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The Trajectory of Remembrances and Forgetting: Memory as Counter Discourse in Heinrich Böll's *The Death of Elsa Baskoleit*

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Abstract:

'Remembrances' and 'forgetting' are political constraints which can never be treated independent of the socio-cultural definitions in post war Germany. The agenda of obliterating memory is often countered by a reinforcement of an act of remembrance. My paper develops this conceptualization through the tracing of a counter narrative that Böll idealises as an apolitical stance of human existence. I contended further to address the emerging discourse of 'forgetting', in which Elsa Baskoleit's presence supersedes and combines with the symbols of war and destruction. These symbols are symptomatic of the brutality and the violence inflicted upon the victims and the survivors of the war. The object of the paper is to capture the tenderness and the vulnerability, not only of the experiences of war but also to focus on the figurative devices incorporated by Böll, in his short story, to heighten this situation. I have also contextualized similar thematic approaches in the seminal works of some other writers of this contemporary period.

Keywords: post war Germany; remembrances; forgetting; violence; counter narrative.

'Trümmerliteratur' is a literary genre that developed essentially after the Second World War in Germany. Often translated as 'Rubble literature' in English, it not only refers to the mutilated landscape and demolition of buildings, as the aftermath of the war, but also more appropriately it captures the destroying of ideals and utopias. It centers on the reality of war and the experiences between death and survival, which became an integral part of contemporary Germany after the Second World War. It is in this context one could mention about the paradox between the psychological emigration of writers, who found themselves blatantly suppressed by National Socialism and those writers who were banished from Germany during this time and whose works were broadly categorized as Exile Literature. The works that are usually brought together under 'Trümmerliteratur' intercepts the similar thematic approaches and stylistic features. But it is seemingly problematic to consider 'Rubble Literature' to be homogenous in nature. A poem by Wolfgang von Borchert is essentially different from that of Günter Eich and again a short story of Heinrich Böll is different from that of both Borchert and Eich.

Heinrich Böll is an exponent writer, whose name has become synonymous with this genre of 'Trümmerliteratur'. He was a distinct member of "Gruppe 47" ["47 Group"], which was a network of writers and publishers who usually met three times in a year and even invited the

works of the other non members to present their unpublished works. Other important writers associated with this group were Ilse Aichinger, Ingeborg Bachmann, Paul Celan, Günter Grass, Günter Eich, Wolfgang Hildesheimer, Uwe Johnson, Wolfdietrich Schnurre and Martin Walser. Böll's recognition came about specifically in his awarding 1951 of the Literature Prize of the "47 Group" in 1951. His short stories and novels express the psychological horrors and the wholesale massacre of the war upon the contemporary generation. His indictment against fascism and war in *Billiards at Half-Past Nine* (1959), the haunting realities under Hitler and after in *The Clown* (1963), the effect of tabloid journalism that disrupts a young woman in *The Lost Honour of Katherina Blum* (1974) and so on.

In *The Death of Elsa Baskoleit* (1951), Böll follows the trajectory of a counter narrative to record the devastation as detailed in the objective retelling of the events of the war. The child narrative which later grows into the adult voice, becomes for Böll the self reflective index to identify and speak about the fear and estrangement that was continuously concurrent for many who lived under the constant threat of extermination under the Nazi regime. The first part of the story is set before the war and then it grows into the second part of the story that vividly talks about the sense of suffering, physical damage, psychological trauma that become indispensable of a country sabotaged and shattered by the ravages of the war. The narrator in the second part of the story has already experienced the catastrophe of war. It is his sense of loss of the ideal that exposes his senses to the vagaries of the claustrophobic realities of existence. The vulnerability of an incorrigible heart that groans under the possibility of death, illumines the mind of the adult narrator as he witnesses the destruction unleashed upon humanity. The symbols incorporated by Böll makes his narrative as pungent as the ash and the soot and the dust, primarily associated with Rubble Literature. His mind becomes an amalgamation of images and memories, of lost people, lost time, remembrances and disappearances without traces of reality which can follow such disappearances.

Memory as a metonymic double of the suffering and the injured is often used in trauma narratives to conceptualize physical disasters and the desecration of identities. In Böll's short story, it is this discrepancy between the recognizable and the familiar with the events of the damage that is inserted in the dynamics of memory. The interplay of the narrative is decisive to ascertain the extent and the object of the loss and the dispossessed. The effects of the war and its impact on ordinary human lives are prioritized by the device of remembering. The analytical understanding of the real in the second portion of the story is supplanted by the disappearance of the object of the real from the narrative. There is a possibility that Elsa Baskoleit never existed. Human mind subjected to the tortures of the war drives in the numbness of brutality and cruelty. It makes an absolute effort to survive through the ideal and its disappearance, as well. Hence the memory narrative is a counter effort, in Böll's story, not only to remember the lost ideal but also intends to forget the possibilities of redemption. Elsa is constituted as a symbol of restitution, whose continuing survival is detrimental to a close understanding of the brutalities of war. Her death is a figurative approach that the writer has incorporated to accentuate the obsolescence of post war Germany and through the narrator's memorializing of Elsa, he objectifies the despair and despondency of post war realities.

The possibility of the Baskoleits being Jewish is evident from the apparent violence that they had to confront in the form of expletives hurled upon Elsa, while the latter rehearsed her dancing

lessons. The adult narrator introspects upon his childhood memories of Elsa. In the early portions of the story, it is suggested how the child narrator is overwhelmed by a deep sense of fascination for Elsa while recalling, with fondness, his early days in the previous house. Even in this early retelling of his innocent infatuation for Elsa, there is a suggestion of the isolation and hostility inflicted upon the Jews, quite prematurely, even before the full brunt of the Nazi persecution. The symbols are of integral significance to trace this political schism in the contemporary social structure. The basement, where the Baskoleits have moved in, is symbolic of something concealed or secluded from the society. The orange crates standing outside in the passages and the smell of rotten fruit put out for the garbage trucks. The dim light of the frosted glass panel from where Baskoleit could only be heard talking or shouting at someone. And again his broad Prussian dialect in which he keeps complaining about the bad times. All these images are coupled together to create a sensation of the squalor and the squalid socio-political situation, appertaining more to an unwholesome psychological state of mind. Almost a repulsive diseased state of reality, into which the Jews were entrusted to live with the constant fear of death and annihilation. It promulgates the reality of Baskoleit to be an outsider, confronting the several atrocities to denigrate his existence by inflicting upon him a deep sense of alienation and isolation. However this tendency to marginalize Baskoleit and negate his identity as essentially inferior is seemingly juxtaposed by the child narrator's impressions about him. The adult narrator introspects on his own impressions of Baskoleit and remembers that for all the children in the locality Baskoleit was a cheerful man. He had a pleasant disposition – agreeable and mirthful and that his grumbling was only a playful game that he often indulged in. He was affectionate and convivial and often gave them apples and oranges.

The memory concerning Elsa is narrated with a sense of beauty, simplicity and tenderness that immediately acts as a possible ideal that is completely baffled and disrupted by the war. The fondness and the innocuous precision with which the child narrator expresses his fascination for Elsa is quite significant. On one hand, it apotheosizes the beauty and the charm of Elsa and on the other, by means of contrast; it intensifies the cruelty and the barbarism of the war. The disappearance of Elsa in the second part of the story and her father's madness over her apparent death is projected upon this memory of the child's remembrances of Elsa. Hence, as soon as the child narrator talks about Elsa one cannot fail to understand his adolescent fascination for her. Elsa aspires to be a dancer and is dedicated to this conviction and practices regularly in the basement room with yellow walls beside Baskoleit's kitchen. The narrator remembers Elsa as "... a slender girl with fair hair who stood on the tips of her toes, dressed in green tights, pale, hovering for minutes like a swan, whirling around , leaping , or doing handsprings". He mentions about the "... the yellow rectangle of the window frame , her thin green clad body, her pale strained face, and her fair head that sometimes, when she jumped , touched the naked light bulb, which began to swing and for the space of a few seconds and expanded the yellow circle of light on the gray courtyard". What is further significant is the Elsa's window which offers the child the medium to his fascination, and at the same time it is the same window through which people hurled abuses to Elsa. The child narrator's ignorance of the word "whore" is reflective of the fact that the child was not conscious of the violence and the brutality of the forthcoming catastrophe. His ideal centering on Elsa Baskoleit provides a continuous foil to the ruthlessness of the war which obliterates not only ideals but real human beings. Their reality is scotomized and is put under an uncertain certainty.

In an interview, in the spring issue of *the Paris Review* (1983; No. 87) Heinrich Böll talks about arrivals and departures: "... I suppose that's also related to the war, to hundreds of departures and farewells which could always be final. Nobody knew: "Will we see one another again?" I experience this metaphysics of farewell even to this day when I leave someplace, when I change localities, which I unfortunately do very often. The farewell is always conceivably a final one." There is a similar tendency observed with the narrator's departure from his town, followed by his arrival after the war. The second part of the story opens after a considerable time period, which can be estimated as five years after the war. The child narrator has now grown into an adult and has returned to his native town. He is by profession a truck driver for a whole sale vegetable dealer. As he overhears the name of Baskoleit, he is immediately overwhelmed by his childhood memories and he decides to make a visit. The journey to Elsa's house is a reconstituting of the agency of memory that can rehabilitate one from the traumatic numbness that the war has set in. His journey is symbolic of tracing the trajectory of the forgotten. Rubble literature often preoccupies in detailing the idea of fear and destruction that was cast upon Germany, through a dense use of metaphors and symbols. It operates on the psychosis of human mind subjected to the savagery of the war and at the same time it inculcates the use of such words and expressions that precipitate upon the physical revulsion and the destruction of human identity.

It is in this context we can mention Paul Celan's apocalyptic poem, *Death Fugue* (*Todesfugue*, 1948). In a letter to his friend, Erich, Celan express his disintegrating psychological experience of the war, as a Jewish poet in those turbulent times under Hitler. He talks about the "...humiliations and emptiness, endless emptiness". This was a common turmoil and trauma, which haunted the thematic essence of post war literature.

"Black milk of daybreak we drink you at night
we drink you at morning and midday we drink you at evening
we drink and we drink"

[*Death Fugue*, 1948]

Böll provides us with a similar picture by connecting the psychological disintegration of human mind and the physical tumult that wrecked havoc as an aftermath of the war. As the narrator travels back to Baskoleit's house, he witnesses the dilapidated landscape. The whole area was mutilated and devastated. There was a terrible loss of livelihood and we can even mention that this physical ruination is also an externalization of the psychosomatic damages of the war. There were broken lampposts of the edges of the street and destroyed houses. There were deep potholes that interspersed the whole landscape with an unnerving absence of human beings, except for a small boy sitting upon a broken wall.

In the introduction to a short collection of Böll's stories, titled as *Traveller if You Come to Spa...* [*Wanderer kommst du nach Spa...*, 1965], Klaus Zobel quoted Böll from his article "Bekanntnis zur Trümmerliteratur" to prioritize the central concern and the thematic importance of 'Rubble Literature. Böll states that "... the people of whom we wrote lived in ruins and rubble, they returned from the war, men and women, and even children, all equally injured. And they were equally keen-eyed: they saw everything. Their life was anything but peaceful, neither their surroundings nor their conditions, nothing about them was idyllic, and we writers felt so close to them that we identified ourselves with them ... particularly, of course,

with the generation to which we belonged and which to a great extent found itself in a strange and memorable situation: it came back home – a return from a war and the end of which hardly anyone had dared hope for.” Böll continues to talk about the content of their literature, mentioning that they “...wrote about this war, about our return from it and of what we had seen in the war and of what we found upon our return home: namely ruins; and out of this arose three catchwords which were used as labels for these young writers and for what they wrote: war literature, ex-soldier literature and literature of ruins.”

The description of Baskoleit continues to express the destitution and the harrowing details of the destruction that war does to ordinary people. The narrator mentions that the small windows of his house “...were dusty, pyramids had collapsed, and the green cardboard was black with dirt”. He hesitantly opened the door and stepped inside the shop, “...there was an acrid smell of damp soup mix, which was stuck together in lumps in a cardboard box by the door...” Baskoleit looked decrepit, vulnerable and feeble. He had gray hair under his cap and looked pitiable and completely destituted. The only thing that he keeps repeating – “My daughter has died”. His madness and the piteous condition to which he has been reduced are constantly juxtaposed with the memories of narrator’s early childhood, when we were first introduced to Baskoleit. The description of the little dark haired boy, whom the narrator meets again outside the house, is symbolic of the susceptibility and the vulnerability of humanity, at the throes of the war. The helplessness and the frailty in the depiction of the boy is reminiscent of the central protagonist of Wolfgang von Borchert’s *The Rats Do Sleep at Night* [*Nachts schlafen die Ratten doch*, 1947], where the little boy is under the impression that he must protect his family from the unforeseen dangers that lurk at night. In reality, he sits and waits upon the ruins of his house, which is completely razed to the ground by an apparent bombing.

The death and the eradication of human beings is pledged upon the metaphor of forgetting those, who are destroyed. It is more of the death and the annihilation of these people that assume the vile character of the massacre, than the actual individuals with their subtle subjective selves which are all forgotten. Heinrich Böll not only captures the devastation of the Second World War but also examines the insignificance that is appropriated on those who are destroyed and forgotten by the war. The poignancy and tender inevitability of solitariness with which the story draws to its close, driving the reality of ‘remembrances’ of the childhood memories against the bleak infliction of ‘forgetting’ associated with the war. Hence it can be suggested that the title of Böll’s story, *The Death of Elsa Baskoleit*, is acutely focused not simply on the death but more importantly on Elsa Baskoleit, as an individual, who is interrogated and quarantined within the discursive politics of occlusions and ‘forgetting’, primarily related to war literatures.

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