

A SYMPOSIUM AS ORNAMENT?
HERMANN BROCH'S SCHLAFWANDLER TRILOGIE AND THE
DISCOURSE OF ART AND PHILOSOPHY IN THE MODERN NOVEL

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Es hat seit dem Expressionismus, ja vielleicht überhaupt in der ersten Hälfte dieses Jahrhunderts wohl kaum einen deutschen Dichter gegeben, der die Probleme der Moderne und insbesondere der modernen Dichtung, genauer: des modernen Romans, in so vielfältiger und umfassender Weise durchdachte wie Hermann Broch. (Brinkmann 347)

It would be fair to say that Richard Brinkmann's 1957 evaluation of the Austrian author Hermann Broch maintains a degree of verity in German literary scholarship. Along with Thomas Mann, Alfred Döblin, and Robert Musil, Broch's oeuvre is still considered to be exemplary of late-modernist prose in the German language. His novel, *Die Schlafwandler: Eine Romantrilogie*, in particular, has become a standard for those interested in delineating the "Deutsche Roman der Moderne"; both in terms of its topic and in terms of its narrative form (Durzak 287; Petersen 38). Broch claimed that in writing *Die Schlafwandler*, he had attempted to create a new *type* of novel, one similar to experiments by contemporaries such as James Joyce, John Dos Passos, and André Gide. Central to Broch's conception of this new novel is the unity of reflection, plot, and style, and in fact it is on the basis of what he termed this "einheitliche Geschlossenheit" that he felt the form of the novel could be renewed. I would like to look at how this unity is achieved in *Die Schlafwandler* by considering the philosophical and architectonic status of "Das Symposium oder Gespräch über die Erlösung," a dialog passage that appears in "Huguenuau oder die Sachlichkeit."

Die Schlafwandler was written by Broch between 1928 and 1931, and it comprises three books. Each book is set in a different historical period – 1888, 1903, and 1918, respectively – and each presents a different story. Characters from the first two run over into the third, however, and there is a unity, as I mentioned above, to the trilogy's theme. Before I enter into a discussion of the symposium dialog and its relation to this theme, it might be best to provide a cursory review of the main points of the novel's plot.

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The first book, "Pasenow oder die Romantik," is set in and around Berlin at the end of the nineteenth century. Lieutenant Joachim von Pasenow is the son of a Prussian landowner. The military and social traditions that have come to define his life are beginning to unravel around him. It is a gradual dissolution depicted in the book through his relationships with his father, his friend Eduard von Bertrand, and Ruzena, a girl from a local theatre with whom he has fallen in love. Joachim has a brief affair with Ruzena, but eventually ends their relationship and marries the daughter of a neighbouring landowner. His decision to marry Elisabeth Baddensen is a culmination of the romanticism to which the title refers; like the antiquated customs and habits that structure his life, Joachim's marriage is an empty formality and an attempt to escape from the changing realities of the world around him.

The second book is set in the industrial milieu of Cologne and Mannheim at the turn of the century. "Esch oder die Anarchie" centers on August Esch, a bookkeeper who develops an idiosyncrasy following his dismissal from a shipping company; he feels that the world is full of tiny, bookkeeping errors. Esch's attempt to trace these errors to what he perceives to be their origin fails, and he retreats into a world of utopian plans and dreams. He develops an idealized image of America and decides to go there to escape the pressures of his lower-class life, and he even invests his savings in a variety show, hoping that the profits will help him to leave Germany. Esch's restlessness and his constant desire to bring about some sort of social revolution constitute the "anarchy" to which the title of the second book refers. These impulses lead Esch to a confrontation with Bertrand, now an industrialist, and into an almost mystical relationship with Mutter Hentjen, the owner of a small tavern. Eventually Esch loses everything invested in the variety show and marries Mutter Hentjen.

Events in the third book take place toward the end of the First World War, in a little town on the Mosel. Both Esch and Pasenow reappear in "Huguenau oder die Sachlichkeit" (the former as the owner of the town's newspaper, the latter as its military governor), and so too do Bertrand and Mutter Hentjen. A deserter, Wilhelm Huguenau, arrives in the town and immediately proceeds to manipulate Esch out of his ownership of the newspaper and subsequently attains a certain prominence among the townspeople. But Huguenau lives in fear that his desertion from the army will be discovered, and the story that unfolds in the third book centers for the most part on his attempt to win the favor of Major Pasenow and to prevent any friendship from developing between the latter and Esch. "Huguenau oder die Sachlichkeit" includes various other story lines running parallel to, and at times crossing, the principal story of Huguenau, Esch, and Pasenow. Each of these secondary story lines concerns a different character in the town. Lieutenant Jartzki, for example, has lost an arm in battle and tries to come to terms with his situation through alcohol. Hannah Wendling is a young woman who slowly loses her sense of connectedness to her husband, to her marriage, and finally to the world around her. Gödicke is a soldier who had been buried alive in the trenches and whose "resurrection" is in effect a gradual reconstruction of his identity. Also embedded in this third book are a narrative and an essay. The narrative, "Geschichte des Heilsarmeemädchens in Berlin," is recounted by a convalescent in the Berlin home

of a group of Jewish refugees. As the third book unfolds, we discover that this convalescent is actually Bertrand, and that he is also the author of the essay, “Zerfall der Werte.” Broch later wrote that in putting together the complex narrative of “Huguenau oder die Sachlichkeit” he intended to weave all of the separate stories together like a carpet:

im *Huguenau* ist eine neue Technik versucht [...] Das Buch besteht aus einer Reihe von Geschichten, die alle das gleiche Thema abwandeln, nämlich die Rückverweisung des Menschen auf die Einsamkeit – eine Rückverweisung, die durch den Zerfall der Werte bedingt ist – und die Aufzeigung der neuen produktiven Kräfte, die aus der Einsamkeit entspringen, wenn sie tatsächlich manifest geworden ist. Diese einzelnen Geschichten, untereinander teppichartig verwoben, geben jede für sich eine andere Bewußtseinslage wieder: sie steigen aus dem völlig Irrationalen (“Geschichte des Heilsarmee Mädchens in Berlin”) bis zur vollständigen Rationalität des Theoretischen (“Zerfall der Werte”). Zwischen diesen beiden Polen spielen die übrigen Geschichten auf gestaffelten Zwischenebenen der Rationalität. Auf diese Art wird die Sinngebung der Gesamtrilogie erzielt, und ebenso wird der metaphysisch-ethische Gehalt [...] mit aller Deutlichkeit zum Ausdruck gebracht. (quoted in Durzak, 1966, 76)

The “Zerfall der Werte” that Broch describes is presaged by both Pasenow’s romanticism and Esch’s anarchism, and it culminates in Huguenau’s “Sachlichkeit”; at the end of the third book, after coldbloodedly murdering Esch by stabbing him in the back, Huguenau later cheats Esch’s widow, Mutter Hentjen, out of all her savings.

“Sachlichkeit” is in itself a difficult term to translate into English; it can be thought of as “objectivity,” as “matter-of-factness,” or perhaps even as “functionalism.” All of the principal characters in *Die Schlafwandler* suffer from what might be called a disconnected perception of reality – with the exception of Huguenau. Unlike Pasenow and Esch, Huguenau is rooted in the objective here and now of the world. His relations with the other characters depend upon their usefulness to his plans, and he spends little time reflecting upon his actions. The problem, or idea, with which Broch was trying to come to terms in the character of Huguenau, was general to the period in which he wrote *Die Schlafwandler*. Huguenau not only confronts reality, but also creates it for himself by removing any secondary or ethical reflection from his actions. Broch is ambivalent when it comes to providing a final judgment of Huguenau and his Machiavellian attitude. At the end of the novel, Huguenau returns home and becomes a successful businessman. It is not that the novel is devoid of alternatives; in fact *Die Schlafwandler* is a perfect example of the interpretive possibilities that arise from what contemporary literary theorists have termed “the turn to narrative.” My present concern, however, is with the actual structure or “Architektonik” of the novel.

Broch conceived his novel as a tangible structure and often used terms such as “Architektur” and “Architektonik” when describing the composition of *Die Schlafwandler*. As some of his readers have noted, it is not insignificant that a discussion of modernist architecture is included in the embedded essay in the third

book, “Zerfall der Werte.” Its author, Bertrand, begins the second part of his essay by commenting, “vielleicht ist das Entsetzen dieser Zeit in den architektonischen Erlebnissen am sinnfälligsten [...] hinter all meinem Ekel und meiner Müdigkeit steckt eine alte sehr fundierte Erkenntnis, die Erkenntnis, daß es für eine Epoche nichts Wichtigeres gibt als ihren Stil” (436). Paul Michael Lützeler has termed Broch the “kulturphilosophische Romanschriftsteller par excellence,” and has provided the most detailed interpretation to date of the novel in relation to Broch’s writings on the philosophy of culture. Like a number of authors of his generation, Broch was influenced by epochal theories of culture. Lützeler has shown how Broch’s earlier thoughts on modernist architecture are repeated in “Zerfall der Werte,” and he has also pointed to aspects of the “Architektur” of the novel that can be thought of as realizations of this theory. I would like to review some of Lützeler’s arguments before I turn to the question of the “Symposion-Gespräch” (see Lützeler, 1996, 289-297).

At the turn of the century, the Viennese architect Adolf Loos helped to set the tone for the later development of modernist architecture when he advocated the removal of decorative ornaments and greater emphasis on functional considerations in the construction of buildings. Loos’s criticism was directed at the type of aestheticism that had produced the various “neo” architectural styles (Gothic, Classic, Romantic) over the course of the nineteenth century. It is a criticism that was shared in certain respects by Broch himself. He used similar arguments to distinguish between art and kitsch, which he saw as “Mache” or “Dekorationsbombast” – an attempt to hide the lack of a central value through aesthetic decoration. But Broch also pointed to what he saw as the wider consequences of a total reduction of style to function. Loos was not simply describing architecture; he was writing from within that disintegration of a system of values he set out to criticize, and the problem, according to Broch, lay in Loos’s evaluation of the ornament.

An ornament could be decorative and merely fulfill an aesthetic function, but for Broch it was also indicative of the style of a period in art history, and in this sense an ornament was not merely decoration; it completed a work of art by summarizing it and expressing its essence on a smaller scale. Accordingly, an approach to architecture that removed the ornament from its theoretical considerations, such as that proposed by Loos, could also reveal something about the epoch in which it appeared. In spite of his stated intentions, Loos’s proposition was similar to a concept of art reduced to the aesthetic (*l’art pour l’art*) and to a system of values that had fractured into various independent systems of values with their own absolute logic. The author of “Zerfall der Werte” points out that the one quality which distinguishes modernist architecture from all previous architectural styles is the removal of the ornament, and that proponents of modernism have failed to recognize that the ornament is not merely an accessory; in its medial position, it provides the basis for any representation of a broader, or perhaps it would be better to say “deeper,” unity between the two:

“Baustil” ist Logik, ist eine Logik, die das Gesamtbauwerk durchdringt [...] und innerhalb dieser Logik ist das Ornament bloß das letzte, der differentiale Ausdruck im kleinen für den einheitlichen und einheitssetzenden Grundgedanken des Ganzen. (437)

The ornament is the only art form that cannot exist autonomously; as such, it provides the starting point for Bertrand’s thoughts on the broader collapse of a universal system of values.

Lützelzer has suggested that Broch incorporated his thoughts on the ornament by including “textual” markers in the novel that can be thought of as realizations of Bertrand’s thoughts in the essay (299-303). In the first book, the military uniform assumes the role of ornament, and in the second book the variety show fulfills this function. Both motifs, according to Lützelzer, are decorations; they hide the loss of a central value rather than help to bring expression to it. And both are restricted to the level of the diegesis. In the third book, it is the essay itself that takes on this role, but Lützelzer believes that in this case, it represents an authentic ornament as it is conceived by Bertrand (and, ultimately, Broch):

Das Gebäude findet seine ästhetische Vollendung im Ornament, und der Roman *Die Schlafwandler* findet seine Abrundung im “Zerfall der Werte”. So sinnlos ein Ornament ohne Gebäude, so sinnlos “Der Zerfall der Werte” ohne die Romanhandlung. (Lützelzer 298)

The essay grows out of the novel by integrating and discussing on a theoretical level all of the problems associated with the disintegration of values in the story. There are two other major compositional moments in the third book: “Geschichte des Heilsarmeemädchens in Berlin” and “Das Symposion oder Gespräch über die Erlösung.” I would like to discuss now whether the latter can be considered as an ornament or decoration on the basis of what I have just described.

“Das Symposion oder Gespräch über die Erlösung” takes place in the home of Esch and Mutter Hentjen. The editor, his wife, Major Pasenow, and Huguenau are seated at a table. The narrator introduces the dialog, which ensues as a “Theaterszene” (551), and the form of the “Symposion-Gespräch” is the same as we would expect to find in a dramatic script or perhaps even the libretto of an opera. Dialog is rendered directly, although there are italicized passages that might pass for stage directions or prompts. The narrator also lets us know that this “Theaterszene” is a symbol. In fact, in the atomized and mediated world of *Die Schlafwandler*, it is the symbol of a symbol, a symbol “zweiter, dritter, n-ter Ableitung” (551).

In the opening dialog, Esch asks the Major if he would like another glass of wine. He declines, and Huguenau remarks, pretentiously, that it is a harmless wine and that the most the Major would have to fear from it is “einen einfachen natürlichen Rausch..., man schläft ein, wenn man genug hat, das ist alles” (552). Esch interjects that to be drunk is never natural: “ein Rausch,” he says, “ist eine Vergiftung” (552). Huguenau, interpreting this as a taunt, replies in kind that he can recall times when Esch himself had drunk more than his share of wine in the local tavern. And looking over at Esch, he adds “übrigens [...], gar so unvergiftet kommen Sie mir nicht vor” (552). The Major, sensing perhaps that this denigration of Esch is being staged for his ears, tells Huguenau that his comments are

deplorable. Huguenau persists, and goes so far as to call Esch a wolf in sheep's clothing, "ja, dabei bleibe ich... und, mit Verlaub zu sagen, seine Räusche tut er im geheimen ab" (552). What follows in the "Symposion-Gespräch" corresponds to the dramatic pattern set out in these opening lines. Huguenau, self-centered, sarcastic, and trying to draw the Major away from Esch, is himself excluded from the increasingly esoteric discussion between the other two men. Esch, following his own train of thought, breaks from it only occasionally to respond to Huguenau. The Major complements what Esch has to say, although it is clear from their exchange that he is also trying to draw Esch in a particular direction with his thoughts.

Numerous biblical references, and also allusions to other parts of the trilogy, are integrated into the "Symposion-Gespräch." The Major quotes the Lutheran Bible, and some of Esch's comments are reminiscent of his earlier conversation with Bertrand in the second book, when he visits the industrialist. Symbols are always difficult to interpret definitively, and I would like to suggest three possible ways in which the "Symposion-Gespräch" might be approached in relation to the theme of *Die Schlafwandler*.

First, in terms of the story, the dialog marks the point at which Huguenau becomes aware of both Pasenow's animosity toward him and the favorable opinion Pasenow has of Esch. The dynamic between Huguenau and Pasenow is one of the more interesting aspects of the third book, and it is never really clear if the former's mollification is self-serving or sincere. This fine line between rational and irrational action is, as Broch often pointed out, a principal element of *Die Schlafwandler*, and it finds its quintessence in Huguenau's attitude towards Pasenow.

Second, in respect of the essay, the dialog can be considered in relation to Bertrand's thoughts on religion. "Auf dem Tische," the narrator tells us in describing the scene, "das Brot und der Wein." Bread and wine are central to the Christian Holy Communion and are, at least since Hölderlin's famous poem, motifs associated in the German culture with a general unifying impulse. In the course of the dialog, Esch and Pasenow try to draw each other in a particular direction with their comments, and at the end they do reach a synthesis, but it is in the form of the song of the "Heilsarmee," something I will return to later.

Third, with regard to the novel's philosophy, and by that I mean Broch's comments on weaving the different story lines in the third book together like a carpet – what he would elsewhere call its polyhistoricism – the dialog is a "Symposium"-dialog. The Platonic original was rooted in the ancient Greek custom in which a group of men, after a meal and over wine, would discuss a topic chosen by a Symposiarch. Plato created an original philosophical genre based on this ritual, and it is this "Symposium" form, which the Romantics later imitated in their "Symphilosophieren" and to which the title of the dialog refers.

But is it an ornament or decoration? Most probably, it is a decoration. In spite of the fact that the "Symposion-Gespräch" condenses many of the principal themes of the novel, it ends in the song of "Heilsarmee." The "Zerfall der Werte" discusses architecture, philosophy, and also religion. Bertrand is extremely critical of Protestantism, and describes it as just another symptom of the disintegration of values. He does not consider it a religion (and therefore capable of instituting a new

hierarchy of values), but rather as a sect, and he regards the Salvation Army itself as the quintessential Protestant sect:

Religionen entstehen aus Sekten und zerfallen wieder in Sekten, kehren zu ihrem Ursprung zurück, ehe sie sich gänzlich auflösen. Am Anfang des Christentums standen die einzelnen Christus- und Mithraskulte, an seinem Ende stehen die grotesken amerikanischen Sekten, steht die Heilsarmee. (578)

Given the option of joining Marie, the Salvation Army girl, Bertrand chooses to stay with the Jewish refugees because he believes it is the most honorable choice available to him. If the “Symposion-Gespräch” is considered a decoration, however, then it might also give an indication of two directions in which the author of *Die Schlafwandler* did not see a possibility of renewal (at least at the time that the novel was written): in the Christian church and in Platonism. The ethical trajectory is similarly directed away from the past, but what distinguishes *Die Schlafwandler* is precisely this mixture of narrative and essay. Broch does not argue only from a position “beyond good and evil,” he also depicts what he perceives to be its effects on the various characters in his novel. This “what he perceives to be” is perhaps the strongest argument that can be made against the ethical component of *Die Schlafwandler*.

In conclusion, I would like to touch upon a ubiquitous problem in recent literature on Broch, namely whether or not he should be considered a modernist or a post-modernist. At a recent conference, a novel by Thomas Mann was described as pre-postmodern. An elderly gentleman, somewhat perplexed, asked whether or not pre-postmodern simply meant modern; it is a question that might be asked of several German and Austrian authors whose novels are considered representative of late modernist prose. Lützel has answered this question in favor of modernism for Broch, but in order to do this he focuses on Broch’s Platonism. In Broch’s insistence upon the need for a universal system of values, or at the very least his nostalgic recollection of it, Lützel believes that Broch is on the other side of the philosophical divide when it comes to the central debate on the “grand narratives” (Lützel 302). But I think that we could also take into consideration Broch’s concept of a textual “Architektur” in this regard. The early theory of postmodernism was also informed by discussions about the larger role of architecture in society, and Charles Jencks’s study *What is Post-modernism?* is a good example of this. Jencks hinted that one of the many revivals of postmodern architecture was the ornament, an ornament which not only grew out of the building to which it was attached but also helped to situate it in the broader community in which it was built. In this respect, Broch is not quite as modernist as he might seem at first glance, and I mention this only in order to suggest that the answer to a question that continues to perplex North American literary scholars – “What is a Postmodernist Text?” – might be found in the work of seemingly modernist authors such as Broch. The conclusion of *Die Schlafwandler* carries what would appear to be Broch’s inscription: “Schluß der *Schlafwandler* / Wien 1928-31” (716). And this leads to a final question: Is the contemporary “return of the author,” or what some critics refer to as “narcissistic narrative,” an ornament or a decoration?

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