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Casting a Critical eye on his own Church : Heinrich Boll's "The Clown"

Eamon Maher

Technological University Dublin, eamon.maher@tudublin.ie

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Writers on Catholicism 7

In this series, Eamon Maher looks at one book by an author who was marked by Catholicism

Though himself a Catholic, Heinrich Böll's *The Clown* is a robust attack on what he sees as the abuses within the German Catholic Church, writes Eamon Maher



The German writer Heinrich Böll (1917-1985) would be known to a lot of us in this country as a result of his *Irish Journal*, which describes his trip here in the 1950s. He was born into a liberal, Catholic family just prior to the end of World War I in Cologne and, in keeping with the views of his family, he would remain opposed to war and violence all his life. His pacifist convictions did not prevent him from being drafted into the Wehrmacht during World War II, however, and he served in France, Romania and the Soviet Union before being finally captured by the Americans in 1945. He won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1972 and his corpus of work bears witness to his strongly felt Catholic beliefs. He admitted the debt he owed in this regard to the French writers Bloy, Péguy, Bernanos and Mauriac.

Like his French counterparts, Böll was always a questioning Catholic, someone who couldn't just passively accept pronouncements handed down by Rome. He chose instead to tease out his own version of what it

meant to be a Catholic in a world (particularly in his native Germany) that had been subjected to the trauma of war and the resulting disillusionment with authority, be it political or ecclesiastical.

Given his robust attacks on abuses within the German Catholic Church (which we will observe in some detail in *The Clown*), the romanticised version of Ireland he produced in the *Irish Journal* is difficult to comprehend. Because all was far from right with Irish society during

the 1950s, with massive emigration, great poverty and little hope for most of the population. The high numbers attending Mass and the sacraments, the spiritual fervour Böll detected among the people is probably responsible to a large extent for the tinted glasses through which he viewed the Emerald Isle. On arriving in Dublin, he cannot get over the seriousness with which people take religion:

"Schoolboys with hurling sticks under their arms pray at the Stations of the Cross; tiny oil lamps burn in dark corners in front of the Sacred Heart, the Little Flower, St Anthony, St Francis; here religion is savoured to the last drop."

Little opposition

What Böll failed to appreciate was that a lot of the religious fervour in Ireland at this time was largely the result of a collusion between Church and State who conspired to ensure that the majority religion



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would hold centre stage at all times. There was very little opposition to the status quo in evidence, no real public debate on issues pertaining to religion and morality. The vast number of people emigrating did not prevent an unusually high birth rate, and an Irishwoman Böll met on the ferry told him she didn't believe in God, or in Cathleen ní Houlihan, the fictitious land of Saints and Scholars: "I've a brother myself who is a priest, and two cousins, they're the only ones in the whole family who have cars'. (Journal, p.4)

The priesthood was definitely a guarantee of social advancement at a time of severe deprivation. Böll does acknowledge that the view of the outsider is often different to that of the person actually living in a country:

"For someone who is Irish and a writer, there is probably much to provoke him in this country, but I am not Irish and have sufficient grounds for provocation in the country about which and in whose language I write; in fact, the Catholic provocation in the country whose language I write is enough for me." (Journal, p.127)

John McGahern mentioned to me in an interview once that Böll's Journal was 'a love affair with Ireland.' It is hard to argue with such an

assessment, especially when coming from a writer who encountered such intransigence and intolerance in Ireland as McGahern did. All of which leads us on nicely to how Böll portrayed Catholicism in his own country.

The Clown (1963) is a novel which is scathing in its attack on hypocrisy, conformity and self-satisfaction among the Catholics who feature in it. The main consciousness through whom the story is narrated, Schnier, a clown by profession, is shown to be the most discerning of all the characters. He is someone who was sent by his Protestant parents to a Catholic school for

reasons of denominational tolerance but who never caught the religious virus:

'I am not religious myself, I don't even go to church, and I make use of the sacred texts and songs for therapeutic purposes: they help me to overcome the two afflictions Nature has saddled me with: depression and headaches.'

Catholic guilt

His problems with Catholicism began in earnest after he met and fell in love with Marie, a woman who suffered from an inordinate sense of Catholic guilt. She felt uneasy to be involved in an 'irregular' relationship with a man with no religious convictions and is haunted by a sense of her own sinfulness and spiritual unworthiness. Troubled by his mistress's unease because preoccupied above all else with her happiness, Schnier agrees to convert to



Catholicism before they get married. The meetings of the 'Group of Progressive Catholics' inflame his antipathy to what he perceives to be the 'circus' performed by those people who use religion for their own purposes.

From the opening pages of the novel, we discover that Marie has left Schnier for an orthodox Catholic, Züpfner, whom she accompanies to Rome to be

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married. The thought of them together causes great anguish in Schnier. He thinks back to the first time he and Marie made love and how she started to cry afterwards. When asked the reason for her tears, she answered: "For Heaven's sake, I'm a Catholic, you know I am." (p.41) His fate was sealed from an early stage. As the person responsible for taking both her virginity and her religious piety from Marie, he was indelibly associated in her mind with sin and guilt.

There is much detailed analysis of the hero's slide into an alcoholic haze through which he relives many events in his life: his problematic relationship with a pious and mean-spirited mother and adulterous father, his encounters with the priests and Catholic circle frequented by Marie. He is obviously someone who has very little time for posturing, something to which, given his experience of the

stage, he is very sensitive. Here is what he has to say to a priest, Sommerwild:

"To listen to your sermons, anyone would imagine your heart is as big as a barn, but then you go around whispering and conniving in hotel lobbies. While I am earning my daily bread by the sweat of my brow, you are having consultations with my wife without listening to my side. Unjust and two-faced, but what can you expect from an esthete?" (*The Clown*, p.123)

Unhealthy approach

He refers to his 'wife' in the biblical sense here. Schnier views Catholics as hypocrites who prey on the religious scruples of people like Marie. He also has issues with their unhealthy approach to sex:

"In your heart of hearts you people regard it [sex] as a form of self-defence against nature – or you kid yourselves and separate the physical from that other part of it – but it is precisely that other part of it that complicates matters." (*The Clown*, p.124)

The 'other part' to which he refers is undoubtedly the soul. In Schnier's view, when two people give themselves freely to each other in love, there can be no sin. Marie has been taught that sex outside of marriage is inherently wrong. Such a legalistic and inflexible approach drives Schnier to the brink. He has more in common with people like Marie's Marxist father, Derkum:

"He [Derkum] was no longer a Catholic, he had left the church long ago, and he had spoken contemptuously to me [Schnier] of the 'hypocritical sexual morals of bourgeois society' and was furious 'with the swindle the priests carry on with marriage.'" (*The Clown*, p.38)

Raw pain

Long after his relationship with Marie has ended, Schnier's pain is still raw. His father comes to visit him and offer comfort but is frightened when asked for money – he is an important figure in

media circles. He offers to pay for training to help his son become a successful clown and fails to see that it is not success Schnier craves, but Marie. His brother, Leo, who is studying to become a priest, does not even take the time to visit him – what sort of Christian witness is this you may ask?

Schnier is more vehement in his unbelief than the Catholics he meets are in their faith. After a talk he gives on the topic 'Can Modern Art be Religious?', the priest Sommerwild asks Schnier if he thinks he was good. When told by Schnier that he never considered him any good, his disappointment is plain to see. 'The Clown', he whose profession involves playing a role as actor and comedian, is less concerned with his impact on the public than the priest.

That a writer like Böll should take such a critical view of Catholicism in Germany while maintaining a romantic view of Irish practices is somewhat paradoxical. At the end of *The Clown*, the hero decides he will pretend to be a Catholic: 'to be a successful hypocrite and get as much fun out of it as possible.' (p.221) *The Irish Journal* is as unquestioning and positive in its treatment of Catholicism in Ireland as *The Clown* is uncompromising and vicious about abuses in Germany. Note how Böll relates an amusing anecdote of a young woman reading an article on religious tolerance in West Germany:

"For the first time in the history of that country – the young woman reads – there is complete freedom of religious observance in West Germany. Poor Germany, the young woman thinks, and adds a 'Kindly Jesus, have mercy on them.'" (Journal, p.69)

One could profitably enquire as to what was so much better about the regime that held sway in Ireland at that time. *The Clown* is an important book with Catholicism as its core theme. I recommend that readers of *Reality* get their hands on a copy in order to make up their own minds as to its merits. ✦