

The Visions of Heinrich Boell

Compiled from press services

HEINRICH BOELL came home from war scarred inside and out with wounds and rage and began to set it all down on paper. He rose up, puckish and bushy-browed, as postwar Germany's first angry man.

What flowed from ex-soldier Boell's pen over the next 33 years, from 1949 to 1972, was a nightmarish vision of collapsing society -- poignant portraits of lonely losers ruined by war and war-lovers, tricked by hypocrisy, driven mad by human coldness and indifference.

Boell, often rendered in English simply as Boll, last week received the Nobel Prize for literature.

In "The Clown," perhaps his best-known work, a sick and drunken mime named Hans Schnier tries to rebuild his empty life by the simple device of returning home and calling up his old friends on the telephone. The voices are cold, self-centered, uninterested in Hans. He finishes mad, strumming a guitar on the steps of a railroad station in his clown make-up, fetching a few unwanted coins from passersby.

In "Billiards at Half-Past Nine," a young architect trained in explosives to aid the wartime German army uses his skills to blow up a church built by his own father. That was his protest against a society that cared more for preserving its monuments than preventing human suffering.

This was pungent stuff that drew praise from like-minded critics and angered those who preferred Germany's wartime past -- and its capitalist present -- left alone.

BOELL BECAME wealthy, famous and controversial, a darling of the intellectual left, a favorite in the Soviet Union and a devil to the conservative right. But they never mellowed him.

In recent years he has raised his voice repeatedly on domestic political issues, though he admits himself that he does not understand politics. He has regarded it

with cool detachment as well as with engagement.

When Beate Klarsfeld, a housewife-turned political activist, publicly slapped former Chancellor Kurt-Georg Kiesinger as a reminder of his Nazi past, Boell outraged a large segment of German public opinion by sending her flowers.

Several years ago, he said in a TV interview that a writer could only be engaged indirectly in politics and he must have confidence in the indirect effect. Otherwise he must become a politician. The sole duty of a writer is a self-appointed one: to write. And the more engaged that he believes and feels himself, the more he should seek expression.

And yet, Boell has taken to the rostrum to voice his bitter opposition to West Germany's state-of-emergency laws and in the late 1960s he identified himself with the leftist outer-parliamentary opposition.

Last January, aged 54 and with some 40 volumes behind him, Boell attacked police methods being used in the hunt for a gang of West German "urban guerrillas" led by Andreas Baader and Ulrike Meinhof as creating a national psychosis.

"Their manifesto (calling for the violent destruction of capitalist society) is a declaration of war by mixed-up theorists, by persons who, between being prosecuted and denounced, have gotten themselves driven into a corner and whose theories sound much more violent than their practice," Boell wrote in the weekly magazine Der Spiegel.

Several months later, West Germany was hit by a series of terrorist bombings and the gang was blamed.

DURING THE stepped up manhunt, police invaded Boell's country retreat in the Eifel Mountains after receiving a false tip that he was hiding gang members there. Boell protested and said he could not go on living and working in West Germany under such conditions. The establishment exploded at Boell.

Members of parliament, policemen and editorial writers cited evidence that the gang had robbed banks, bombed two U.S. Army posts with fatal results and shot it out with police many times. They demanded Boell eat his words.

He did, but only Boell-style, with a caustic back-of-the-hand at his critics. "I meant to appeal to reason and I showed my emotions," he said, "although emotions here seem to be deemed a kind of syphilis of the soul."

He said afterward he was very hurt by the reaction and would not involve himself in political matters again.

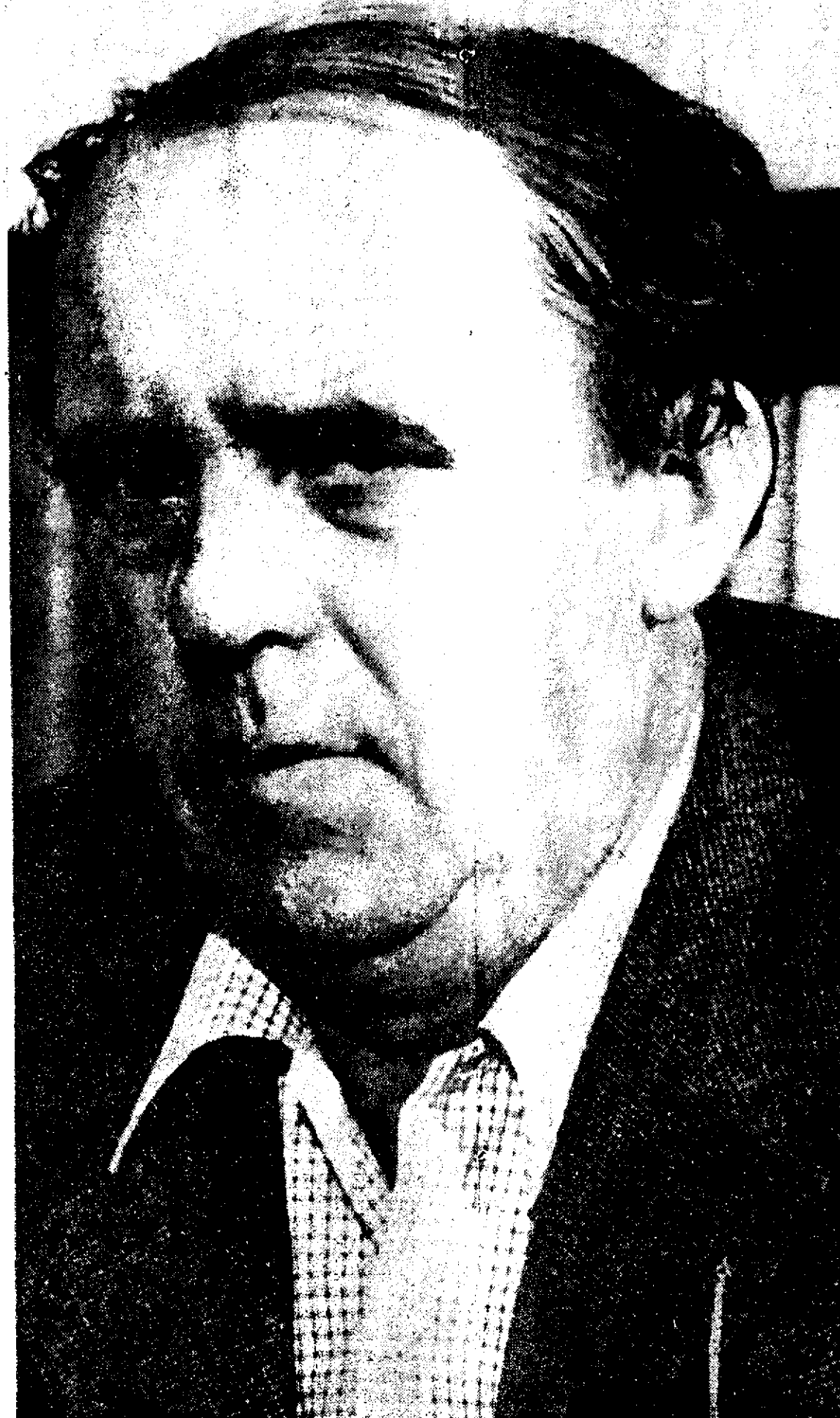
But this autumn he entered the "Citizens for Brandt" independent voters group supporting his friend Willy Brandt for a second term as chancellor. Two weeks ago he appeared at the Social Democratic Party convention in Dortmund to speak up for "the respected, dear Herr Brandt." The bulk of his address was against "violence," which, he asserted, was practiced by the right-wing German press as well as by big business in West Germany.

MORE THAN any other living German, Boell is a national writer in the sense that his works are read with equal intensity and affection in East as well as West Germany.

He is also one of the few West German writers to be published in the German Communist state, and when he travels to East Berlin to give readings the lecture halls are filled even though no publicity is allowed for his appearances there.

The 54-year-old Boell is a member of Germany's "war generation" and most of his writing devolves on World War II -- the Nazis who waged and celebrated it, the soldiers who were killed in it, the parents and children left homeless by it. Even his latest novel, "Group Picture With Lady," published in 1971, and described as his most important book, centers mainly on the affects of war on his heroine, Leni, and the loss of her Russian lover-prisoner.

His main work depicts the terrible fall and difficult rebirth of the German people



Nobel Prize winner Boell: postwar Germany's first angry man.

and this is probably what has made him so popular there and beyond Germany.

His acceptance by the Communist authorities in East Europe is all the more remarkable in view of Boell's devout Roman Catholic faith.

But he is no friend of the Roman Catholic hierarchy, either in his writings or in his daily life. Earlier this month he was served with a notice from the Cologne revenue office that he faced confiscations for refusing to pay his 10 per cent church tax.

Boell, who has a reputation as one of the most generous men in Germany when it comes to helping distressed individuals, defends his action as a protest against "the fiscalization of faith."

He told the vicar general of Cologne, Peter Nettekoven, a schoolmate of 40 years ago: "I don't want to leave the church and I don't want to pay. Make confiscations or throw me out." The collections are being made by a court.

BOELL HAS BEEN a stubborn though gentle rebel in many other ways for most of his life and the heroes of many of his books reflect this attitude -- "The Clown" who refuses to participate in the moral crimes of his well-to-do family, the soldier in "End of a Service Trip" who sets fire to his jeep in protest against a senseless army order.

He has also used his positions as Germany's best known author and president of the International PEN Club since 1971 to

assist oppressed and suppressed writers in East Europe.

Peter Huchel, the septuagenarian poet who is considered the greatest contemporary German lyricist, was allowed to leave East Germany in 1971 for the West after years of being kept silent because of the tacit intervention of Boell. Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, whom Boell greatly admires, is also understood to have benefited from his support.

At least one of Boell's critics has professed to see in Boell evidence of those petty bourgeois values that the writer satirizes in his fiction.

Boell seems to delight in paradoxes. Although professing opposition to the dictatorial and imperialist manifestations of communism, he writes in "Billiards" that every decent person was a Communist at one time.

With some regret, he told an interviewer several years ago that, "with a few exceptions, the members of my generation never got to be Communists. They missed what I consider a necessary intellectual process . . . probably . . . I would have become a Communist, but I was never one and am not one. Perhaps I am a frustrated Communist."

Although a welcomed visitor in Eastern Europe, he makes no secret of his distaste for socialist realism in the arts.

"Man really does not live by bread alone," Boell said giving voice to one of his many paradoxes. "He needs solace and he finds it in the disconsolation of his art."

HEINRICH BOELL was born in Cologne, Dec. 21, 1917, and Cologne and the Rhineland have constituted his literary universe.

Boell finished high school in 1937 and started an apprenticeship with a book dealer. He was an ordinary draftee in the war, serving longest on the Russian front. He was wounded three times.

Soon after release from an American prisoner-of-war camp in 1947, he started studying German literature at Cologne. But when his first short story was published later in that year he turned to writing full time. His works have been translated into more than a dozen languages and he himself has translated several American novels into German with the help of his wife.

He married the former Annemarie Cech in 1942. They have three sons, Raimund, Rene and Vincent, all in their twenties.

When word of his Nobel Prize reached him, Boell was in Athens, en route to Israel to visit Vincent, who is working in a Jerusalem institute for the blind as a penitent for crimes committed by Nazis in World War II.

Cologne's bomb rubble and drafty sausage stands of the early post-war years are the setting of Boell's first major novel in 1953, "And Never Said a Single Word."

He keeps an apartment there on Huelcherath Street. But he is to be seen as often in his old country farmhouse in the tiny hamlet of Langenbroich to the southwest atop one of the Eifel hills. He has called that "my favorite landscape," and has written movingly about the impact of war on the countryside.

He also maintains a cottage at Dugort on Ireland's Achill Island, the setting of some of the sketches in his 1957 "Irish Diary." Like the other Boell dwellings it is simply, almost austere furnished. But its bookshelves contain hundreds of pocket editions of old and newer classics.

FOR ALL HIS travels, to the Soviet Union, United States, Southeastern Europe and the Middle East, Boell remains a son of the Rhineland, his speech marked by the soft and melodious Cologne accent.

He is a big shuffling man, close to six feet tall, brown eyed, nearly bald, and usually to be seen smoking a black tobacco cigarette. He used to enjoy beer and schnapps, but physicians have restricted him and he concentrates now on coffee and cake.

He has the face of a skeptical imp; thick brows and pouches frame his dark pop-eyes and the mouth tends to turn down at the corners.

He cares little for fashion or grooming. Cigarette ashes often smudge his rumpled clothing. He shuns neckties and appears seldom to use a comb.

He prizes casual privacy and ducks most invitations to formal gatherings, even from Chancellor Willy Brandt.

"Usually, when the time to go comes around, I am unshaven," he once explained. "I really don't feel like shaving. On the other hand, if I appear unshaven and without a necktie, other guests would consider it an affront to the host. So I just stay away."

In contrast to the flamboyant and Rabelaisian Guenter Grass, Boell is soft-spoken and his ironic prose is unassuming and clear like Rhine wine. He looks like he could be the model for one of those portraits of a puckish monk in a Rhineland wine cellar.

Interpreter of a society

By VICTOR LANGE
Written for
the New York Times

IT MUST SEEM extraordinary that among that remarkable group of great masters who have during the last half-century provided the decisive impulses to the literature of our time only two Germans should have been given the Nobel Prize.

Neither Rilke nor Hofmannsthal, neither Musil nor Broch were ever serious candidates -- only Thomas Mann and -- though a Swiss citizen -- Hermann Hesse received the award.

If Heinrich Boell has now been recognized as a conspicuous representative of contemporary German letters it is a recognition that comes not to an inventor of formal aesthetic devices but to a chronicler and interpreter of a society that has, in defeat and recovery, reflected the moral issues that in one way or another concern us all.

LIKE GUENTER Grass or Wue Johnson, Boell is, throughout his work, concerned with the impact of the war, its horror and its chaotic and debilitating consequences upon the Germans after 1949.

But, more specifically than most of his contemporaries, he defines the oppressive effects of every sort of institutionalized power. He delineates in a superb array of figures the limited but indispensable space within which we may (or must) assert the small ingredient of subjective integrity that is left to us as members of a community in which binding or redeeming social norms are no longer available.

With his first novel "Adam, Where Art Thou?" (1951) he opened that series of searching, often bitter and satirical investigations into the German postwar mentality in which false heroism, deceit, hypocrisy and obtuseness determine the lives of men and women, warped and crippled by their memories, whose horizon of gloom and despair is relieved only in moments of hope and decency, of courage or dissent.

They are figures "Acquainted With Night," (the title of his second

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and novel, 1953) who recapitulate their past lives, maintain themselves as "suffering lambs" or as ruthless worshippers of the power which has emerged in a new but false constellation of success that the German postwar society has begun to evolve.

In "Billiards at Half-Past Nine" (1959) and "The Clown" (1963) Boell's panoramic view encompasses once again, interlocking past and present, now boldly satirical and more complex in his narrative technique, the prevailing political system. "The Clown" is the "natural" human being in a world of hypocrisy, ambition and sterile intellectualism, an outsider who protests against the defective community in which he is condemned to exist.

THAT FATAL antithesis between the good, poor and powerless on the one side and the corrupt, rich and mighty on the other, that is so characteristic of Boell's thinking has at times given an unfashionable plainness to his narratives and has offered resolutions that have seemed sentimental and emotional.

Yet, Boell, though intensely preoccupied with political issues, has never felt it important to articulate in his novels the structure of the institutions that produce the moral dilemmas and the desperate uncertainties of his characters.

He has, instead, especially in his more recent novels, "End of a Mission" (1966) and, perhaps his most intricate and most accomplished novel, which is not yet available in English, "Group Portrait With Lady" (1971) offered accounts, sometimes moving, often exceedingly funny, of the precarious relationship of the individual to the concrete conditions of his social life.

He has attacked those who in the abundance of a fat consumer society forget their own insufficiencies, their obtuseness and their dulled sense of communal responsibility.

Boell is above all a moralist whose critical intelligence and whose profound religious commitment have produced, beyond all ideological perspectives, and beyond any faith in abstract principles of order, novels and stories that may in some respects seem conservative, but that are bound to move us by their rare compassion and their integrity of vision and purpose.



Boell with fellow author Guenter Grass and "the respected, dear Herr Brandt."