The covers of the eight volumes of the new English edition of Heinrich Böll’s works are very friendly to the eye. The books present themselves in soft shades of blue, green, grey, yellow, and other colors. This is not the place to comment on the importance of colors in Böll’s texts but one fact can be stated right away: The contents of these volumes are far from mellow. They might even be called unsettling. There is a powerful witness for this claim: “He was uncomfortable and pugnacious, he caused offence and generated respect. We shall miss his courageous, committed, aware and constantly warning voice. His work remains.” Thus spoke Richard von Weizsäcker, the President of the Federal Republic of Germany, when Heinrich Böll had died on 16 July 1985.1

Weizsäcker’s confidence that Böll’s work would remain was not shared by everybody at the time. In the same year 1985, in an obituary on Heinrich Böll, the German critic Marcel Reich-Ranicki wrote: “We do not know if his novels will still be read in the next century . . .”2 Almost forty years after Böll’s death and well into the next century, we still do not know. In 2010, the last volumes of the 27-volume Köln Ausgabe (Cologne Edition) of Böll’s works appeared (The covers of these volumes are a deep read. Much could be said about that). To be sure, the publication of a new and complete edition of an author’s oeuvre does not necessarily mean that people will actually read these texts. In Germany, when a shiny new edition is published and the volumes then disappear well in sight on the bookshelves of libraries far and wide and the author is widely forgotten, it is called a “Klassikergrab,” a lying-to-rest as a classic. But who says that Böll has to be read only in Germany? It would undoubtedly be desirable that Böll continues to be read in Germany and English-speaking readers, too, now have an opportunity to (re)acquaint themselves with this Nobel-prize winning author.

Böll was so much regarded as the literary representative of the old Federal Republic (the “Rhenish” Federal Republic, because of its capital Bonn on the river Rhine; as opposed to the Berlin Republic that emerged after German unification in 1990); he was so closely connected to the problems and tribulations, the scandals and debates of the old West Germany that it hasn’t been clear how relevant his works would be for the post-unification future. It was not uncommon to read Böll’s texts as a

---

running commentary of the political and moral developments of postwar West Germany, and with German unification that historical epoch had come to an end. Therefore the question of what remains of Böll’s appeal to contemporary and future readers has still not been answered.

Given this precarious situation of the author’s legacy, it is all the more courageous and inspiring when a small publishing house is willing to put out an eight-volume English edition that combines autobiographical writing with novels, a travel diary, and an almost one-thousand-page volume of collected stories. Melville House’s affordable paperback edition of The Essential Heinrich Böll, with its multi-colored pastel covers uses existing translations, mostly by price-winning veteran translator Leila Vennewitz (1912-2007), who had translated texts by Böll since 1965, when her translation of The Clown (Ansichten eines Clowns, 1963) was published. Every volume, with the exception of The Collected Stories and the novel Group Portrait with Lady, has either a new introduction or an afterword, written by knowledgeable and sympathetic readers of Böll and ranging from Anne Applebaum and Jessa Crispin to Scott Esposito and Salman Rushdie (whose introduction to The Safety Net [Fürsorgliche Belagerung, 1979] had been written earlier).

An edition that calls itself The Essential Böll, implies both that it is absolutely necessary or indispensable to read this author, and that it will provide what is constituting the essence of the author’s opus or at least the most important texts of his output. As far as the first issue is concerned, whether it is (still) incumbent on us to read Heinrich Böll; this is a question that, as mentioned above, can (and will) be debated. It can be argued that whoever is interested in postwar German history, the history of former West Germany, the literary production and the literary aesthetics of postwar Germany, and the link between aesthetics and ethics, cannot afford to ignore Heinrich Böll. Some of the specific subject matters Böll was concerned with might have become historical, but the underlying more general issues he confronted, such as: how to deal with a troubled past (Billiards at Half-Past Nine and The Clown); how a society treats those of its member who live at the margins (Group Portrait with Lady); how efforts to combat terrorism and the enforcement of an overblown concept of ‘safety’ destroy a democratic society (The Safety Net) are still very much with us today.

To answer the question whether this edition provides us with all that is needed to understand Heinrich Böll’s work, we must have a closer look at what is included and at what is not included. First, what is included: The story The Train Was on Time (Der Zug war pünktlich, 1949), the four novels Billiards at Half-Past Nine (Bil liard um halbzehn, 1959), The Clown (Ansichten eines Clowns, 1963), Group Portrait with Lady (Gruppenbild mit Dame, 1971), and The Safety Net (Fürsorgliche Belagerung, 1979). Billiards was
translated by Patrick Bowles, the other novels by Leila Vennewitz. The edition adds the travel diary Irish Journal (Irisches Tagebuch, 1957), the late autobiographical account What's to Become of the Boy? Or, Something to Do with Books (Was soll aus dem Jungen bloß werden? Oder: Irgendwas mit Büchern, 1981), and a volume of Collected Stories, comprising the previously published books Children are Civilians Too, And Where were you, Adam?, Enter and Exit: A Novella in two Parts, 18 Stories, A Soldier’s Legacy, The Casualty, Uncollected Stories, and The Mad Dog. With the exception of the The Mad Dog, which was translated by Breon Mitchell, the translator for all other titles in this volume was Leila Vennewitz.

This is an impressive collection of texts. The Train Was on Time was Böll’s first published book and gained him his first significant recognition as a writer. The four novels included in this edition provide an assortment of Böll’s most important and interesting prose works, both thematically and in regard to formal experimentation and innovation. It was after the publication of Group Portrait with Lady that Böll was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1972. This novel is arguably Böll’s foremost literary achievement and it is also Böll’s most pronounced statement on how modern societies deal with what the majority considers marginal, out-of-date, not-being-able-to-keep-up (with the requirements and challenges of post-industrialist capitalism), and still belonging to a late nineteen/early twentieth century Christian Europe, that – in Böll’s view – was upholding the minimum requirements for what he conceived of as a humane social environment.

Böll’s concern with the abject did not start with Group Portrait, however. In his afterword to The Clown, Scott Esposito calls this novel “by far his most talked-about and controversial work.” According to Esposito, The Clown is “the story of the outcast against society” (243) and tells of “an existence willfully lived on the margins” (244). As a manifestation or even a representative of the abject in postwar West German society, Hans Schnier reminds his contemporaries of their Nazi past (everything they want to forget, have repressed, but are still fascinated with), of the fact that they remain, still, at the center of their beings, Nazis. A new phase in the definition of the abject and how to deal with it is entered in the nineteen-seventies in West Germany, when terrorism becomes the leading discourse in first marginalizing and then purging what cannot be tolerated. Böll’s literary take on this development is his novel The Safety Net in which he tries to show how a democratic system of government that, by trying to protect itself from terrorists, destroys itself by taking away the liberties that define it in the first place. In his introduction, Salman Rushdie sees “the real tragedy for Böll [in] the replacement of the old kindness, of human values, by the remorseless, amoral world of the technologists” (ix).
Although not one of Böll’s most accomplished works in terms of literary quality, *The Safety Net* is an exceedingly timely novel.

*Irish Journal*, published in book form in 1957 after a first, extended visit in 1954 and then several more trips to the island, is a short text with a high degree of significance for anybody who wants to understand Heinrich Böll. That’s why the publisher has to be commended for having included a seemingly minor text into this edition. Ireland before globalization was an ideal or idealized place for Böll, a place on the margins (of modern Europe, of late capitalist Western society) where a lot of what Böll considered crucial to a humane existence seemed to have prevailed – at least for a while longer. Böll’s “Epilogue – Thirteen Years Later” from 1967 is also included in the volume, and it brings out again what Böll seems to have loved about Ireland and the Irish: their stubborn insistence on living life according to the old rules, to tradition, faith, and customs that are based in the community of the people.

The other short text included in this edition is of equal if not even higher importance for a deeper understanding of Böll’s work. *What’s to Become of the Boy?* is a late autobiographical account of Böll’s youth under National Socialism. In her introduction to the text, Anne Applebaum directs the reader’s attention to the depiction of life under a totalitarian regime. According to Applebaum, not the tribulations of a teenage boy form the center of this autobiographical text but the question of how to maintain a semblance of normality and dignity for a family that just wants to get by, materially, spiritually, socially, in surroundings that have become for the most part if not hostile but indifferent. Another, and, I would like to argue, even more significant aspect of this text is that it depicts Böll’s defining experience while he was growing up: the demise of the middle class. At that moment in history, during the late nineteen-twenties and early nineteen-thirties, Böll is faced with an enigma: “Merely lowered socially or truly classless? The question remains unanswered” (20). This represents Böll’s experience of modernity. From then on, “All That Is Solid Melts into Air” (*Communist Manifesto*). This embodies his personal and familial trauma: The realization that there was no longer a place for him and his family in society, that they themselves had become ‘abject.’ Böll’s way of coping with this trauma was to discover the qualities of the rejected, of those who had been declared unworthy, without value, superfluous, devoid of merit. Böll’s aesthetics and his ethics are based on this trauma and his attempts at overcoming it.

The *Collected Stories* is a tome of 964 pages and claims to bring “together all of Heinrich Böll’s shorter fiction published in English” (v). This volume does not only contain the early short stories in *Wanderer, kommst du nach Spa. . .* (1950) which made Böll famous, but also the short novel *And Where Were You, Adam* (*Wo warst du, Adam*, 1951), the story *A
Soldier’s Legacy (Das Vermächtnis, written 1949, first published in German in 1982), and the collection of stories The Casualty (Die Verwundung, written between 1947 and 1952, first published in German in 1983), among other texts. One section of the volume is headed “Uncollected Stories” and includes translated texts that had only been published previously in magazines. Almost as an afterthought, the volume also makes available the ten stories from The Mad Dog (Der blasse Hund, written in the late nineteen-thirties and the nineteen-forties, published in German in 1995), with the introduction by the translator Breon Mitchell. The Collected Stories is a treasure trove, particularly of Böll’s very early writing, but it also presents some of his important satirical texts, such as Murke’s Collected Silences (Doktor Murkes gesammeltes Schweigen) or Christmas Not Just Once A Year (Nicht nur zur Weihnachtszeit), and some of the notable stories of the late nineteen-seventies, such as On Being Courteous When Compelled to Break the Law (Höflichkeit bei verschiedenen unvermeidlichen Gesetzesüberschreitungen) and Too Many Trips to Heidelberg (Du fährst zu oft nach Heidelberg).

Obviously, there is a lot that could have been included in this edition but was not. Twenty-seven volumes in the, at least for now, authoritative German edition of Böll’s works versus eight volumes in the English edition: The difference in numbers is all too obvious. But that’s hardly the point. The edition is called The Essential Böll and this title contains the claim that it provides what is absolutely necessary or indispensable for reading Böll. Does it?

The most popular of Böll’s books in German and the one most studied in schools in German speaking countries, Die verlorene Ehre der Katharina Blum (The Lost Honor of Katharina Blum) is not included. Several of the novels (And Never Said a Word, 1953; Women in a River Landscape, 1985) and some of the very early manuscripts that were published only after Böll’s death (Kreuz ohne Liebe, written probably between 1945 and 1948, published in 2002 in volume 2 of the Kölner Ausgabe, to mention just one) were not included. These omissions are understandable. No new translations have been commissioned for this edition, all the material had been available before. This, too, is reasonable, given the high cost of (quality) translation and the equally high commercial risk of such an undertaking for a small press. It also means, however, that the Frankfurter Vorlesungen (Frankfurt Lectures on Poetics, 1964), Böll’s most compelling account of his literary aesthetics, are still not accessible to English-speaking readers. Furthermore, none of Böll’s essays have been made available again or for the first time. A collection of Böll’s essays has been translated earlier by none other than Leila Vennewitz (Missing Persons and other Essays, 1977) but is not included in the new edition. To gain insight into “Fortschreibung,” a key concept of Böll’s production (which is untranslatable and means something like “continuous writing” or
“continuous written reflection in a variety of genres and media”), it is indispensable to be familiar with Böll’s vast production of essays, reviews, speeches, and other interventions. Just to give an idea of the amount of material involved here: The 1985 paperback edition of In eigener und anderer Sache. Schriften und Reden 1952-1985, comprising Böll’s non-fiction writings, had ten volumes, with about three-thousand pages.

These reservations notwithstanding, The Essential Heinrich Böll goes a long way in providing what is essential about the literary work of the author to English-speaking audiences. It shows that Heinrich Böll is not just an author who was important for the development of the old West Germany but somebody who has to tell readers of the still young twenty-first century a lot about their own times. In an improvised speech Böll gave in 1979 on the occasion of the publication of The Safety Net, he reflected on the many potential meanings of the color pink (“rosa”) in painting, nature, language, and music. As a language equivalent to the color pink Böll identifies the word “nett” (nice). Just as phrases containing the word “nett” can mean pretty much anything, at least in German, the color pink can signify a multitude of meanings: Böll refers to the use of the color in van Gogh and Renoir but also in George Grosz. At the end of his ruminations, Böll cautions not to take the word “nett” and the color “rosa” lightly. One never knows what lies hidden behind them. In The Essential Heinrich Böll, only the cover of the novel Group Portrait with Lady is pink. But somehow one has the impression that all the volumes of this edition contain much that goes beyond what we think we know about this author and his work and that there is still much to discover here.

THOMAS W. KNIESCHE
Brown University


****