threshold of the house, the blooming trees outside, the white flags in the windows –, it allows the outdoors to start penetrating indoors, but slowly, the way blood flows across an even surface. Feinhals’ death in his own blossoming hometown traumatically imbricates the fate of both sides in one single, unescapable destiny.

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30 “Aber in Weidesheim war es vollkommen still. Zwischen den großen Baumkronen waren die Häuser wie versteckt, aber er kannte jedes Haus dort und sah beim ersten Blick, daß die Häuser von Bergs und Hoppenraths beschädigt waren, das Haus seines Vaters aber unbeschädigt, es lag breit und gelb dort an der Hauptstraße mit seiner behäbigen Front, und die weiße Fahne, die im ersten Stock aus dem Schlafzimmer der Eltern heraushing, war besonders groß, größer als die weißen Fahnen, die er an anderen Häusern sah. Die Linden waren schon grün. Aber kein Mensch war zu sehen, und die weißen Fahnen hingen steif und tot in der Windstille.” *Ibid.* Pp. 321-322.

31 “[E]r schrie laut, bis die Granate ihn traf, und er rollte im Tod auf die Schwelle des Hauses.” *Ibid.* P. 329.

## The deceptions of landscape and fate

Two things are happening discreetly and simultaneously in *Wo warst du, Adam?*: on the one hand, Böll is subtly exposing the randomness of fate and the perversity of war, while on the other he is describing the linden trees as being “already green [*schon grün*]” but without a soul in sight to contemplate them.<sup>32</sup> Böll, precise and careful as ever with his language, interrupts two sentences about Feinhals’ eerily silent hometown in order to add this rather quizzical comment on the linden trees being *already* green. Why wouldn’t they be, one might be tempted to ask, if just in the previous paragraph Böll made sure to describe other, unspecified trees as *also* being “already in blossom, slopes and meadows were covered with blossoming treetops, white, pink, and blue-white, and the air was mild: it was spring.”<sup>33</sup> Why shouldn’t the trees, linden or otherwise, be green if it was already spring – what is so unusual about their greenness (or, for that matter, their blossoming) that warrants the adverb repetition?

The explanation comes later, as the disaster looms closer and Feinhals gazes over his hometown to find that “much of it had been destroyed, a whole row of houses next to the station as well as the station itself.” But amidst this trail of death and destruction, what catches Feinhals’ attention, almost blinding him, warranting the paragraph to end in the reticent tone of an ellipsis, are “the blossoms on the trees, its creamy yellow shining brightly up at him...”<sup>34</sup>

The landscape, in its indifference, is *already* green and blossoming throughout Böll’s novel, and all the more the closer the novel gets to its tragic ending.<sup>35</sup> Faced with the difficult task of new beginnings, Böll’s

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32 See footnote 30.

33 “Im Tal blühten schon die Bäume, Hänge und Wiesen waren bedeckt mit blühenden Baumkronen, weiß, rötlich und bläulichweiß, und die Luft war mild: es war Frühling.” Ibid. P. 321.

34 “[E]s war manches zerstört, am Bahnhof eine ganze Häuserzeile und auch der Bahnhof selbst. Es stand noch ein Güterzug da, dessen Waggon wurde Holz auf ein amerikanisches Auto entladen, die frischen Bretter waren so deutlich zu sehen wie der Sarg im Garten des Tischlers, der heller und leuchtender war als die Blüten auf den Bäumen, sein gelbliches Weiß leuchtete deutlich herauf.” Ibid. P. 324.

35 “[Feinhals] stopfte sich eine Pfeile, Finck gab ihm Feuer, und sie sahen eine Zeitlang in die blühende Ebene hinunter, während der alte Finck seine Hand auf dem Kopf des Enkelkinds liegen hatte.”; “Die Amerikaner hatten an der

characters – as all survivors of traumatic experiences, as Andreas Huyssen posits<sup>36</sup> – slip into a revolving, repetitive language that betrays their deepest, darkest fears. Böll, as it has been previously argued, sees language as a symptom of larger, looming, unsettling and unsettled issues. By retreating his characters indoors, aboard trains and behind windows, by suffocating them in an environment – or rather a generational *Stimmung* – that Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht rightly calls “claustrophobic”<sup>37</sup>, Böll achieves enough distance so as to identify in the landscape the outlines of a promise yet to be fulfilled<sup>38</sup>, one that bears the mark of both past and present, of both the inside and the outside. In doing so, Böll seems to quietly back Lawrence Buell’s thesis – posited in his 1995 opus *The Environmental Imagination* – that “the nonhuman environment is present not merely as a device but as a

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Unterführung nur einen Doppelposten stehen. Die beiden Männer hatten die Stahlhelme abgenommen, rauchten und blickten gelangweilt in die blühenden Gärten zwischen Heidesheim und Weidesheim”; “Sie [die Granate] kreperte in einer Baumkrone, und ein milder, dichter Regen von weißen Blüten fiel auf die Weise.” Ibid. Pp. 326, 327, 328.

- 36 “All survivors of traumatic experiences face the difficult task of new beginnings. But the tension between traumatic symptom and new beginning will necessarily remain unresolved, generating ever new attempts at resolution. It is far too simple to believe, as Sebald evidently does, that the presence of a great war and postwar epos could have prevented collective damage to what he calls (problematically) ‘das Seelenleben der deutschen Nation’ (the spiritual life of the German nation): the great writer of the air war not as the conscience of the nation à la Böll or Grass, but as the nation’s shrink. After all, we know that every post-traumatic new beginning bears the traces of traumatic repetition, even though increasing temporal and generational distance from the original experience may alter the discursive structure of the post-traumatic symptom.” Andreas Huyssen. *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003. P. 151.
- 37 Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht. *After 1945: Latency as Origin of the Present*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012. P. 28.
- 38 Discussing Musil’s novella *Die Vollendung der Liebe*, Gerhard Neumann addresses the “Landschaftskonzept als einen Erfüllungs- und Vereinigungsraum”, a very seducing proposition that cannot be fully applied to Böll’s early works, but that nevertheless carries in it the echo of Böll’s later efforts and of the direction in which he is moving. Gerhard Neumann. “Landschaft im Fenster. Liebeskonzept und Identität in Robert Musils Novelle ‘Die Vollendung der Liebe’”. *Neue Beiträge zur Germanistik*, 3 (2004): pp. 15-31, here p. 30.

presence that begins to suggest that human history is implicated in natural history.”<sup>39</sup>

The bleakness and eeriness of Böll’s worldview, as framed by windowsills, thresholds, train compartments and cracks in the wall, is foretold by landscape’s indifference to human suffering, in how it blossoms and starts anew well before language has had the time to wrap itself around the worst of events and calmly supply words that should never exist. In Böll’s fictional world, language has not yet had the time to cope; his prose is still revolving, repeating itself, an almost circular affair obsessively retracing its own steps, exposing its contradictions, searching for a meaning that seems to constantly elude his characters – searching for a meaning, as it has been said, that always seems to be elsewhere. Böll’s words, after all, never overstay their welcome: he whispers where others thunder. His characters are forced to retreat inside and place a window between them and a mistrustful world – not because they refuse to ever trust it again, but because they are looking for the words and angles that shall make it inhabitable once more. Böll tries to make sense of a world violently turned upside down with such a light, competent hand that it may even pass off as landscape description.

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39 Lawrence Buell. *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995. P. 7.



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## Zu den Beitragenden

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