



The  
Kenyon Review

---

The Achievement of Hermann Broch

Author(s): Hannah Arendt

Source: *The Kenyon Review*, Vol. 11, No. 3 (Summer, 1949), pp. 476-483

Published by: Kenyon College

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4333072>

Accessed: 27-12-2018 08:33 UTC

---

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



JSTOR

*Kenyon College* is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The Kenyon Review*

Hannah Arendt

## THE ACHIEVEMENT OF HERMANN BROCH <sup>1</sup>

**H**ERMANN BROCH belongs in that tradition of great 20th Century novelists who have transformed, almost beyond recognition, one of the classic art-forms of the 19th Century. The modern novel no longer serves as "entertainment and instruction" (Broch) and its authors no longer relate the unusual, unheard-of "incident" (Goethe) or tell a story from which the reader will get "advice" (W. Benjamin). It rather confronts him with problems and perplexities in which the reader must be prepared to engage himself if he is to understand it at all. The result of this transformation has been that the most accessible and popular art has become one of the most difficult and esoteric. The medium of suspense has disappeared and with it the possibility of passive fascination; the novelist's ambition to create the illusion of a higher reality or to accomplish the transfiguration of the real together with the revelation of its manifold significance has yielded to the intention to involve the reader in something which is at least as much a process of thought as of artistic invention.

The novels of Proust, Joyce and Broch (as well as those of Kafka and Faulkner who, however, each in his own way is in a class by himself) show a conspicuous and curious affinity with poetry on one hand and to philosophy on the other. Consequently, the greatest modern novelists have begun to share the poets' and philosophers' confinement to a relatively small, select circle of readers. In this respect, the tiny editions of the greatest works and the huge editions of good second-rate books are equally significant. A gift for story-telling which half a century ago could be found only among the great is today frequently the common equipment of good but essentially mediocre writers. Good second-rate production, which is as far removed from *kitsch* as it is from great art, satisfies fully the demands of the educated and art-loving public and has more effectively

---

1. THE SLEEPWALKERS, by *Hermann Broch*. Translated by Willa and Edwin Muir. Pantheon Books. 1948. \$5.00  
THE DEATH OF VIRGIL, translated by Jean Starr Untermeyer. Pantheon Books. 1945. \$5.50

estranged the great masters from their audience than the much-feared mass culture. More important for the artist himself is that a widespread possession of skill and craftsmanship and a tremendous rise in the general level of performance have made him suspicious of facility and mere talent.

The significance of *The Sleepwalkers* trilogy (whose German original appeared in 1931) is that it admits the reader to the laboratory of the novelist in the midst of this crisis so that he may watch the transformation of the art-form itself. Reaching back into three crucial years—1888, when *The Romantic* finds himself in the not yet visible decay of the old world; 1903, when *The Anarchist* gets entangled in the prewar confusion of values; 1918, when *The Realist* becomes the undisputed master of a nihilistic society—Broch seems to start in the first volume as an ordinary story-teller in order to reveal himself in the last as a poet whose main concern is judgment and not reporting, and as a philosopher who wants not just to portray the course of events but to discover and demonstrate logically the laws of movement governing the “disintegration of values.”

The first part, which consciously imitates the prose style of the 'eighties, is so skilfully told that one begins to understand the extent of sacrifice made by those great narrative talents who suddenly refused to continue telling tales about the world because they had realized that this world was going to pieces. The story stops abruptly with an unconsummated wedding night, and the author asks the reader to figure out the rest for himself, thereby upsetting the illusion of a created reality in which the author controls all events and the reader is admitted only as a passive observer. The fiction itself is expressly depreciated, its validity is set at an ironical and historical distance. The story is over not when the characters' private invented destinies have been played out, but when the historical essentials of the given period are established.

Thus one of the chief attractions of novel reading, the reader's identification with the hero, is consciously destroyed, and the daydreaming element, which always had brought the novel so suspiciously close to *kitsch*, is eliminated. *The Sleepwalkers* is of course a historical novel, but the point is that Broch is never engrossed in, and never permits the reader to become absorbed by, the story itself.

The first part of *The Sleepwalkers* describes the world of the Junker von Pasenow, whose youth is spent in military duty in Berlin, years of honor and boredom brightened only by the usual affair with some sweet

girl below his own class and therefore beyond responsibility, whom, however, against all rules, the lieutenant Pasenow seems to love truly, a fact which he himself realizes dimly through the fog of inarticulate class prejudices and under the shock of his unhappy wedding night. To the world in Berlin belongs Pasenow's friend, Eduard von Bertrand, who is about to desert the narrowness of Prussian aristocracy, has resigned from the army and set out on a civilian career as an industrialist. The world at home is made up of the landed nobility with their estates, the horses and fields and the servants, and their constant fight against emptiness, boredom and financial worries. Pasenow marries the "pure" daughter of his neighbors on the adjoining estate—just as it should be and just as everybody had expected.

Broch does not picture this world from the outside; even fifty years later when, simply because of contrast, one was easily impressed and fooled by its façade of stability, he did not trust its obvious indications. Instead he uses the technique of the stream of consciousness novel whose radical subjectivization allows him to present events and feelings only insofar as they are objects of consciousness, which, however, gains in significance what it has lost in objectivity by picturing the full meaning of each experience within its proper framework of biographical reference. This enables him to show the frightening discrepancy between the open dialogue which respects the conventional forms and the always panic-ridden thoughts that accompany speech and actions with the obsessive insistence of compulsive imaginations. This discrepancy reveals the fundamental fragility of the time, the insecurity and convulsiveness of those who were its representatives. It turns out that behind the façade of still strong prejudices is a complete incapacity for orientation and that the clichés that impress society because they seem to reflect principles are the only remnants of former nobility and glory. The discrepancy dissolves and a unity of character is established when the father of Pasenow sinks into a senile insanity which gives him the privilege of saying what he thinks and acting as compulsively as he pleases.

The second part retains only a few rudimentary examples of this technique. Its principal character, the bookkeeper Esch of petty-bourgeois origin, feels no need for pretenses and is therefore even more helpless, more openly confused, and at the mercy of the general decay. The idea of justice possesses him like a hallucination of a bookkeeper who wants to keep his accounts in good order. A man of "impetuous actions," he spends

his life settling imaginary accounts. The climax of this volume is a dream-like dialogue between Esch and Bertrand (from the first volume) after Esch, in his confused fanaticism, decided to denounce the beloved president of a shipping line for homosexuality. Bertrand's role in both volumes is the same: he appears as the only superior personality who is the master of his life and not a driven victim of events. As such he is the human yardstick against which the shady and shifty doings of the others are measured.

While the first part seemed to follow the tradition of the psychological novel, the second part seems to be realistic. Everything, except for the dialogue between Esch and Bertrand, happens on the tangible surface of reality. Yet this reality is no more fully and objectively presented than the psychology of the figures of the first part was objectively stated. The world of 1903 is a shadowy, sketchily drawn backdrop against which people act without any true contact between themselves so that their behavior becomes most compulsive when it seems most impetuous. Since the compulsive actions of the characters can find no common ground they constantly destroy or at least undermine the reality of the common world. Like the first, the second volume ends when the marriage of its hero seems to assure a normal, reasonably safe future. If only these two parts of the work existed, one might be left with the impression that the banality of everyday life eventually overcomes human perplexity and resolves confusion into some kind of middle-class normalcy.

The third part deals with the end of the first World War and the actual breakdown of a world which had held together and retained its right senses not by any "values," but only by the automatism of habits and clichés. The two heroes of the preceding volumes reappear: the lieutenant and junker Pasenow, returned to active duty during the war, has become a major and military commander of a small town in Western Germany; the former bookkeeper Esch is now editor of the town's newspaper. These two, the Romantic and the Anarchist, unite and become friends across all differences in class and education against the protagonist of the third volume, the Realist Huguenau who, after deserting the army, begins his successful career as a businessman. It is Huguenau's "realism," his consistent application of business standards to all fields of life, his emancipation from every value and every passion, which eventually demonstrate the Romantic's and the Anarchist's unfitness for life: for "objective" reasons, that is for reasons of his own logical self-interest, he slanders the

Major, murders the editor, and winds up a respected member of bourgeois society.

The technique of the narrative has again changed entirely. The story that binds together the heroes of the three volumes is broken by a wealth of episodes whose figures cross each other occasionally and which are woven and synchronized into the development of the main action. The most magnificent of these is the story of Goedecke of the Landwehr who had been buried alive and whom two comrades, on a wager, brought back to life. How the single organs and functions that were once the man Ludwig Goedecke slowly and piecemeal return to balance, how out of the decaying, doomed pieces a man rises up again who can speak and walk and laugh, how this "resurrection from the dead" resembles a second creation whose terrifying wonder lies in the animation and individualization of matter—this already foreshadows in its forcefulness of vision and language the most beautiful passages in *The Death of Virgil*.

The episodes that break into the narrative from all sides give the principal story—the story of the Romantic who believes in honor, of the Anarchist who seeks a new faith, and of the Realist who destroys them both—a somewhat episodic character. This impression is even strengthened through the introduction of two more levels of an entirely different kind, the lyrical parts of "The Story of the Salvation Army Girl" and the philosophical speculations about the "disintegration of values," which somehow bring the eternal to the historical narrative plane. Neither the lyrical nor the philosophical parts have anything to do with the story itself, although it is suggested that Bertrand reappears as the narrator of the love story of the Salvation Army girl and a Polish Jew whom the war has driven to Berlin. The point is that this story is a purely lyrical interlude, frequently in verses, and the reflections truly logical discourses.

In other words, the novel at its end breaks into lyricism on one side and philosophy on the other. This is indeed like a symbol of what was happening generally to the novel as form of art. Neither the passions which lent the traditional novel its suspense, nor the universal and spiritual which illuminated it, could any longer be preserved in the narrative. The transparency of the world for the universal and the passionate affection of the individual have disappeared through "the disintegration of values," which consists in the collapse of an integrated view and way of life and the consequent radical atomization of its various spheres,

each of which claims that its relative values are absolute. The universal and the rational on one side, the individual passion and the "irrational" on the other, have established themselves as the independent regions of philosophy and poetry.

*The Death of Virgil*, one of the truly great works in German literature, is unique in its kind. The uninterrupted flow of lyrical speculation leading through the last twenty-four hours of the dying poet begins when the ship that, in accordance with his imperial friend's desire, should carry him back from Athens to Rome, lies in at the port of Brundisium, and ends with the journey into death, when Virgil has left the feverish, over-articulated clarity of a conscious farewell to life and lets himself be led through all its remembered stages, over childhood and birth back into the calm darkness of chaos before and beyond creation. The journey leads into nothingness; but since it is an inverted story of creation, tracing all stages of world and man back to their creation out of nothingness, the journey also leads into the universe: "The no thing filled the emptiness and it became the universe."

The plot is dying itself in the sense that it is the story "of a man who feels the most significant thing of his life approaching and is full of anxiety lest he miss it." Apart from the introductory paragraph which describes the entry of the ship into the harbor, and which—comparable to the portrayal of Bohemia in the first pages of Stifter's *Wittico*—stands among the greatest literary landscapes in the German language, nothing is reported or perceived but what penetrates the invisible web woven of sensual data, fever visions and speculations which death has already spread over its victim. The richness of association produced through fever is used not only to transform one thing into another in an endless chain of association, but to bring each floating bit of memory into full actuality and to illuminate it in its universally interrelated meaningfulness, so that the contours of the concrete and the particular are at once brought into sharper relief *and* merged into a universal, dreamlike symbol pattern.

The philosophical content itself resembles a Spinozistic Cosmos- and Logos-speculation in which all things we know to be separate and particular appear as the ever changing aspects of an eternal One, so that the manifold is understood as the merely temporary individualization of an all-comprehensive whole. The philosophical basis of Broch's speculations on the all-meaningfulness of all things that exist or happen lies in a truly

pantheistic and panlogical hope of redemption in which eventually beginning and end, the "no thing" and the "universe" will prove to be identical. This hope illuminates the composition just as dying, understood as a conscious action, articulates it. The magnificent, fascinating rhythm of Broch's prose, which in the form of invocation reiterates constantly and always more insistently the fundamental themes of the work, is consistent with the gesture of farewell which yearns to save what is necessarily doomed as well as with an enthusiastic drunkenness with the universal being that can express itself only in exclamations.

In this sense, the theme of the book is truth, but a truth that, like a mathematical formula, should become manifest in *one* word in order to be fully expressed at all. The repeating insistence on words like Life, Death, Time, Space, Love, Help, Oath, Solitude, Friendship, is like the speculative attempt to penetrate to the *one* word in which from the beginning the universe and man and life have been "dissolved and acquitted," "contained and preserved," "destroyed and recreated forever," to the Word of God that was in the beginning and is "beyond speech."

The prose rhythm reflects the movement of philosophical speculation, somewhat as music reflects the movements of the soul. As distinguished from *The Sleepwalkers* suspense and tension are not thwarted and broken; the suspense and the tension are those of philosophical speculation insofar as it is, independent of all philosophical techniques, the still inarticulate passionate affection by the philosophical subject itself. And just as one who has been seized by the passion for philosophy is not simply haunted by one particular problem, just as the passionate tension of speculation is not relieved by results, the reader of this book is drawn into the tenseness of a movement which is beyond the suspense caused by a plot and carries him, like Virgil himself, through all its episodes and visions to the solution of eternal rest.

The reader is expected to surrender himself to this movement and to read the novel as though it were a poem. Suspended between life and death, between the "no longer" and "not yet," life reveals itself in that all-meaningful richness which becomes visible only against the dark background of death. At the same time, the "no longer and not yet" which permeates the work like a leitmotif signifies the turning point in history, the crisis between the no longer of antiquity and the not yet of Christianity, and its obvious parallel to the present. The philosophical significance of the crisis has a resemblance to the situation of farewell: a time



which despairs of everything, touches every possible problem with its questions and asks redemption from every possible need.

"No longer and not yet," "not yet and yet close at hand," have replaced as a general frame of reference Broch's earlier insistence on the "disintegration of values." With the insight into this crisis, this turning point in history, Virgil despairs of poetry and tries to destroy the manuscript of the *Aeneid*. In the hour of his death, the poet reaches a higher, more valid region than art and beauty. Beauty, irresponsible in and excluded from reality, pretends a spurious eternity; the artist's productivity pretends to be creation, that is, it arrogates to man what is the privilege of God. Whatever the nature and level of this make-believe, circus-games for the Roman populace or masterpieces of artists for the refined, it always satisfies on different levels the same vulgar ingratitude of men who will not admit their non-human origin, and it appeases their vulgar desire to escape reality and responsibility into "the unity of the world established by beauty." "Art's . . . despairing attempt to build up the imperishable from things that perish" makes the artist treacherous, self-seeking, unreliable and oblivious of the essentially human.

Seen within the framework of literary history, *The Death of Virgil* solves the problem of the new form and content of the novel that *The Sleepwalkers* raised. There the novel seemed to have reached an impasse between philosophy and lyricism, precisely because pure story-telling, entertainment and instruction, had been taken care of by extraordinary but second-rate talents. The historical significance of *The Death of Virgil* is the creation in both of a unity in which a new specifically modern element of suspense could materialize. It is as though only now those purely artistic elements which always gave the traditional novel its literary validity, the lyrical passion and the transfiguration of reality through the universal, have emancipated themselves from the merely informative and found a new and valid form.