

SEMINAR ON THEOLOGY AND LITERATURE: THE IRONIC MODE OF RELIGIOUS IMAGINATION IN HEINRICH BÖLL¹

It is surprising that little has been made of Heinrich Böll's Nobel Prize awarded in 1972, a year after the publication of his *Group Portrait with Lady*.² His work has been translated into eighteen languages and this particular novel has been a best seller in European countries.³ But *Newsweek*, although granting that Böll's novels are widely read in Russia, noted that in the U.S., his fiction inspires only a "feeling that we ought to read him but would rather read Gunter Grass."⁴ And Harry Cargas in *America* detected disappointment that the Nobel prize was awarded to Böll—not least in "those of us who had hoped Jewish author Elie Wiesel would get the prize."⁵

The ironic mode—the art of saying one thing and directing attention to another—has always posed difficulties for literary interpreters, but especially for those concerned with the religious imagination. The neglect Böll's work has suffered in this country, despite his Nobel award, suggests that his ironic seriousness may be what is at stake: is the reader to enjoy his work merely as a spoof, or must the reader, in addition, be expected to "make" something of the text—for example, to interpret a social reality as it is represented through the irony of the text.

¹This paper is part of a book-length study of the "dialectics of belief" as exemplified in several twentieth-century "Catholic" novels.

²The citation read by Ragnar Gierow, Permanent Secretary of the Swedish Academy, including the following remarks which are pertinent to my paper: "He and his generation were forced to breathe the air in a country where everyone's throat was in the grip of dictatorship and not a word was said because the grip was so tight that it stifled every sound. It is one of the postwar miracles of Germany that so soon after the holocaust and the years of hunger and desolation, a new generation of writers, thinkers and researchers was so quickly at the ready to take up their real job and that of the country as a whole, in rebuilding the intellectual life of the country." Quoted in E. Dillon, "The Urgency of Heinrich Böll," *Commonweal* 98 (March 9, 1973), 11.

³For a summary of the American reception of Böll's novels, see Keith Stewart, "The American Reviews of Heinrich Böll; a Note on the Problems of the Compassionate Novelist," *University of Dayton Review* 11 (Winter 1974), 5-10. See also Heinz Ludwig Arnold, "Heinrich Bölls Roman," *op. cit.*, pp. 42-9, for questions concerning the German reception of Böll's novels. It is indicative of Böll's stature that he has won nine prizes in the West and three in the East for his writing. For more details, see Leopold Hoffman, *Heinrich Böll: Einführung in Leben und Werk* (Luxemburg: Edi-Centre und Leopold Hoffman, 1973), p. 16.

⁴"'Au.' Is a Camera," *Newsweek* 81 (May 14, 1973), 118.

⁵Harry J. Cargas, "Böll: Nobel Laureate," 127 (November 4, 1972), 369.

With Böll's ironic mode, then, there is initially the question of whether, as irony, his novel is sufficiently serious to warrant the interpreter's teasing out what Wayne Booth aptly calls the "religious and metaphysical riddle" of the text.⁶ And even if the work is judged to be sufficiently serious, there is the difficulty of speaking about the mockery of the text without merely repeating it. Finally, there is the problem of the dearth of theological resources dealing with the relationship of irony and religious consciousness. Among major theologians who have attempted to come to grips with irony only the names of Sören Kierkegaard and Reinhold Niebuhr come readily to mind.

Without an understanding of the ironic character of Böll's fiction, an interpreter runs the risk of erroneous or even wrong-headed readings. Such readings seem to have been the fate of *Group Portrait with Lady*.⁷ The majority of reviews have been flawed by one or more of three oversights: first, an exaggerated

⁶Wayne Booth, *Rhetoric of Irony* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1974), p. 266.

⁷One exception to the typically reductive approach to the religious interpretation of Böll's novels can be found in Francisco de A. Cabellero's "Heinrich Böll, Premio Nobel de Literatura," *Arbor: revista general de investigación cultural* 324 (1972), 97-102. Cabellero presents Böll's religiosity as "ingenious in the best sense, pristine and direct in that it manifests the faith of the publican who came out of the church 'justified'" (p. 101). Cabellero also speaks to the issue of Böll as an anticlerical "Catholic" novelist.

Although the question of sentimentality is appropriate with respect to Böll's early novels, it does not arise, it seems to me with respect to *Gruppenbild mit Dame*. Moreover, in an early theoretical statement, "Kunst und Religion," Böll defines the problem and proposes a non-solution which is—again theoretically—well beyond Cargas' indictment:

Diese Problematik betrifft nicht nur die Christen, sie betrifft alle Künstler, die eine Verbindlichkeit ausserhalb ihrer Kunst anerkennen. Schaffen sie die Kongruenz der beiden Gewissen gewaltsam, so leidet die Kunst Schaden. Ein Beispiel ist die Literatur und Malerei des sozialistischen Realismus, und wenn diese Kongruenz gewaltsam hergestellt wird, stellt sich heraus, dass sie, indem sie Kunst verletzten, auch den Inhalt verletzten, dem zuliebe sie die Form vernachlässigten. Es bleibt ein Geheimnis, wie beides zu verbinden sei; man kann nicht halb wahr sein, kann nicht die Form an den Inhalt preisgeben, ohne zugleich den Inhalt zu verraten. So bleibt das Dilemma, Christ zu sein und zugleich Künstler und doch nicht christlicher Künstler. Nur dem Finanzamt gegenüber ist diese Bezeichnung erlaubt, und damit bleibt sie geheim, so geheim wie unser Gewissen, das sich erst beim Gericht offenbaren wird. In Böll, *Hierzulande Aufsätze, Deutscher Taschenbuch* (Berlin: Verlag, 1963), pp. 51-2.

Elsewhere, his views on religious traditions are succinctly given in an interview: "I am a passionate contemporary man. To be aware of the problems of your time may mean changing your mind sometimes. Take the Catholic Church, for example. To be a Catholic today means something very different from what it meant five or ten years ago. I see this as a healthy development. I would still define myself as a Catholic, but I believe that methods of creating obedience in the Catholic Church came out of second-rate church laws. The real problems, such as

regard for, at times almost a veneration of, Leni (the "lady" of the title)—an interpretation which is almost certainly disallowed by the tone of the novel; second, a failure to take Au. (Böll's abbreviation for the narrator) seriously and to explore his role in the novel; and third, a neglect of any but the literal meanings of the religious images in the novel.⁸

attitudes towards birth control, are very important." In B. A. Bannon, "Heinrich Böll," *Publishers Weekly* 203 (June 4, 1973), 32.

Again, Böll alludes to the religious function of art, but not art exclusively in his 1958 "Brief an einen jungen Katholiken." By relating his own experiences before and during World War II, Böll demonstrates the failure of religious establishments to stem the political destruction of human society. He concludes (in 1958) that one must prepare one's own Bread of Life since the churches offer only politics to live by:

Es wird bald in Deutschland viele Katholiken geben, die mit ihren Glaubensbrüdern und -schwestern nur noch ihren Glauben gemeinsam haben; ja, Sie haben recht gelesen, ich schrieb: *nur*, es gibt ja keine religiösen Auseinandersetzungen mehr, nur noch politische, und selbst religiöse Entscheidungen, wie die des Gewissens, werden zu politischen gestempelt: magere Jahre stehen bevor, denn die Theologen verweigern uns jenes andere, das Wort, von dem wir leben, und ob sir am nächsten Tag noch Brot haben werden, ist ohnehin fraglich. Wir werden gezwungen, von Politik zu leben— und das ist eine fragwürdige Kost, da gibt es, je nach den Erfordernissen der Taktik, an einem Tag Pralinen, an anderen eine Suppe aus Dörngemüse: unser Brot müssen wir selber backen und das Wort uns selbst bereiten . . ." (pp. 44-5). In Böll, *Hierzulande Aufsätze*, pp. 23-45.

See also Böll's reflections on the "Catholic" novel tradition in "Mauriac zum achtzigsten Geburtstag" (1965) in *Aufsätze-Kritiken-Reden I* (Köln-Berlin: Verlag Kiepenheuer & Witsch, 1967), pp. 208-10. How Böll's fiction correlates with his theory, of course, is a further question.

⁸See, for example, H. J. Bernhard's discussion of "Modell und Menschenbild" in his *Die Romane Heinrich Bölls*, which centers almost exclusively on the way in which Leni's "pure, naive humanity" and her "trustworthiness with which she herself has known the right way" is an example of the classic utopian humanitarian representation:

Da er eine geschichtliche Gegenkraft nicht poetisch fixieren kann, versammelt er in Leni grundlegende prinzipielle Züge eines Menschenbildes, das bewusst der profitgesellschaft entgegensteht. Hierin liegt die Grundlage für den Modellcharakter eines bürgerlich-humanistischen Menschenbildes unter zeitgenössischen kapitalistischen Bedingungen, wie es Leni repräsentiert. Es hat seinen Kern in der moralischen Integrität des einzelnen, der aus der Sicherheit seiner Emotionen heraus handelt. . . .

Nicht nur die Übereinstimmung im Begriff, wenn von Lenis reiner, naiver Menschlichkeit gesprochen wird, auch die Sicherheit, mit der sie sich des rechten Weges bewusst ist, deckt Beziehungen zum utopisch-humanistischen Menschenbild der Klassik auf. Leni ist ein guter Mensch. . . . Da die Hauptfigur aber trotz des Modellhaften, das ihr eignet, als Mensch verstanden werden soll und muss, der mehrere Jahrzehnte in der kapitalistischen Gesellschaft be- und überstanden hat, ist der Autor gedrängt, diese Naivität zu überfordern. H. Bernhard, *Die Romane Heinrich Bölls* (Berlin: Rutten and Loening, 1973), pp. 364-5.

Other critics, such as Daniel Coogan in "A Bonus for Fiction Buffs," *America*, 128 (May 12, 1973), recognize the importance of the Au. but miss his structural importance: "With great skill Böll makes a show of suppressing the Au.'s personality, but as the story unfolds, . . . the anonymous writer emerges very clearly. . . . Such is the story of Leni" (p. 445). See also the review in *Choice*

For an interpretation of the religious significance of this recent novel I have found two major resources to be of assistance: the theory of the "new novel" as represented by Alain Robbe-Grillet, and Theodor Adorno's notion of "negative dialectics." After a brief introduction to the novel, I shall describe how each of these resources assists in the task of understanding its art.

PLOT SUMMARY AND STRUCTURAL INTERPRETATION

Gruppenbild mit Dame is set in Germany after World War II. The story is about the effect of Leni on Au., whose task it is to be a disinterested recorder of the facts of her life. Au is collating details about Leni, a "vulnerable and indestructible" 48 year old woman. A third main character, Klementina, is introduced in the second half of the novel and becomes increasingly important. At the end, she helps to complete Au.'s manuscript, which is *Group Portrait with Lady*, the novel itself.

What follows is a table which correlates the lengths of the chapters in a four-part structure with the action of the novel and gives a clue to its dialectical rhythm, peaks, and final cadence:

Chapters with Lengths Grouped According to a
Four-Part Structure

Part One Leni's Childhood		Part Two Leni's Maturity		Part Three Au.'s Dilemma		Part Four Denouement	
Chap.	Pages	Chap.	Pages	Chap.	Pages	Chap.	Pages
1	20	5	20	9	43	13	4
2	36	6	34	10	19	14	2
3	44	7	38	11	12		
4	39	8	76	12	6		

Because they treat the text as if it is comprised of two parts, most critics miss the subtle changes in the focus of the novel. The following summary of details, arranged according to the foregoing four-part structure, demonstrates how Au. comes to the fore and how the ironic mode prevails throughout the novel.

(September, 1973): "Gradually the unobtrusive 'Au.' becomes a central figure in the novel in his own right, and his love affair with Klementina is as absorbing as Leni's affair with Boris," (p. 987). Neither the structural form nor the overall significance of this insight are validated in the summary.

Part One: Leni's childhood and adolescence. Very early in Part One, Leni's first sexual awakening is recorded by Au. One day as she crossed the street, "her right foot recognized a slight unevenness in the pavement," passed on the message to her brainstem, the latter transmitting "the impression to all her sensory organs and emotional centers."⁹ From then on, "Leni is waiting for a man 'whom she means to love, to whom she can give herself unreservedly.'" Erhard, a shy poet, appears. She thinks that he might be "the one," but "knew she would know it only when he asked her." Before her wish that they would "come together in an open field of heather" can be fulfilled, Erhard is called to the front and is killed. Au. comments that, since he is "neither in a position to meditate on tears nor considers himself suited to do so, information on the origin of tears, their chemical and physical composition, can best be obtained from a handy reference work." He concludes with a discourse on "T. and W., L. and B." (Tears and Weeping, Laughter and Beatitude), which appears to be quoted from an encyclopedia.

Leni's grief is partially overcome at a dance where she meets Alois Hoyser, the son of her father's former bookkeeper. Out of boredom, she agrees to leave with him. They arrive at his aunt's apartment the morning after, apparently having spent the night together. Alois' family then tries to claim rights to Leni, on the grounds that she may be carrying their grandson. That argument failing, they insist on negotiating their son's "lost honor" on the ridiculous grounds that he has lost his virginity. Although Leni begins to realize that she does not love Alois, she is too passive to reject his request that she marry him. After a quick ceremony, Alois claims his conjugal rights in her family's ironing room and exercises them right there, then leaves for the front and is killed. Here Au. "indulges in considerable interference by taking the liberty of constructing a hypothesis of fate, of wondering what Leni might have, would have, should have become, if. . . ."

Part Two: Leni's maturity. Leni is employed during the war as a wreathmaker. Wreaths, notes Au., were "war-essential": "This is not the place for an appreciation of the state in its capacity as organizer of funerals; we may take it for granted, both historically and statistically, that there were a great many funerals, . . . and the farther the war progressed, . . . the scarcer, of course did wreaths

⁹All of the following quotations are from the translation, *Group Portrait with Lady* by Lelia Vennewitz (McGraw-Hill, 1973). The original text was published in Cologne by Kiepenheuer & Witsch in 1971.

become." Artistic and clever, Leni is well-liked and respected by the other workers. Complications set in when she befriends Boris, a Russian prisoner of war who, through the favor of a high German official, is released from his camp during the day to work in the same shop as Leni. Leni and Boris fall in love, Leni taking the initiative this time, "intuitively understanding that it must be this way." Au. calls this Leni's *decisive* appearance in the novel and is tempted to describe it as "a birth or rebirth, or as it were, a seminal experience."

Part Three: Awakening of Au.'s subjectivity and his dilemma.

One wonders why most critics have missed the change in the direction of the novel beginning with Part Three. Perhaps the naive reader tends to accept as given, Leni's propensity to love (regarding her as a woman who guides her life by emotion rather than by reason) and to accept Au.'s objectivity as well (regarding him as a man leading a rational life, neither seeking nor waiting for "someone" else). Indeed, the novel builds our expectations this way: for example, Au. presents himself as "hopelessly dependent upon facts," whereas we have seen Leni as a romantic at heart. But in Part Three the roles begin to be reversed. We learn that Leni, whom we have been led to think of as hopelessly inept regarding financial matters and profligate with money so long as it concerns Boris, is solvent and almost able to balance her accounts (barring the injustices her in-laws, the Hoysers, are about to inflict upon her). Now we see Au. succumbing to Klementina's request that he believe what she is about to tell him before he has the facts.¹⁰ We also see him capable of acting on impulse when he kisses Klementina on the occasion of their first meeting—an action resembling Leni's involuntarily laying her hand on Boris' on his first day in the shop. We also learn, through Klementina, that Au.—who had never betrayed any more than objective interest in Leni from a distance, although he seems to have stopped short of the unchecked melancholy of unrequited love that comes to others in the novel—has been her "pedantic admirer." Finally, we see Au.

¹⁰The passage reads as follows:

... to hear from such lips the interrogative form of the future tense as applied to the verb "to believe" seemed to the Au. most unfair! A simple question in the future tense such as "Will you go for a walk with me?" or "Will you propose to me?" is perfectly permissible in such circumstances, but the question of whether a person *will believe* what he has not yet even heard—! The Au. was weak enough to nod his assent and moreover, penetrating looks having already challenged him to verbal utterance, to breathe a Yes such as is otherwise breathed only at the marriage altar (p. 329).

And later Au. is said to have "emerged from his objectivity" (p. 344).

becoming bored with his research project: "To his relief, Au. finds that almost all the remainder of the report needs only to be quoted. . . ." His boredom with writing is contingent upon other developments: namely, his taking up residence with Klementina—although she stoutly refuses to marry him, maintaining that she had been a bride too long—and his gradual growth into a new self-identity.

Meanwhile, Klementina, having overcome her fear of life, begins to be interested in Leni: "Although she had now heard of and about Leni from such many-angled perspectives, some forceful, some direct, some indirect . . . , K. was now all agog to meet her 'in the flesh,' to touch her, smell her, see her." Here we suddenly realize that Klementina, without warning or further comment by Au., has become "K." in the novel and literally takes over the writing from him. She decides to convert the police officer's report regarding Lev, Leni's son, into "indirect speech rather than quote it verbatim." This puts Au. in an awkward position initially. He notes that her decision "results in a considerable shift in style" and even a loss of detail. He even speaks of these lost details as "victims of his lack of resistance" since he "by no means approves of K.'s 'iconoclasm.'" Nevertheless, while K. is deleting all the superfluities with her blue pencil, "whether the Au. is displaying d.u.a. [deliberate under-achievement] or d.l.r. [deliberate lack of resistance] must remain an open question."

This reference to "d.u.a." is one of several and is typical of the way Böll casts new light on a situation by overextending jargon which pertains to it. D.u.a. is a technical term first used in the novel by a social worker (who, because he insists on absolute anonymity, is referred to as the "psychological expert") in the case study on Lev, Leni's son, recorded by Au. Lev had been jailed for forging two checks on Uncle Hoyser's account. E. (the expert) declares that "d.u.a. is a steadily increasing phenomenon that will burden our achievement-oriented society with serious problems." But wherein lies the "burden"? It seems that Lev, a garbage truck-column leader, had so organized the work of his team that they finished two or three hours ahead of time and therefore had more time for lunch. When asked to put his organizational skills at the disposal of the planning section, Lev refused. The psychologist reports: "in L.B.G.'s [Lev's] case, the d.u.a. consists in the fact that, although he reaches the target expected of him, his innate intelligence, his organizational talent, are not—even after considerable increase in wages—placed fully at the

disposal of the employer." Part Three concludes with the complete psychogram of Lev, which has been made available to Au.

Part Four: K's usurpation of the writing of the novel. Here K. has become indispensable to Au.: "Her undeniable sensibility in regard to German language and literature, which fails her only when she has compositional or editorial ambitions, her fairly lengthy familiarity with spiritual practices, when applied secularly are on no account to be considered wasted . . . she has made herself independent, as it were, meaning that her blue pencil no longer goes to work on other people's texts, merely her own." The term d.u.a. reappears: "Whereas the Au. has still not achieved the ardently desired state of total d.u.a., she [K.] is approaching the goal of doing only those things she enjoys." Au. at this point no longer vacillating between d.l.r. or d.u.a. as before, but now well on his way to the latter, now "ardently desired," way of being. No longer blue pencilling Au.'s material but setting out to write a biography of someone else in the novel, K. is approaching her own goal, which also sounds remarkably like that of d.u.a. The novel ends by having charted a radical growth of Au. from researching another's life, to living one of his own.

GRUPPENBILD MIT DAME AS A "NEW" NOVEL

To gain some critical distance, let us make explicit the place of this book in the genre of the novel. It seems most closely related to those novels, prominently within French literature, which define themselves against traditional novels and are constituted primarily by negativity. Some critics have already considered other Böll novels as "new" literature or "anti-literature,"¹¹ but to my knowledge none has done so with *Gruppenbild mit Dame*. The tenets of the new novel are set forth most clearly in Alain Robbe-Grillet's

¹¹See, for example, Karl August Horst, "Überwindung der Zeit," in *Der Schriftsteller Heinrich Böll*, p. 67. See also James H. Reid, *Heinrich Böll: Withdrawal and Re-emergence* (London: Oswald Wolff, 1973):

The similarities between Böll's novel and the *nouveau roman* in France have frequently been indicated, although Böll has poured scorn on the latter (Horst Bienek, *Werkstattgespräche mit Schriftstellern* [Munich: Hanser, 1962], p. 148). What has been overlooked is that *Billard um halb zehn* is both a 'nouveau roman' and its opposite. For implicit in the novel's ending is an attack on the abstract, purely artistic existence which Robert has been leading (p. 57).

A similar point might be made concerning the ending of *Group Portrait with Lady*, based on such irony as appears at the end of chapter ten. "Has the impatient reader noticed that quantities of happy endings are now taking place? Holding hands, alliances formed, old friendships . . . being renewed, while others . . . were getting nowhere?" (p. 376).

Toward a New Novel and are best stated as counterpoints to conventional narrative.¹²

Robbe-Grillet states, first of all, that the characters of the new novel are not to be molded on the model of an individual. Since the world, according to him, is no longer our own to own, we must renounce the "omnipotence of the person." The character, Leni, can be illuminated by these considerations. Whereas she does have parents and a name, her identity does not dictate her actions, nor does she merely react to new events because of her historical identity. Quite the contrary, she leads Au. in Part One to construct a "hypothesis of fate." Au concludes that Leni might still have experienced another intense love besides that of Erhard, had he lived, because the latter "would not have insisted on rights of any kind, and this would have guaranteed him one thing for the rest of his life: if not the certainty of Leni's permanent devotion, nevertheless her affection."

The effect of this "hypothesis of fate" is to present "Leni" more as the simple subject of the action of the novel than as a fictional biographee.¹³

Next, according to Robbe-Grillet, the emphasis is not to be on story at the expense of writing. Invention and imagination—rather than prefabricated ideas of reality—become "at the limit, the very subject of the book." What is at stake is the presumed ready-made intelligibility of the world. In the new novel, the certainty of the direction and the self-containedness of the plot ceases. In *Gruppenbild mit Dame*, for example, we are at all times conscious that the novel is being constructed. In a few instances (such as in the "hypothesis of fate"), Au.'s reflection even dominates the events of the story.

Third, the new novel is not out to prove anything—either in psychological, sociological terms or by way of political ideality. The author of the new novel, says Robbe-Grillet, "works for nothing" and is designedly opposed to deceptive ideologies, such as the existentialist themes of despair or absurdity. In the case of *Gruppenbild mit Dame*, not only is there an absence of psychological, sociological, theological or political theses; there are satiriza-

¹²The following four points are based on Alain Robbe-Grillet's "On Several Obsolete Notions," *For a New Novel* (New York: Grove Press, 1965), pp. 25-47.

¹³I realize that this is a difficult distinction. It can best be appreciated by comparing Leni to Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* and then to Robbe-Grillet's Mathias (of *The Voyeur*). Leni is prevented from becoming a "fictional biographee," I think, by the irony of the novel and by her being kept at a distance by means of the device of reportage.

tions of inadequate determinations of these meanings wherever they occur. The case-study worker's report on Lev is one example of a supposedly "objective" psychological report which, despite its faithful analysis of the facts of Lev's life, in the end degenerates into a totalitarian concern for societal productivity. Earlier in the novel, moreover, certain information is given "merely as consolation for all those who feel the lack of a political angle."¹⁴ Later there is the Church's suppression of the miracle of the roses in spite of the facts, against the botanists' and biologists' acceptance of its "supernatural" character because of the facts.

Finally, the new novel has no need to go outside itself for its justification: it is in its form that its reality resides. Its meaning is more in terms of its internal necessity than in any preconceived external value. So, too, although *Gruppenbild mit Dame* has important links to reality outside the novel,¹⁵ its own reality is to be found in its organic unity rather than in any preconceived objective. The nearest thing to a cause to which the novel may be related is the war Böll waged for five years against the Springer newspaper syndicate for their treatment of the Baader-Meinhof-Bande, a group of anarchists who terrorized Germany in the early seventies.¹⁶ Böll did not condone the violence of the Bande, but he insisted that newspapers refrain from fanning the flames of retribution. The Springer syndicate's response was to attack Böll viciously. One of the many cartoons it printed showed Ulrike Meinhof, a notorious anarchist, standing in front of the others, among whom one recognizes Heinrich Böll.¹⁷ The cartoon is enti-

¹⁴Indicative of Böll's involvement with victims of political injustice is his intention to share his Nobel monetary prize with writers currently imprisoned. Moreover, he is known to be an "avowed anti-capitalist" (Cargas, *op. cit.*, p. 369). For an example of his extra-literary political writings, see the script, *Politische Meditationen zu Glück und Vergeblichkeit*, which he co-authored with Dorothee Soelle, a well-known German theologian, and Lucas Maria Bohmer (ed. by Hans-Eckehard Bahr, *Reiche Theologie und Politik*, Band 3).

¹⁵Namely, World War II and its aftermath. Böll is a member of a formal group named "Gruppe 47" (including Gunter Grass, Peter Weiss and Martin Walser) who organized themselves to reconstitute literature toward individual freedom. See also Böll's "Angst vor der 'Gruppe 47'" in *Aufsätze - Kritiken - Reden*, I, pp. 191-201.

¹⁶See, for example, the editorial news report by Erik v. Kuehnelt-Leddihn, "Quiet Revolution in Germany?" *National Review* 26 (May 24, 1974), 593. See also *The New York Times Sunday Magazine* (May 11, 1975), pp. 14-5, on Ulrike Meinhof and Christine Baader; *New York Times* (May 22, 1975), p. 18, c.1, on the arrest of the Bande; *New York Times* (June 6, 1975), p. 31, c.4, on the postponement of their trial; *New York Times* (June 24, 1975), p. 7, c.7, on the arrest of their lawyers; *New York Times* (August 11, 1975), p. 1, c.5, on the effect of the trial upon civil service examinations.

¹⁷Böll collected all the material—articles and cartoons published continuously for three weeks before the first in Böll's favor appeared, together with his

tled "Gruppenbild mit Dame." Although the title of the book relates to Böll's battle with Axel Springer, that external reality is subsumed within the form of the novel and never dominates the autonomy of the narrative. It is here that Böll's creative genius appears: the novel "frames" some public events but never depends on them for its effectiveness.

Insofar as it is a new novel, then, *Gruppenbild mit Dame* flagrantly disregards the sense of the well-made conclusion, of character bound by social convention, or of constraint by external cause. Considering this novel as a new novel assists us in constructing an alternative to interpretations which find a technical flaw in the "petering out" of the novel at the end.¹⁸ The lack of a sense of an ending, in this new novel, heightens the awareness that stories and concepts—like that of "negative dialectics" to which we will turn in the next section—are themselves part of the reality that calls for their construction. At the end of the novel, for example, Au. is anticipating but has not achieved the state of being a d.u.a.¹⁹

"NEGATIVE DIALECTICS" AND GRUPPENBILD MIT DAME

We are now prepared to ask, what is the central focus of this text—what social reality does it contain? In response to this question, I wish initially to tease out a first level meaning of the term "dialectic" as it appears in three different passages in the novel. On each occasion, it refers to an uncritical reaction to stimulus.

The term is used early in the novel when Boris gets into difficulty with his fellow POW's because he provided valuable information to the commissar of the camp: "because he was so

defense—for a book entitled *Safe Conduct for Ulrike Meinhof: An Article and Its Effects* (which I have been unable to locate). Subsequently, a novel and a film based on the incident, *The Lost Honor of Katerina Blum*, have appeared. See also his "Will Ulrike Meinhof Gnade oder freies Geleit?" (1971) in Böll, *Neue politische und literarische Schriften* (Köln, Verlag, Kiepenheuer and Witsch, 1973), pp. 230-8.

¹⁸ *Time Magazine's* finding the ending to be "banal" is one example of a superficial reading of the novel. See *Time* 101 (May 28, 1973), p. 99.

¹⁹ The reviewer of *Group Portrait with Lady* in *The Economist* 247 (May 26, 1975), offers an interesting speculation about Böll on the d.u.a. issue:

It seems altogether possible that, in Böll's eyes, the Au. is one of the hollow men as surely as he is the ghost of the Böll who has just won the Nobel Prize with his most elaborate d.o.a. [defiant overachievement]—preparatory perhaps, to embracing that "desired state of d.u.a.," which in Böll's case could only take the form of dropping out. Writers do from time to time renounce their work; and it would be unlike the uncompromising Böll to continue with his if he had found at its centre the same lacuna as he has identified and attacked in society at large (p. 116).

salubrious to Viktor he naturally lost the confidence of the others—that goes without saying once you know the POW dialectic.” In this instance the term indicates the prisoners’ reaction against the special privileges, even those which accrue to their general welfare. Next, during Au.’s meeting with Klementina, the latter tries to explain why Rahel (a nun formerly a Jewish convert, whose grave miraculously sprouts roses wherever it is moved) was so poorly treated in her convent during the war: “since I assume you have some small measure of insight into the dialectics of motivation I needn’t explain that if one wishes to save a person from concentration camp one is more or less obliged to hide that person under the concentration-camp conditions.” The nuns’ cruel measures toward Rahel in order to protect themselves and her from the Nazis are referred to as the “dialectics of motivation.” Finally, toward the end of the book, the intern’s letter to Leni, informing her of the cause of her friend (a prostitute) Margret’s death, reports that the silly fad of creating names for the male sex organ—to be “expected in girls’ boarding schools”—here became a “dialectic carry-over” from the VD patients to the nursing nuns. The “dialectic carry-over” designates the nursing-sisters’ and patients’ imitation of boarding school vocabulary, which grotesquely causes Margret, who has extraordinary modesty, to die from blushing.

Common to all three instances is the perpetuation of a state worse than the first: one from unrecognized jealousy, one from fear and fanaticism, and one from childishness. As such, they may be called the “dialectics of immediacy.” In other words, the term as it appears in the novel designates, on a first level of meaning, an ironically reactive justification of unreflective human behavior. On this level, it hardly warrants further reflection. But if we attend to the transferral of the initiation of action from Leni to Au. in Parts Three and Four, we may formulate the overall plot in terms of a theoretical “dialectics of reflection.” In other words, by enticing us with the metalinguistic term, dialectics, the novel both repels and invites thought in that direction. It repels us from trying to understand merely by multiplying examples, since it is already clear from the three instances in the novel what constitutes dialectics in the popular understanding, namely, a retaliation in kind. At the same time, the effect of Au.’s investigation of Leni’s life upon his own life, which is left unexplained in the novel, is to attract us to the need for a concept, to create a space for “thinking more” and differently about the term “dialectics.”

The search for an appropriate concept through which to "think more" about the dialectical effects of the novel as a whole has led me to review Theodor Adorno's idea of "negative dialectics." In his book by that title, Adorno describes the appropriateness of negative dialectics.²⁰ First of all, because facts take primacy over concepts, negative dialectics doubts that theory can change contradictory practice (xi). Second, if it is true that philosophical thinking is ordinarily done in terms of a model, then negative dialectics attempts to be, by contrast, an "ensemble of models" (29). At the same time since "concepts . . . are moments of the reality that requires their conceptualization" (11), in negative dialectics concepts are to be understood as referring essentially to nonconceptualities in the sense that reality always surpasses concept. Third, even when concepts are acknowledged to be part of a "non-conceptual whole," they by and large are still understood to emphasize the principle of identity. In negative dialectics, however, conceptuality is given a "turn toward nonidentity" (12). On the one hand, concept anticipates being halted by image and reflection. On the other hand, concept risks being objectionable—risks in the sense that "to the unobjectionable nothing happens."

Besides inviting us to understand the phenomenon of effect and change in Leni and Au., the term negative dialectics also assists us in constructing the social reality of *Gruppenbild mit Dame*. For the novel most certainly is more about Leni's social context than it is about Leni as an individual. The Lady of the Portrait is only *with the Group*. Only on one level—that of observation—does she constitute the major focus of the book. Notwithstanding the emphasis on the group, the novel is infuriatingly mute with respect to a perspective for understanding either the events of the war or of present-day Germany.²¹ Böll's technique is to suggest the societal dimension through the experience of individual subjects. Trustworthy subjects are usually given an occasion to retrieve their innocence, but this toleration of change in individuals never implies, for Böll, optimism with regard to the

²⁰T. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics* (New York: Seabury, 1973). Originally published as *Negative Dialektik* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1966). See also Adorno's introduction to a book of critical essays on Böll's work, "Keine Würdigung," *Aufsätze-Kritiken-Reden I*, pp. 7-9.

²¹Arnold calls attention to the indirectness with which Böll's novels are political: Bölls neuer Roman ist also durchaus politisch, . . . aber wie stets bei Böll wird das Politische nicht unmittelbar geboten, sondern es wird mittelbar evoziert. Für viele seiner Leser mag das entschieden wirkungsvoller sein als das direkte politische Bekenntnis (*op. cit.*, p. 45).

social whole. Instead, we are left with seemingly inevitable and ineradicable social "blind spots." Although we cannot go farther than this on the level of description, there is yet a further question that can be asked. Do these social "blind spots" have to do only with the characters' lack of moral energy to reconceive their social roles other than in terms of dialectics of immediacy? Or are the lapses from societal well-being also reflected in the very structure of the novel?

Let us recall the kind of world in which Leni resides at the beginning of the novel. In it radical expectation is complemented by radical action. Her radical expectation is couched in extravagant religious symbolism: we are told that she "would not be in the least surprised, let alone alarmed, if one day the Virgin Mary's Son were to be introduced to her on the TV screen after sign-off time." Before we have time to wonder at the significance of this information, Au. remarks: "Whether indeed she is waiting for this is not known to this reporter. It would certainly come as no surprise to him after all that he has meanwhile found out."²² What is to be taken seriously in Böll's symbol is that Leni persists in her style of life—precisely because it flows from her radical expectations—in the face of danger:

What the people in Leni's environment really want is for her to be either eliminated or removed; the cry is even heard as she passes: "Get lost!" or "Get out of Here!," and there is evidence that from time to time someone demands that she be gassed; this wish has been verified, although whether such a possibility exists is not known to the Au.; all he can add is that the wish is expressed with vehemence (5).

After the manner of negative dialectics, her radical expectations challenge both popular belief and her own self-certainty. ("She had meanwhile . . . yielded to a man . . . ; true, she did not know whether this was really the right man, the one whom she was so ardently awaiting. . . .") In other words, her radical expectations enable her to aspire to what seems objectionable. In this sense, Leni is both the object of irony and the containment of it.

But, lest we think that only the naive—and it is questionable that Leni is naive in the face of her understanding of her experi-

²²On the last page of the novel, K., who has been "silently watching Leni paint and helping the artist . . . has, of course, won the privilege of seeing the Madonna appear on television. Her comment is almost too prosaic to warrant printer's ink: 'It is herself, Leni herself, appearing to herself because of some still unexplained reflections.'" Au. wryly acknowledges the "still unexplained reflections," together with some "thunderclouds of foreboding." At this point, the three-fold allusion to Leni's "statuesqueness" might fancifully be related to the reference to the Madonna.

ences that is indicated by her silence, her lack of bitterness, and her willingness to enter into an intimate relationship once more—are capable of such radical expectations, we have Au., who initially represents the ultra-reasonable, to consider. The novel does not explain why he willingly immerses himself in the task of writing, or why, knowing that he had “lost his nerve,” almost immediately begins to acquire nerve. What is the upshot of his taking on a new identity? Surely, we cannot speak only of an “inner change” since personal perspective or action in this novel, most especially Au.’s, is inextricable from its social perspective. Radical expectation for Au. is to have his careful sense of fact and judgment sublated into a capacity for decisive action. This is most dramatically demonstrated in chapter nine when he constitutes the single opposition in the Hoyser conclave which is to decide Leni’s financial fate. Just as Leni and Boris have quietly gone against conventional sexual mores by reversing the roles of initiator and provider, so, too, Au., although he has been rejected by Klementina and, in a different sense, superseded by her in the completion of the novel, begins to move decisively in the direction of a new identity, that is, of being a d.u.a.

This last identity has immense significance on the social level: we recall, for example, the psychological caseworker’s concern that d.u.a. would “burden our . . . society with serious problems.” To be an underachiever is to thwart the establishment mentality bent upon achievement-orientation, which not only gives little thought to the consequences it perpetrates for humans, but eventually becomes incapable of reflection. That the latter orientation is itself more dangerous than d.u.a. for society is made clear in the transcripts of Nazi war criminals cited earlier in the book. D.u.a., then, turns out to be more than a theory since, as *deliberate* underachievement, it requires participation in a dialectics of reflection.

Moreover, if one wishes to understand the vision of social reality held out in this novel, it is necessary but not sufficient to attribute vulnerability and indestructibility to Leni, as one critic has.²³ One must also take into account Au.’s reflectiveness, his total servitude to truth—in short, the artist’s labor of imagination and action.²⁴ By means of low-key humor and high irony, the novel

²³ Interestingly enough, these are passive and negative characteristics, respectively. One wonders how much the well-intentioned critic who understood Leni in these terms might be reflecting a sexist prejudice. See H. Bernhard, *op. cit.*, p. 341.

²⁴ Böll has frequently been derogatorily referred to as a moralist. In response to

shows that it is always too late to speak only of *theoria* informed by *praxis* and *praxis* informed by *theoria*. For intrinsic to both is naiveté—that primitive belief, that which we are—which is the ground of meaningful and moving symbols for thematic reflection.

This seems to suggest that the basic dialectic is always between life and its many possible expressions. The term “negative” is appropriately introduced as a critical element to keep maximally and theoretically open the many possibilities of expression. We have seen how the dialectics of immediacy contrasts with Leni’s and Au.’s actions. Both Leni and later Au. respond first sensitively and then creatively in accordance with positive good for themselves, and finally reflectively and decisively in accordance with the exigencies of each inherently ambiguous situation. The dialectics of immediacy, on the other hand, results in the loss of freedom of action, since one is forever enslaved to the primary opposition. Only for those who have a creative freedom from within is energy generated to go beyond the dialectic and to sustain the ensemble of all desirable possibilities.

The hypothesis of fate, then, becomes intrinsic to Leni’s and Au.’s authenticity and, by extension, the social reality of the novel as well. Only in entertaining maximum kinds of possibilities for one’s self and one’s social world does one find the conditions for freedom. And only in engaging these conceived possibilities does one find that one’s energy for continually going beyond the dialectic is beneficently sustained.

Gruppenbild mit Dame does call for a negative dialectics—that is, a world in which one will be capable of conceiving a number of analyses of possibilities and of pursuing true probabilities in spite of obstacles. Because negative dialectics almost always involves transcending the status quo, the “miracle of the roses,” as one of the explicitly religious images in this novel, is simultaneously satirical and serious—satirical with respect to the liberal understanding of the supernatural and serious in its intent to re-present the bursting forth of new possibilities beyond the status

a suggestion that he was “the conscience of the nation,” Böll replied,

What a horrible definition, so characteristic of German idealism! I do not consider myself the least bit as a moralist, but as a player. Essentially it is the game with forms, with personages, with situations, that please me in writing. I have a horror of didactic literature. If I appear to be a moralist, it is completely unconsciously. (Quoted in Jean-Louis de Rambures, “Heinrich Böll on Work, Faith, Germany: An Interview,” *Commonweal* 100 [May 10, 1974], 236-38).

See also Böll’s “Das Ende der Moral” (1952), *Aufsätze - Kritiken - Reden*, II, pp. 9-13.

quo.²⁵ All of the traditional religious symbolism functions in the novel as that indomitable belief that newness can break into known reality. However naively or critically this symbol is understood by those who open themselves to most radical change and therefore most dramatically re-present the symbol in their own lives, the symbol stands irrefutably as the horizon or "limit" of all other calculated and fully explained realities which emerge within the text—both social and individual.

From the beginning of Au.'s narration, Leni has been painting a picture entitled "part of the Retina of the Left Eye of the Virgin Mary alias Rahel." By the end of the novel, only a fraction of Leni's picture has been completed, in spite of her having spent years at her "rod and cone" painting. So too, only a fraction of the possibilities to which Leni herself has given rise are presented in *Group Portrait With Lady*. The newest story remains to be written by any R. (reader) who, like Au. and K., discovers in him/herself the nerve to write it.

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²⁵The passage is as follows:

A report for each year and always the same: roses suddenly sprouting out of the ground in December. . . . We have gone to desperate lengths, lengths you might even feel were macabre, we have exhumed her, transferred—er, her remains, which were unquestionably in a state of decay corresponding to the time of her death, to other burial grounds. . . . What would become of liturgical reform, of recent demonstrations of the physico-biological plausibility of so-called miracles! . . . Do you know who it was that claimed to be moved by it, who introduced the supernatural element? The botanists and biologists, not the theologians. . . . It's like witchcraft.

Elsewhere in the novel, scientific perspectives are in opposition to the magnitude and complexity of the phenomena they attempt to understand. Remotely pertaining to the understanding of this passage is also Au.'s observation that K. could not differentiate between knowledge and faith (p. 368).

The reference to witchcraft has an interesting corollary in Leni's being referred to as a witch at least twice in the novel.