**Hermann Broch (1886-1951)**

Hermann Broch is best known as a philosophically attuned novelist. Above all he is the author of two extraordinarily accomplished works of European modernist fiction: *Die Schlafwandler* (*The Sleepwalkers*) (1932) and *Der Tod des Vergil* (*The Death of Virgil*) (1945). After the Nazi seizure of power in 1933, Broch focused on charismatic politics, perverted religious feeling, and the contagious madness of crowds in a new novel. It concerns a wandering demagogue who seduces and corrupts the peasants of a Tyrolean village. Broch never felt satisfied with the book and did not complete or publish any of its three versions. The most fully developed of the three was published posthumously in 1953 as *Die Verzauberung* (*The Spell*). Broch’s failure to complete this book was predicated on his sense of literature’s impotence in the face of political violence. He turned to activism, writing antifascist tracts and developing his *League of Nations Resolution* (1936/37), which pressured that organization to take a stand against European fascism. When the Nazis annexed Austria, Broch fell into the hands of the Gestapo: as a converted Jew he was especially vulnerable. With the support of James Joyce and others, he escaped Nazi Austria in 1938.

Broch grew up in Vienna as the son of a prosperous textile industrialist, entering the firm in 1908. But by 1927 he had taken control of and then liquidated the family business in order to study mathematics, philosophy, and psychology at the University of Vienna and support the lifestyle of an independent intellectual. He simultaneously began work on a trilogy of novels entitled together *The Sleepwalkers*. This trilogy established his reputation as a leading Austrian and German writer. It explores a line of thought — similar to Nietzsche’s view of European decadence and Max Weber’s sense of Western disenchantment — that the modern world is sinking into a state of spiritual decline. The third volume of *The Sleepwalkers*, entitled *1918 ‐ Huguenau oder die Sachlichkeit*, includes sections in which the narrator offers a philosophical theory of culture. This essayist-narrator is not Broch himself but a fictional figure, Dr. Bertrand Müller, who is simultaneously inside and outside the story. Müller develops a set of essays, interpolated into the novel, that expound an epistemologically oriented theory of values he calls “der Zerfall der Werte” — the disintegration of values. However, this self-reflective novel simultaneously advances the countervailing thought that philosophy and science have an inherent limit beyond which they cannot advance: ethics and values necessarily elude the grasp of instrumental reason. Art, especially the novel, must step in and assert itself where scientific and philosophical thought end. “The novel and its new form,” wrote Broch to his publisher in 1931, “have assumed responsibility for taking over those parts of philosophy that address metaphysical needs but which contemporary philosophy regards as ‘unscientific’ or, as Wittgenstein says, ‘mystical.’” Like Robert Musil, Samuel Beckett, and Milan Kundera, Broch believes that the novel can say things that can be said in no other way.

The rise of Hitler in Germany and Austria forced Broch into exile. He fled first to Scotland, where he lived with his translators Willa and Edwin Muir briefly. Then with aid of Thomas Mann, Albert Einstein, and others he obtained a visa to the United States. He lived first in New York City (1938-1942), then in Princeton, New Jersey (1942-49), and finally in New Haven, Connecticut (1949-1951), where he was loosely affiliated with Yale University. Broch’s European prestige meant little in America. The family wealth was long gone, his English was not strong, and he found himself in continual need of money for the most basic necessities. He lived hand to mouth from stipends, prizes, grants, and the kindness of friends.

Despite their penury, Broch’s American years (1938-1951) were full of political and intellectual projects, including many essays and an introduction to an English-language edition of Hugo von Hofmannsthal. It burgeoned into a book-length manuscript amounting to a study of European modernism. He also worked on a never-completed theory of mass hysteria (*Die Massenwahnpsychologie*), and tracts on human rights. His conspicuously lively correspondence is voluminous and included many luminaries of the time. But he worked most fruitfully on his novel *The Death of Virgil* (1945). The novel explores the last eighteen hours of the mortally ill poet’s life as he returns from Greece to Rome. Broch’s highly wrought, lyrical style attempts to illumine the elusive moments of human experience and consciousness that reason and discursive language cannot capture. A central theme is the legend that Virgil intended to destroy his masterpiece, the *Aeneid*. In Broch’s telling, Virgil cannot accept the thought that his childhood friend, the emperor Augustus, will take up the poem and exploit it as a celebration of the Roman empire in general and of his own tyrannical rule over it in particular. This extraordinary novel is not historical fiction in the usual sense. Rather, it is a unique exploration of art’s meaning and limitations at the outermost limit of human experience. Broch saw Virgil’s Rome as a crucial moment of historical upheaval that parallels the modernist era. The great poet’s confrontation with death is the novel’s decisive element as Broch uses language against itself to explore its potential for yielding knowledge that can be gained in no other way.

Broch died in 1951 as he was planning a move from New Haven to France. His archive is at Yale University’s Beinecke Library.

**Key Works**

*Die Schlafwandler* (1931-1932, *The Sleepwalkers* 1932)

*Die Unbekannte Grösse: Roman* (1933, *The Unknown Quantity*, 1935)

*Der Tod des Vergil* (1945, *The Death of Virgil* 1945)

*Die Schuldlosen* (1950, *The Guiltless*, 1974)

*Die Verzauberung* (1953, *The Spell* 1987)

*Hugo von Hofmannsthal and his Time: The European Imagination, 1860-1920*. Ed. Michael P. Steinberg. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

*Geist and Zeitgeist: The Spirit in an Unspiritual Age: Six Essays*. Ed. John Hargraves. New York: Counterpoint, 2002.

**References and Further Reading**

Dowden, Stephen D., ed. (1988) *Hermann Broch, Literature, Philosophy, Politics*: *The 1986 Yale Symposium,* Columbia, SC: Camden House.

Kessler, Michael and Paul Michael Lützeler, eds. (2013) *Hermann Brochs Gesamtwerk: Neue Studien und Berichte*, New York: de Gruyter.

Lützeler, Paul Michael (1987) *Hermann Broch: A Biography*, London: Quartet.

Lützeler, Paul Michael, ed. (2003) *Hermann Broch, Visionary in Exile: The 2001 Yale Symposium*. Rochester, NY: Camden House.