

Awareness of Emptiness

(I.)

René Böll's paintings "are tranquil, earth-coloured, dark, and warm landscape paintings. They show archetypes of life which are equally valid in all cultures and among all peoples."¹ "Thus, the landscapes depicted, which appear to be far away from the distracting and tiring influences of the civilized outside world, are landscapes based on quietness and solitude. Landscapes in which man abandons himself to the 'course of things', the Dao. Embedded in the soft, rounded shapes of mountains and hill formations, surrounded by earthy colours, is man, who in the formation of death, the skeleton and the skull is already in the process of disintegration, and is making the transition into the primary elements of nature, into the cosmic cycle of nature. This dissolution of man in nature, which he experiences through death and which appears as a peaceful, harmonious state in Böll's paintings, may disconcert the Western beholder. However, in the Daoist imagination there is no terrifying final state, it is merely a phenomenon of the eternal cycle of nature."² But still: "these pictures are visions of life which do not omit a central reality of life – death. Nature is a process of constant change. Life becomes death, and death becomes life again."³

"In the form of death, the skeleton or the skull – a frequent motif in Böll's work – he too is integrated into this great cycle of the Dao."⁴ Böll's understanding of artistic creation is shaped by the spirit of Chinese philosophy, in particular the spirit of Daoism, the essence of which is characterized by the deep respect for the freedom of man as the condition for the development of his ethical power. "The landscapes in Böll's paintings are in many respects reminiscent of the world of imagination of Chinese Daoism. These landscapes radiate quietness and solitude. They are places which are far away from the distracting and tiring influences of the din of civilization, in them time is different from the time of history. Nature is left to herself. Her elements – fire, earth, water, air, the sun and the moon, seas and mountains – follow the Dao, the 'eternal way' in continuous change."⁵ "It is a quiet, a wise, a sensitive process that leads to the very source of the Dao, to a state of peace and quiet, of non-action, of the undefined and the undefinable, beyond time and change (...)."⁶

Böll's "landscapes in oil, however archaic, original and consciously non-conformist they may appear to be in the art scene of today, are occasionally reminiscent of a time when communication with nature was seen as an important step towards incarnation in European culture too. (...) As Caspar David Friedrich explained: '(...) The artist's task is not the true representation of air, water, rocks and trees, but it is his soul, his emotion that should be reflected in that.' René Böll has followed this principle. His landscapes are composed with careful and sparing use of means, and are free from decorative and playful additions and details. This 'emptiness', which is consciously aimed at, may astound many an eye at first, but after a short time one discovers that it exerts magnetic powers which make it inevitable to linger in front of the picture."⁷

Böll's landscape paintings show "mountainous and hilly landscapes; in some of them the sea can also be seen. We are looking at a world that is recogniza-

ble in representationalism, space and time, but it takes an effort for us to penetrate this world. We are travellers on a journey of discovery. (...) Although Böll's landscapes remain, on the one hand, comprehensible in their representationalism, on the other hand, they also form landscapes for the spirit. They possess that lasting value of reality of landscapes we see in our dreams. They could also be the sort of landscapes painted by someone who has travelled all his life and is now beginning to put into pictures the images formed in his memory by what he has seen and felt. In these two types of impressions – formed by our mind – we are also presented with a combination of the recognized and the unknown..."⁸

"This double view of the pictures, simultaneously soothing as an archetype and a monition for the future, makes viewing René Böll's pictures an exciting pleasure. This double view also confuses our narrow idea of 'avant-garde' art. Here, an artist does not care about the 'current' developments in art, what is more, he even stands aside deliberately."⁹

(II.)

The painter René Böll enjoys spending time in the countryside, where he records his impressions in sketchbooks. He travels to many countries and landscapes which are still left to nature, for instance the Andes in Ecuador, the jungle and the Galápagos islands. Also the days of his youth in Ireland with its lonely landscapes, overgrown with moss and lichen but otherwise lacking in vegetation are reflected in the landscapes of his paintings."¹⁰

Thus his relations with nature are extremely close. "He views the subject attentively and records his impressions in sketchbooks in order to absorb them in a concentrated way. Later, in the studio he paints from memory, completely free. In the course of this, naturalistic forms recede into the background and lose importance."¹¹

His depictions of landscapes are, therefore, "not views of concrete objects but vehicles of meaning for something which is underlying and reaches beyond the external appearance of things. The landscape, in Chinese this word is formed from the two signs for mountain and water, is a synonym for nature in its broadest sense. Nature particularly enables us see beyond the external appearance of things without having to forfeit the joy and fascination at its forms and its variety."¹²

"This unity of philosophical background and permanent perfection of ink painting technique also enriches Böll's oil paintings and watercolours. His oil paintings show reverence for nature, and radiate quietness and solitude. Earthy, warm colours or cool, bluish tones blend into celestial brightness and shining, often reddish light."¹³

"The impression of the sun becomes the main theme of Böll's works, light and sadness are given expression in his colours, particularly in the vivid red with warm temperament amidst a cold tone of earthy stones. The painter applies

white colour to the empty expanse as grounding for the organic connection, and subsequently he contrasts cold and warm colours. Through this complicated process, he carves out vibrating lines of light and fashions the expanse of colour into a stage for the sun.”¹⁴

“In contrast to a certain continuity of motifs in René Böll’s work, the painter has with his work with ink ventured into a territory which demands a ‘re-thinking’ in order to be mastered both regarding technique and spirit. Ink and Xuan paper, which for the sake of simplicity is known in the West under the collective term rice paper, are extremely sensitive media demanding complete mastery of the matter, technical perfection and deep concentration, verging on meditative contemplation on the part of the artist. Speed, pressure of the brush, positioning of the brush, the thickness or the degree of liquidity of the ink have to be applied with almost seismographic accuracy onto the very delicate and difficult to handle Xuan paper, so that every correction, every hesitation, every uncertainty – also in the metaphorical spiritual sense – would become visible and consequently reveals whether the artist is in harmony with the flow of cosmic forces.”¹⁵

“The use of the brush and its touch demand from the artist the considering of ‘space’ and ‘time’, where ‘space’ means the way in which the brush touches the paper, which in turn depends on the type of the brush tip and the angle at which the brush is held. The Chinese brushes for painting and calligraphy are made from very different types of hair including sheep’s, goat’s, horse’s and wolf’s hair. ‘Time’ means the speed with which the brush is moved across the paper. When using the lightly glued and, therefore, highly absorbent Xuan paper, the stroke becomes broader the slower it is performed. Moreover the ink allows gradual transition and variation in tone from the most delicate grey to the jettest black (...) Böll uses Chinese ink which, in the words of Huang Binhong, has to be as dry as the autumn wind when using the ‘dry brush’ technique, but at the same time as moist as spring rain. He has acquired the four different basic techniques of applying ink, in addition to ‘dry’ also moist, light and dark, which constitute the basic skills for painting with ink.”¹⁶

He succeeds in both applying the technical features of Chinese ink painting and transferring into his own language characteristic phenomena such as calligraphy in its different expressions, without the results being mere technical imitations.

(III.)

“Böll’s interest in this great painting tradition was aroused at the beginning of the 1970s when he came across some books about ink painting techniques. He was fascinated by these so much that soon he began to study this art and to learn it himself. It is impressively apparent that he has developed an original, very personal style of painting in this process over the course of some 25 years.”¹⁷

“These years of being intensely occupied with the meanings and techniques of Chinese painting and its impartment by Chinese artists allowed Böll to achieve

pictures which are also widely acclaimed in Chinese art circles. He has intensely studied the mixing of colours. He is less interested in theories on colour than he is in the considerations of how he can change a given colour by mixing it in such a way that he obtains exactly the tone he wants. When it comes to the actual process of painting the mixing is done intuitively. He says: You have to have internalized colour and technique in such a way that you don't have to think about them. Many of his watercolours were also painted in several layers. Apart from ready-made watercolours, he also uses relatively coarsely ground pigments – similar to the way he also uses them in oil painting. Böll prefers earth colours and mineral pigments, and keeps a stock of several hundred pigments which he has been collecting since his youth. Each time these pigments are freshly ground and used up straight away. Apart from natural yellow, red, brown, green and black earth colours, he uses ground minerals like orpiment, vermilion, different coloured jasper, and micas, some of which look like gold; also lapis lazuli, coral, malachite, pyrite, realgar, soladite, vivianite or synthetic metal compounds. He also uses a large number of modern organic colours originating from petroleum chemistry. However, these are mixed with other pigments, namely plant colours, which display a larger spectrum, and are not as 'garish' as most colours used today in industry, advertising and art. In this way he tries to obtain vivid yet permanent colours similar to the plant colours used in the past, particularly by book illuminators, which unfortunately are barely colour-fast to light. It makes a difference to him whether a colour is manufactured synthetically or whether it is thousands of years old or." ¹⁸

"René Böll prefers natural colours because in his experience they are more vivid and have a much larger spectrum. Different inks are also found among the treasures he keeps in his studio: such as glistening oil-soot ink and the less shiny pine-soot ink, also an ancient type, which is particularly well suited for the greyer tones. René Böll mixes them himself, as he does with almost all of his colours, and not until he needs them." ¹⁹

He has Chinese ink which is more than one hundred years old, and he has collected colours from tombs in Ecuador, as well as pigments which were produced according to recipes from Egypt and the Renaissance period. "On top of this underpainting, the picture is built up in many varnished, semi-opaque or opaque layers using oil colours produced in a way similar to handcrafted colours, as well as oil colours freshly ground each time whenever special tones are needed. The varnish, the adding of different transparent layers on top of each other, plays an important role in Böll's paintings. Through the varnish he can use both the additive and the subtractive blending of colours in his paintings." ²⁰

"According to the painter René Böll, the theory of Yin and Yang is of particular importance when dealing with colours, and so René Böll's work with ink can be seen as a further answer to traditional Chinese ink painting, which expresses the principle of Yin and Yang in a particular way." ²¹

"Böll's unspoiled landscapes with their contrasts between light and dark, their contrasting of sky and earth, and of mountains and water, as well as their carefully thought-out combinations of colours reflect the dialectics of Yang and Yin that permeates all existence." ²²

Opposing as well as complementing elements are taken to be a natural whole. "Thus, properties such as light and dark, warm and cold, firm and fluid – basically all those characteristics which meet in the colour – have to be explored and captured so that they can be brought together in a natural, harmonious whole. It is noticeable that René Böll prefers the varnish technique in his pictures, and that the possibilities of additive and subtractive blending of colours comes closest to his idea of the harmonious changeability of colours (...)

René Böll has found an authentic form of expression in his works using ink, as regards brush technique, structure of the picture and composition. Thematically, they take up motifs of his oil paintings and egg tempera paintings. However, these motifs, such as the sun, the moon, mountains and water, appear to have detached themselves from the overall context of his landscapes, and are developing a life of their own. Nature suddenly seems very close, its concrete forms more and more turn into their qualities, which now reveal themselves in ink and brush technique: light and dark, from jet black to light grey, wet and dry, soft and hard, smooth and fissured, concentration and dissolution all come to the foreground. The concreteness which eluded the vision of the landscapes becomes abstract, abstract becomes concrete."²³

(IV.)

"Böll (...) abandons himself to inspiration, mood, imagination, he creates pure terrains of sensory perception, mixes in his existential experience, conducts games with tones of colour in ambience, light and air. Freed from all theories on art, he thus paints his visions of a world between paradise and hell, imaginary grounds; epic, dramatic, poetic, metaphoric, elegiac, emotive, vegetative, static and silent. Fictional landscapes full of bursting silence and magic melancholy, panoramic pictures as a symbolic still life: documents of a sensitive perception of the world against a background of potential collapse. A sentimental game with things final.

His pictures invite us on journeys of discovery through space and time. We travel along these landscapes that are representational but also landscapes of the spirit. The absence of distracting details shows to us a new world far away from influences of civilization. But this emptiness is but an illusionary one. A landscape of what is essential, based on quietness and solitude,

reveals itself to the beholder. 'For me Stone Age painting is as current as today's painting – and so is Eastern painting, thousands of years old.'

For René Böll there is no such thing as limitation by time, and he is convinced that painting won't end nor could there be a substitute for it."²⁴

- 1 Olaf Zimmermann: "Zeitspringer – im Hyperraum der Kunst", (Time-jumping – in the Hyperspace of Art), in: Kunst Köln (Art Cologne), H. 3 and 4, 1992.
- 2 Anne Engelhardt-Ng, Ng Hong-chiok: "Mit den Farben zum Dao des Pinsels", (To the Dao of the Brush with Colours), in: René Böll/Binghu Shanren, "Die Leere erreichen", (Achieving Emptiness), Schuffelen Verlag (Publishers), 1996.
- 3 Olaf Zimmermann: "Zeitspringer – im Hyperraum der Kunst", (Time-jumping – in the Hyperspace of Art) in: René Böll/Binghu Shanren "Die Leere erreichen", (Achieving Emptiness), loc. cit.
- 4 Anne Engelhardt-Ng: "Einführung zur Ausstellung 'Namenlose Stille'", (Introduction to the 'Silence without a Name' Exhibition), speech given on the occasion of the official opening on 29 April 1997 at the Konrad Adenauer Foundation, Sankt Augustin.
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 Daniela Tandecki: "Namenlose Stille. Die Landschaften des René Böll", ("Silence without a Name". René Böll's Landscapes), in: Einblicke (Insights) 2/97.
- 7 Günther Rüther, welcoming speech given on the occasion of the official opening of the René Böll exhibition "Namenlose Stille" (Silence without a Name) on 29.4.1997 at the Konrad Adenauer Foundation, Sankt Augustin.
- 8 Th.E.H. Huyen, opening speech to the exhibition of works by René Böll in the Galerie Hannelore Meyaerd, Vlissingen 1994. (Translated into German by Heiner Koop, Cologne)
- 9 Olaf Zimmermann, loc. cit.
- 10 Anne Engelhardt-Ng, loc. cit.
- 11 Siegfried Pater: "Brücken zwischen Ost und West", (Bridges between East and west). Contribution in the René Böll exhibition catalogue "Namenlose Stille" (Silence without a Name), published by the Konrad Adenauer Foundation, commissioned by Günther Rüther, Wesseling 1997.
- 12 Anne Engelhardt-Ng, loc. cit.
- 13 Siegfried Pater, loc. cit.
- 14 Zhu Quingsheng (Lao Shu): „Mit chinesischen Pinseln und eigener Tuschtechnik“, (With Chinese Brushes and an Individual Ink Technique), in: René Böll/Binghu Shanren, loc. cit.
- 15 Anne Engelhardt-Ng, Ng, Hong chiok, loc. cit.
- 16 Siegfried Pater, loc. cit.
- 17 Günther Rüther: „Vorwort zum Katalog 'René Böll – Namenlose Stille', (Foreword to the René Böll catalogue "Silence without a Name"), loc. cit.
- 18 Siegfried Pater, loc. cit.
- 19 Anne Engelhardt-Ng, loc. cit.
- 20 Ibid.
- 21 Anne Engelhardt-Ng, Ng, Hong-chiok, loc. cit.
- 22 Daniela Tandecki, loc. cit.
- 23 Edwin Kratschmer, OTN, from 3.6.1991.
- 24 Siegfried Pater, loc. cit.

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