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## Böll on Joyce, Joyce on Böll

### A Gnomonical Reading of Heinrich Böll's "Die schönsten Füße der Welt"

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#### I

In the late 1960s Michel Foucault published his seminal essay on the author-function "Qu'est-ce qu'un auteur?" (1969; translated into English as "What Is an Author?", 1979<sup>1</sup>) where he proposes that we conceive of 'authors' less as actual persons and producers of (literary) texts than as fictitious entities constructed by critics through critical discourse. That this proposition has become a truism of sorts of contemporary literary theory makes it no less valid today than at its inception twenty years ago. In Foucault's own words, all

aspects of an individual which we designate as making him an author are only a projection, in more or less psychologizing terms, of the operations that we force texts to undergo, the connections that we make, the traits that we establish as pertinent, the continuities that we recognize, or the exclusions that we practice. (p. 150)

By consequence, an author's name is never "simply an element in a discourse," but rather "performs a certain role with regard to narrative discourse, assuring a classificatory function" (p. 147). That this untraditional notion of classification is closely allied with the more traditional notion of literary influence becomes apparent when Foucault defines two of the central operations which allow critics to muster the discursive force of the author-function as "the making of connections" and the "recognition of continuities." This suggests, too, that the greater and more influential an author is deemed to be, the greater her or his classificatory potential within the discourse of literary criticism will be (his own examples are Marx and Freud) – and the more disjunct the person tends to become from the persona of literary history.

It is therefore not surprising to find that, among twentieth-century English language authors, James Joyce provides not only one of the most illuminating examples of how critics instrumentalize literary genealogy, but also how, in doing so, they procure authority for themselves by usurping (an author's/an other's) authorship. A typical case in point is postwar German literary criticism, where – once the works of James Joyce had recognizably begun to impact German literature itself – it soon became standard practice among German literary critics (*Literaturwissenschaftler*) and literary reviewers (*Literaturkritiker*) to employ the cognomen 'Joyce' (the quotation

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<sup>1</sup> Michel Foucault, "What Is an Author?". In: Josué Harari (ed.), *Textual Strategies. Perspectives in Post-Structuralist Criticism* Ithaca 1979, pp. 141-160.

marks here signify not Joyce the writer but the author-function Joyce) as a kind of conventionalized stylistic label or token trademark with which to champion or torpedo the most recent literary output, depending on the whims of the critic or reviewer in question. Whenever a postwar German writer adopted a literary device that seemed ever so vaguely reminiscent of, for example, Joyce's use of interior monologue or word-play, *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake* were certain to be summoned as its source and inspiration – with all the implications of imitation and unoriginality, if not outright plagiarism. To cite just one example: a prime victim of this practice was Arno Schmidt, whose love-hate relationship with the Irish writer has frequently been the subject of Schmidt criticism.<sup>2</sup> Ever since his literary debut in 1949, Schmidt was accustomed to seeing his work compared to 'Joyce' – more often than not unfavourably. A typical such statement about Schmidt's affinity with 'Joyce' runs:

Schmidt ist also ein Erbe, kein "Avantgardist"; ein Nachfahre wie fast alle jüngeren Schriftsteller in Deutschland (und nicht nur in Deutschland), nur daß der Erblasser in diesem Falle nicht Rilke oder Eliot, Bert Brecht oder Valéry heißt, sondern Joyce. Schmidt hat innerhalb unserer jüngsten Literatur sozusagen eine empfindliche Lücke ausgefüllt: Die Joyce-Nachfolge war endlich fällig geworden. Und in der Tat: Das Druckbild ist dem des großen Iren und seiner amerikanischen Schüler täuschend ähnlich [...] Im Gegensatz zu den berühmten Amerikanern, die fast alle die Technik des *Ulysses* im Rahmen einer eigenen und originalen Thematik schöpferisch verarbeitet haben, begnügt sich Schmidt mit der bloßen Manier.<sup>3</sup>

The paradox is that, while this statement was published in 1951, it was not until the mid-1950s – we currently assume 1956 as the key moment – that Schmidt actually acquired and began to read the works of Joyce for the first time. Indeed, his initial reading of *Ulysses* may have been prompted precisely by Schmidt's urge to find out more about this numinous 'Joyce,' his putative literary precursor. But even if Holthusen was possibly right in proclaiming Schmidt as Joyce's heir and successor, his

<sup>2</sup> See the books and articles by Jörg Drews: "Work after the Wake. A First Look at the Influence of James Joyce on Arno Schmidt". In: *Bargfelder Bote* 19. 1977, pp. 3-14; "James Joyce und Arno Schmidt". In: Rudi Schweikert (ed.), *Zettelkasten 10. Aufsätze und Arbeiten zum Werk Arno Schmidts* Frankfurt 1991, pp. 183-196; "Schmidt und Joyce, und im Hintergrund der Dritte". In: *Protokolle* 1992, pp. 5-22. Also Stefan Gradmann, *Mythologie, Psychoanalyse und Zeichensynthese in Arno Schmidts Joyce-Rezeption* Munich 1986, David Hayman, "Schmidt / Joyce: A Case of Possession". In: *Review of Contemporary Fiction* 8. 1988, pp. 154-161; Friedhelm Rathjen, "Kains Panoptikum James Joyce in Arno Schmidts Erzählung 'Großer Kain'". In: Dietmar Noernng (ed.), *Zettelkasten 5. Aufsätze und Arbeiten zum Werk Arno Schmidts* Frankfurt 1987, pp. 78-103; Friedhelm Rathjen, » ... schlechte Augen«. *James Joyce bei Arno Schmidt vor "Zettels Traum"* Munich 1988; Fritz Senn, "Entzifferungen & Proben. *Finnegans Wake* in der Brechung von Arno Schmidt". In: *Bargfelder Bote* 27. 1978, pp. 3-14; Robert Weninger, *Arno Schmidts Joyce-Rezeption 1957-1970. Ein Beitrag zur Poetik Arno Schmidts* Frankfurt 1982.

<sup>3</sup> Hans Egon Holthusen, "Bären dienst für Arno Schmidt". In: Hans-Michael Bock (ed.), *Über Arno Schmidt. Rezensionen vom "Leviathan" bis zur "Julia"* Zurich 1984, pp. 19-20, here p. 20.

comment is double-edged, proposing descent as much as descendance. That is, comments of this kind were, no less in the context of the time as today, all too frequently employed to mete out praise or disapproval without requiring a critic to substantiate his or her claim.

A second application of the author-function is that, whenever palpable similarities of form, style, tone or mood obtain between literary texts, critics tend automatically to assume that they are the outgrowth of a direct influence. In Schmidt's case, even if we grant that his early prose style bears some resemblance with Joyce's use of interior monologue, we need not necessarily infer – indeed in Schmidt's case we must not infer – that this affinity proceeds from a firsthand knowledge of Joyce's oeuvre. Since Joyce's direct influence on Schmidt could only commence once Schmidt had actually read Joyce, any textual similarity before that juncture must be attributed to secondhand sources, for instance the writings of Alfred Döblin or Hans Henny Jahnn. Clearly, the itineraries and detours of influence are many, and in postwar Germany the stream of consciousness technique had entered into the anonymity of literary discourse long before Schmidt ventured upon Joyce's *Ulysses*.

There is, finally, one further dimension of the Joycean author-function that merits our attention here. An added misapprehension stems from the fact that literary critics and literary historians have all too obstinately attributed any influence that 'Joyce' exerted on later writers to the presumed successor's reading of either *Ulysses* or *Finnegans Wake*, or both. While the motivation behind this assumption hardly needs elaborating here – there can be no doubting the fact that *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake* belong among the most profoundly influential works of twentieth-century literature – it should not detract our attention from the equally important fact that Joyce's earlier works, too, may have impacted other writers' literary sensibilities. By the same token, it is self-evident that the kind of influence that emanates, for example, from Joyce's *Dubliners* is much more difficult to pinpoint, and the causal links and stylistic similarities are much more difficult to establish, than is the case with Joyce's later novels. Understandably, Joyce critics have for this reason shied away from exploring influence relationships of this sort. Consequently, while there is no lack of studies that discuss the impact of, say, *Ulysses* on German literature, foremost among them Breon Mitchell's monograph *James Joyce and the German Novel 1922-1933*,<sup>4</sup> and while we have an abundance of studies on the sources for Joyce's *Dubliners*, very little research has been invested into the influences that issued from Joyce's earliest stories. In the following, I would like to examine precisely one such instance where I believe it can be argued that Joyce's *Dubliners* has affected, however imperceptibly, the work of a prominent postwar German writer who has been associated less frequently with Joyce, at least up to the period of his career culminating in the mid-1950s with *Irisches Tagebuch* of 1957, namely Heinrich Böll. In the process, I hope to explore the limits, alongside some of the methodological gains and pitfalls, of the concept of literary influence, a concept that has been declared as dead as the author, but is as obstinately alive in current literary critical practice as is its authorial counterpart.

<sup>4</sup> Breon Mitchell, *James Joyce and the German Novel 1922-1933* Athens, Ohio 1976.

## II

Critics agree that the postwar German writer and Nobel prize winner of 1972, Heinrich Böll, underwent a period of transition during the early 1950s. With novels like *Und sagte kein einziges Wort* (1953) and *Haus ohne Hüter* (1954) he successfully abandoned his *Trümmertextur*-signature-style, which was permeated by the experience of war, death, and physical and spiritual deprivation. New motifs and more contemporary settings began coming to the fore as Böll increasingly lashed out both in his fiction and in his essays against the moral hypocrisy and inhuman materialism of the Phoenix-like economic resurgence of *Wirtschaftswunder* Germany. At the same time, a gradual but tangible shift could be observed away from the largely unsophisticated realism of Böll's literary beginnings to the much more elaborate forms and configurations of books like *Billard um halb zehn*, his landmark novel of 1959, which exhibits extensive symbolical cross-referencing, or *Gruppenbild mit Dame* (1971) with its unprecedented complexity of character portrayal. New too in this period is Böll's adoption, especially in his shorter prose, of caricaturistic and satirical modes of presentation.

It is my contention – but not my whole argument, as we shall soon see – that this shift or new departure can be attributed in part to Böll's introduction to the work of James Joyce, an event that took place at or around the time when Böll began travelling to Ireland in 1954. Indeed, as if in corroboration of this assumption, the earliest mentionings of Joyce that I have found occur in the second and third episodes of Böll's popular travelogue *Irishes Tagebuch*, published in 1957. It is worth noting, however, that neither of these two comments is formulated in a way that would presuppose more than a superficial knowledge of Joyce's works. And later, too, we find only the occasional allusion to or mention of the Irish writer in Böll's literary work. Nor does Joyce or his oeuvre figure prominently in Böll's countless essays and interviews on writers and writing. Even in the short article "Über den Roman" of 1960, which is devoted to the modern novel and would provide the natural occasion for an acknowledgement of this kind, Böll refers neither to *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* nor to *Ulysses*, not to mention *Finnegans Wake*. This fact in itself is quite astonishing, considering Böll's genuine interest in Irish literature; let us not forget, after all, that Böll went on in the sixties and seventies to translate, together with his wife, the works of numerous Irish writers into German, among them Brendan Behan, John Millington Synge and George Bernard Shaw. Tellingly maybe, the narrator of Böll's novel *Gruppenbild mit Dame* deems Leni Gruyten, the book's central character, no more than a 'potential' reader of Joyce. "Ganz sicher ist," he speculates, "– wären solche frivolen Bücher auch nur als potentielle Lektüre in ihre Nähe geraten –, sie wäre eher ein Proust- als eine Joyceleserin geworden".<sup>5</sup> We cannot exclude the possibility that Böll himself, like his fictional narrator, considered Joyce frivolous. And even if Böll is clearly cognizant of Joyce's achievement and literary reputation

<sup>5</sup> Heinrich Böll, *Gruppenbild mit Dame* Munich 1974 (quoted here from the 16th edition, 1988), p. 64.

(especially his reputation in Ireland at the time), his judgment might be based on hearsay and, for all we know, he may never have skipped through more than a couple of pages of Joyce's work. That is to say, the little information that we have at our disposal is neither very conclusive nor does it appear to take us very far. Joyce, it seems, leads an elusive or eclipsed life in Böll's literary household.

So why investigate this relationship at all? Why not simply close this chapter of Böll's possible literary ancestry and Joyce's possible impact? After all, what can Joyce's intransigent style and path-breaking formal experimentalism have in common with Böll's more often than not rather nondescript and straightforward prose? As tenuous as the immediate link between the Irish and the German writer might be, it seems ironical that, at least since the appearance of *Billard um halb zehn* in 1959, Böll critics have not ceased to tie this turn to experimental techniques to the writings of his great modernist precursor. And equally ironically, the selfsame Böll critics have failed to investigate the extent of the Joyce-Böll relationship. To be sure, many of the stylistic traits of Böll's later works might indeed be traced back to Joyce – most frequently highlighted among them are, beginning in the fifties, Böll's increased use of interior monologue and montage techniques and his employment of elaborate symbolic reference systems, as for example in the above-mentioned novel. But again our attempt to pinpoint such vague formal correspondences may be doomed if only because any such echo or parallelism can be attributed as easily, if not more convincingly, to influences other than that of James Joyce. They may have been mediated, for instance, through Alfred Döblin or William Faulkner, writers with whose works Böll was intimately familiar. Might we be dealing with just another case of critics instrumentalizing the author-function in order to qualify, and possibly even disqualify, a contemporary writer's achievement while sparing themselves the need to substantiate their claim?

Either way, Böll himself cautions us to beware of the pitfalls of speculating about an author's literary obligations; in an interview of 1971 he remarks judiciously from a writer's point of view:

Man schreibt ja nicht bewußt den Stil nach, praktisch wohl, sondern sucht seinen eigenen Ausdruck innerhalb der Spannungen des Autors, den man im Augenblick für vorbildlich hält. Der Vorgang ist interessant; aber ich glaube nicht, daß es irgend etwas über die Qualität eines Autors sagt, von wem er beeinflusst ist. Manchmal z.B. werde ich angeregt von einem blödsinnigen Film, den ich sehe, wo in irgendeiner Ecke eine Idee ist, die ich interessant finde und die vielleicht kitschig dargestellt ist. Das kann viel wichtiger sein, als Einstieg wichtiger werden, als die Gesamtlektüre von etwa Camus, der für mich interessant, sehr wichtig war.<sup>6</sup>

This comment is useful in that it reminds us to heed Claudio Guillén's cautionary words when he observed that "an influence need not assume the recognizable form of a

<sup>6</sup> Heinrich Böll, *Im Gespräch. Heinrich Böll mit Heinz Ludwig Arnold* Munich 1971, pp. 7-8.

parallelism, just as every parallelism does not proceed from an influence".<sup>7</sup> But it is precisely such formal parallelisms which critics have cited to document Böll's presumed indebtedness to Joyce. In a case like Heinrich Böll's, however, this requires some qualification. Not only does it seem unlikely that Böll possessed the time and energy to plough through Joyce's most intractable and intransigent masterpieces at a time in his life when he was fighting for his very subsistence. But in the 1950s, when we must assume that Böll first encountered 'Joyce,' if not Joyce's actual writings, Böll was primarily preoccupied with short prose forms rather than with the bulkier genre of the novel. He claims as much in the following quotation culled from an interview given as late as the mid-seventies: "Da ich immer noch glaube," he tells his interlocutors Nicolas Born and Jürgen Manthey, "von Natur ein Kurzgeschichtenschreiber zu sein, haben mich natürlich die Kurzgeschichtenschreiber unter den Kollegen am meisten interessiert."<sup>8</sup> If this is so, it would seem much more likely that Böll would have taken an interest in *Dubliners* than in any of Joyce's more celebrated, albeit more voluminous and time-consuming works. Indeed, once we focus our attention less on formal coincidences – like most critics have done when they conceive of Joycean echoes and parallelisms – and more on theme, tone, and mood, we might actually notice that a number of Böll's texts, and in particular those written in the mid-fifties, exhibit tangible convergences with Joyce's earliest narratives. Böll's *Irishes Tagebuch* as well as his remarkable short story "Im Tal der donnernden Hufe," both of which were published in 1957, seem to carry such Joycean overtones.

### III

To illuminate these possible convergences, I shall focus in what follows on one exemplary episode of Böll's *Irishes Tagebuch*, entitled "Die schönsten Füße der Welt." Much like the "Wandering Rocks" chapter in *Ulysses*, it is located switchboard-like in tenth position of the eighteen (!) sub-sections of Böll's book. It is the tale of a provincial doctor's wife who stays up half the night worrying while she is waiting for the return of her husband who is attending to a childbirth some twenty miles away. She traces on a map the dangerous coastal road her spouse is forced to travel, she sighs, she thinks of Dublin, she drinks a whisky, she reads, she knits, she drinks a second whisky, she studies the newspaper, she hesitates to drink a third whisky, then she reads the wedding announcements and obituaries in the newspaper, puts on lipstick, redoes her silver fingernail varnish and so forth. In short, she does not relax until she sees the headlights of her husband's car approaching in the dark. The counterpart of this young nameless mother of four with her urban background is the woman to whom the doctor has been attending. Mary McNamara is a plain provincial beauty and is this very night

<sup>7</sup> Claudio Guillén, "The Aesthetics of Literary Influence". In: *Literature as System. Essays Toward the Theory of Literary History* Princeton 1971, pp. 17-52, here p. 35.

<sup>8</sup> Heinrich Böll, "»Ich habe nichts über den Krieg aufgeschrieben.« Ein Gespräch mit Heinrich Böll und Hermann Lenz". In: *Literaturmagazin* 7, ed. by Nicolas Born and Jürgen Manthey Reinbek 1977, p. 50.

expecting her fourth child. The obvious symmetry between the two is amplified by the fact that Mary's husband is also away from home; he works abroad in England and returns each year only for the three winter months (which explains why their children are all born in September).

Critics have consistently observed how Böll's story ends essentially on a positive note – the doctor returns with a large and purportedly antique copper kettle that he has received from Mary McNamara in payment for his nocturnal services. Indeed, the whole of the *Irish Journal* is regarded as more uplifting and, in its quasi-utopian tone and naïvely uncritical characterization of plain Irish life, much tamer and politically more defensive than both Böll's earlier and his later work. The latter in particular is, as many readers will recall, explicitly political and *engagé*. Hence, like the aforementioned story "Im Tal der donnernden Hufe," in which Böll turns to the depiction of adolescent boyhood, *Irishes Tagebuch* is commonly considered uncharacteristic of Böll's accustomed narrative style and preferred content matter. If this is so, would it not seem to forbid our drawing a correlation between Böll's buoyant portrayal of Irish life and Joyce's much more sinister tales of Dublin's paralysis?

As we shall see in a moment, the thrust of my argument lies not in the domain of influence studies. While we are clearly faced with a rapprochement of theme and topic, to which we might add Böll's occasional mentionings of Joyce (two of which appear in *Irishes Tagebuch*), we must be cautious not to overestimate the possible degree of influence. So I ask again, why bother with this relationship at all? As I shall go on to argue in the remainder of this essay, the issue is less whether an actual influence took place – this must indeed remain speculative – but whether we can instrumentalize the tangible rapprochement in theme and mood between Joyce's *Dubliners* and Böll's *Irishes Tagebuch*. To show how and to what effect this can be done, I would like to shift our attention away from the primary order of direct textual comparison – which, as is so often the case with influence studies, seizes upon the similarities and differences but rarely contributes to a deeper understanding of the text in question – and toward the secondary order of textual exegesis and evaluation. This shift from literary discourse to meta-literary discourse necessitates a move from influence to intertextuality.

When intertextuality was first introduced as a term by Julia Kristeva in her 1966 essay "Word, Dialogue, and Novel"<sup>9</sup>, it was explicitly intended to replace not just the notion of 'intersubjectivity' but also the notion of a direct and measurable influence that one author's work exerts on another's. Closely related to Roland Barthes' call for the "Death of the Author,"<sup>10</sup> the concept of intertextuality was used to reject what the French school of comparatists had until then considered the basis for all literary investigation, namely the *rappori de fait*, the tangible and traceable link between any two or more works of literature (or two or more authors, genres, movements, and

<sup>9</sup> Contained in Julia Kristeva, *Desire in Language. A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, ed. by Léon Roudiez. New York 1980.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author". In: *Image – Music – Text*, ed. by Stephen Heath. New York 1977, pp. 142-148.

national literatures). In his essay "From Work to Text," Barthes clearly draws the line between this kind of source study and the form of literary exegesis that he envisions:

The intertextual in which every text is held, it itself being the text-between of another text, is not to be confused with some origin of the text: to try to find the 'sources', the 'influences' of a work, is to fall in with the myth of filiation; the citations which go to make up a text are anonymous, untraceable, and yet already read: they are quotations without inverted commas.<sup>11</sup>

Among the many extensions and offshoots of Kristeva's and Barthes' versions of a poststructuralist intertextuality (on the American side of the Atlantic we might point to the work of such vastly different literary critics and theoreticians as Michael Riffaterre, Jonathan Culler, or Harold Bloom), one particularly interesting case is the recent work of Gérard Genette, in particular his book *Palimpsestes. La littérature au second degré*, which was published in 1982. Under the general heading of 'transtextuality,' Genette distinguishes five kinds of textual relationships, 'intertextuality' (the presence of one text in another by means of quotation, plagiarism, allusion), 'paratextuality' (the interrelationship in a text of title, sub-title, preface, introduction, afterword, footnotes, illustrations, motto, book-cover and other varieties of 'auto- and allographic signals'), 'metatextuality' (the relationship between one text and another text that deals with it, even when the latter does not directly quote the former), 'architextuality' (a form of family relationship between texts belonging to the same genre), and finally 'hypertextuality' (in which a hypertext superimposes itself upon another text, the hypotext, much like Joyce's *Ulysses* is fastened parasitically upon the model of Homer's *Odyssey*). While it may be difficult to decide once and for all whether the relationship between Böll's *Irishes Tagebuch* and Joyce's *Dubliners* is 'intertextual' or 'hypertextual' by nature, or both, and whether they are related at all in Genette's understanding of 'architextual' relationships (after all, Joyce's *Dubliners* are short third-person narratives, Böll's tale, by contrast, is embedded in a first-person diary, as fictional as this may be), I would like, in the following, to propose a metatextual reading of Böll's *Irishes Tagebuch*.

As I indicated earlier, Böll's *Irishes Tagebuch* has been widely regarded an anomaly of sorts within the progression of the German writer's oeuvre, not only because it is loosely written in the form of a diary, but also because Böll is here perceived as much less critical in his portrayal of Irish attitudes and Irish institutions than he ever was of similar cultural and political phenomena in his native country. Hence, while the only critic to provide a detailed interpretation of "Die schönsten Füße der Welt," Theo Dotzenrath, comments briefly upon the melancholic mood of the story, he views Böll's narrative as hinging mainly upon the stereotypical opposition of the negatively connotated cultural (the silver varnished fingernails of the doctor's wife signifying 'civilized' urban life) and the positively connotated natural (the rural Mary

<sup>11</sup> Roland Barthes, "From Work to Text," in: *Image - Music - Text*, ed. by Stephen Heath. New York 1977, pp. 155-164, here p. 160.

McNamara with the symbolical authenticity of her beautiful feet).<sup>12</sup> Dotzenrath's version of the story dilutes and even cancels out the potential bitterness of Böll's social commentary.

Just the opposite happens if we opt to graft, in a metatextual movement, Joyce's - and Joyce criticism's - notion of paralysis, with all its implications of stasis, immobility, absence and emptiness, onto our interpretation of Böll's tale of rural existence. This metatextual shift of perspective allows some crucial but hitherto overlooked layers of suppressed meaning and narrative subterfuge to come into view. Paralysis is a word that figures prominently in the first tale of Joyce's *Dubliners*. It is no coincidence that when it first appears in the opening lines of "The Sisters," we find it linked in the young narrator's mind to the, for him, equally 'strange' words 'gnomon' and 'simony.' Nor is it coincidental that precisely these three terms have found extensive use as interpretive key words for critics of *Dubliners*.<sup>13</sup> Next to paralysis, gnomon is particularly relevant in our context. In dictionaries we are informed that the word means either the pillar of a sundial that tells time by casting part of a circle into shadow or, more importantly, the figure that remains after a parallelogram has been removed from the corner of a similar but larger parallelogram. In his discussion of *Dubliners*, Phillip Herring concludes:

"Gnomonic" language may contain ellipses, hiatuses in meaning, significant silences, empty and ritualistic dialogue. We note the continual emphasis on emptiness, incompleteness, solitude, loneliness, shadow, darkness, and failure, which so affect the lives of Joyce's *Dubliners* and allow subtle expression of his political views.<sup>14</sup>

He goes on to argue that "Gnomon signaled the creation of absences that readers must make speak if they are to gain insight into character, structure, and narrative technique".<sup>15</sup>

Transferring this insight to our interpretation of "Die schönsten Füße der Welt" makes us recognize that Mary McNamara is not presented to us by the 'real' diarist Heinrich Böll himself - as in my opinion most critics have too naïvely assumed - but that her portrait is reflected, if not refracted, through the mind of the anonymous doctor's wife, much like in Joyce's stories where we find the 'objective' narrator's language continually infected and inflected by the main characters' self-consciousness, if not self-conceit. This is what Hugh Kenner has called the "Uncle Charles Principle"; it occurs in free indirect speech whenever "the narrative idiom [is] not the narrator's" but entails instead "writing about someone much as that someone would choose to be

<sup>12</sup> See Theo Dotzenrath, "Heinrich Böll: Die schönsten Füße der Welt". In: *Wirkendes Wort* 8. 1957/58, pp. 302-307.

<sup>13</sup> Phillip F. Herring, *Joyce's Uncertainty Principle* Princeton 1987. (The section "Dubliners: the Trials of Adolescence" is here quoted after its reprint in: Mary T. Reynolds (ed.), *James Joyce. A Collection of Critical Essays* Englewood Cliffs 1993, pp. 67-80.)

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 68.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

written about".<sup>16</sup> When we reread Böll's story in this light it becomes all too apparent that its narrative perspective never really transcends the narrow confines of the unnamed woman's psyche and her subjectively limited world-view. From this vantage point, the romanticizing effect no longer proceeds from Böll's narrative stance, but would seem rather to emanate from the fictitious female character's consciousness through which Böll has chosen to focalize, and vocalize, his story. We thus arrive at the unexpected conclusion that Mary McNamara's beautiful feet – the most beautiful ones in the world – may not be so shapely after all. Their beauty may represent nothing less than the idealization of a captive woman's mind, whose fancy romanticizes rural hardship to such a degree that it marvellously metamorphoses into a state of natural grace and perfection. Mary's roaming the coast in search of flotsam and anything of value might likewise signify less her complicity with nature than suggest her state of utter dejection and abject poverty. And rather than signal genuine gratitude, the fact that Mary remunerates the doctor for his assistance by giving him the quasi-mythical copper kettle – surely a treasured heirloom from which no family would willingly part – might just imply that she has no other means of compensation for his service. Are we not led to assume, then, that Mary's husband sends too little money, if any at all, home from England? And are we not to infer that he squanders his income on women and drink and that, just maybe, Mary has elected not to accompany her husband abroad because she is happier at home and possibly even safer from physical harm and marital violence? All this, of course, is stated nowhere in the text, but it does come to mind gnomonically and (in Genette's sense) metatextually.

Viewed in the light of Joycean meta-concepts, and read against the grain of its facile narrative surface, the nature of Böll's tale changes radically, bringing to the fore its darker hues (much like in that second meaning of 'gnomon' the sundial casts the circle into shadow). This tale of two provincial counterparts thus takes on a more markedly sinister tone. The story's central concern no longer seems to be merely to contrast the two opposing world views of dolled up urbanity<sup>17</sup> and rural authenticity, divorcing them, in a just too perfectly Rousseauistic manner, into the mature sensuality and serenity of nature on the one hand, and the immature intellectuality and nervousness of urban civilization on the other. Quite to the contrary, much like in Joyce's tales of Dublin life, here too an uncanny sense of solitude, powerlessness, privation, and dispossession prevails, permeating the lives of both female characters. True, Böll does not fully attain the style of 'scrupulous meanness' that we have come to associate with Joyce's depiction of 'dear dirty Dublin.' But after all, Böll remains Böll. And even if we grant that he was influenced by Joyce – which is probable, but not provable, and certainly of little exegetical value in itself –, he has, to rephrase Böll's earlier statement, 'looked for his personal expression amidst the tensions of Joyce.' Joyce's narrative style and content would have provided at best an alternative 'point of entry' for Böll to develop and expand his own vision of the world. But

<sup>16</sup> Hugh Kenner, *Joyce's Voices* London 1978, pp. 18 and 21.

<sup>17</sup> At one point in the narrative the doctor's wife is compared to a doll: "ihr Kindergesicht wirkt mit dem scharfen Make-up noch kindlicher, fast wie das einer Puppe, aber die Puppe hat selbst vier Kinder" (Heinrich Böll, *Irishes Tagebuch* Munich 1961, p. 65).

regardless of whether or not an influence took place, what is more important is that both authors' narratives can be, and have been, mistaken for simple, uncomplicated, and unmediated depictions of everyday life. In both cases the incomplete parallelogram was taken for the whole. In the case of Joyce's *Dubliners*, critics have long since become aware of the existential abyss that lurks beneath the seemingly smooth surface of each of these tales and have corrected their readings accordingly, establishing in the process what Bernard Benstock has called "gnomonic criticism".<sup>18</sup> In Böll's case, it seems high time to take a fresh look at, and to reevaluate, the purportedly 'uncritical' and socially less involved tales of the middle period of his career, including *Irishes Tagebuch*, and to gnomonically attend to the existential silences and veiled psychological meanings hidden behind and beneath the seemingly uncomplicated surfaces of these narratives.

<sup>18</sup> Benstock, Bernard, "The Kenner Conundrum. Or Who Does What with Which to Whom". In: *James Joyce Quarterly* 13. 1976, pp. 428-435, here p. 428.