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Neither here nor there – Hermann Broch’s Writing in Exile

On May 9th of 1951, the Austrian emigrant Hermann Broch wrote a letter to his publisher, Daniel Brody. Broch, who had been living in New York since 1938, was considering returning to Europe, but still hesitated, and expressed his doubts in a joke that may be read emblematically:

Two friends travel across the Atlantic, one from Europe to America, the other in the other direction. By chance, the two ships meet in the middle, all passengers stand at the rail and wave to each other. As the two friends recognize each other, both shout with one voice: “Are you meschugge?” (Broch and Brody 1971, 1055–1056)¹

This seems to express a basic truth about exile: that both directions of the passage remain problematic. Neither is it possible for the emigrant to return ‘home’, since home might have changed dramatically and might actually not even exist any longer as home. Nor does it make sense to go abroad, into the open, into the land of freedom, at least not for a writer and a political intellectual. For Broch realizes very well how little his influence in exile is and how important it might be to come closer to his literary audience. If the joke makes sense, the exile it figures is not simply a condition of homelessness, of being different and in difference, but a more complex situation. It is a double bind, and especially after 1945, when exile was no longer a question of fate, but of choice, many intellectuals had to face this double bind. Broch, however, would not have to make a choice, because just one month after putting his jest to paper, he died in exile.

Given this double bind, the condition of exile is still not merely a negative condition. What nonetheless remains is the movement between both shores of the Atlantic as well as between the different dimensions of the question of home and exile. As we will see, Broch carefully balances his writings in various regards: He tries to make sense of the American experience without loosing ties to Europe, he tries to combine political activity with poetic practice, he tries to get his writings translated into English and he maintains contact with European publishers, as here with Brody, who was in Zurich by that time.

1 Apart from *The Death of Virgil* all citations of Broch are translated by Timothy Kyle Boyd.

Translated by Timothy Boyd

What remains, secondly, is the sea as the emblem of a permanently instable and insecure condition of being. It is probably not by chance that Broch, reflecting on his exile and its possible end, includes four – albeit much less telling – “maritime jokes” in his letter. For the sea itself may stand for the lack of position of the modern endangered subject. Its relation to home, its ‘identity’, is only a mere remembrance or an expectance directed to the one or to the other shore.

Thirdly, in all distress, the meeting with the friend remains, even on the high sea – a meeting nonetheless, which is actually the aim and content of the letter and the joke as well. Writing to the distant friend is a genuine gesture of exile that relates the isolated subject to a context, but at the same time, the sheer act of writing to someone distant, with all its epistolary gestures, exposes the very distance of separation that constitutes the condition of exile. Broch, as we will see, as a manic writer of letters, constantly plays on the situation in which he has both lost a proper place and makes sense of this loss.

Finally, what remains is the joke itself. As is often the case, the joke consists of a shortcut between two perspectives, between the semantics of home and of exile, which actually mirror each other: Exile as a privation and exile as freedom. The joke not only shows us that Broch was able to assume both perspectives, but that he can also make sense of their very clash, to play with them as he generally loves to play with the different roles of the emigrant, e.g. when he quotes a suavian phrase: ‘Ich bin überall a bissele ungerm’ or states that he felt “exclusively diasporesque” throughout his life (Broch 1981c, 356; 143). In these phrases and jokes, exile is not a simple and single condition but consists precisely in the combination and overdetermination of its different aspects.

Exile can actually mean very different things in very different ways: It is a quotable topos, an experience and a situation. It is also a trope that orients literary speech in fluctuations between religious, political and biographical registers. Exile is thirdly a concept, the attempt to comprehend something. It is fourthly a political task which posits the question of what is to be done in exile. Fifthly, it is ultimately also a self description and autobiographical figuration of the subject.²

In the following, I will attempt to develop these aspects in the writings of Hermann Broch by 1) examining the use of the semantics of exile in his early writings, 2) describing Broch’s own experience of exile, 3) carving out the workings of an aesthetics of exile in *The Death of Virgil*, 4) examining Broch’s theory of

2 cf. Elisabeth Bronfen’s analysis for a sketch of the primary metaphors of the loss of paradise, the loss of the mother and of innocent childhood, and the loss of unambiguous expression (Bronfen 1993, 167–183).

mass hysteria, which is primarily a theory of exclusion and thereby of exile, 5) reflecting in particular on his concept of human rights in between theology and politics, and finally, 6) returning to the beginning and coming to speak about the time after exile, from whence a retrospective of the history of the subject can occur.

Rootless

Broch's elaborations about exile came late in his writings, but they were long in preparation, for he was using the topos of exile long before he actually went into exile himself. Hermann Broch was born in 1886 as the son of Joseph Broch, who came from a poor Jewish family from Moravia and worked his way up to becoming the owner of a textile factory.³ Hermann was baptized in 1909 and managed his father's factory before emerging with philosophical and art-critical texts at the end of the twenties and ultimately publishing the three-volume novel *Die Schlafwandler* (The Sleepwalkers) 1930–1932, which made him a known author. The novel creates a period portrait in three stages, 1888, 1903 and 1918, and in some measure, it tells the story of the decline and dissolution of Europe.⁴ It is also a highly interesting literary experiment with regard to what it means to impart the history of nihilism. When Broch unfolds this story as a critique of modernity – by thoroughly modern means – against the contrasting backdrop of a medieval culture, he is following a philosophical Catholicism like that of Max Scheler and Carl Schmitt, to whom one of his concurrent essays on the logic of a collapsed world is also dedicated.⁵ Here, Broch appears to be anything other than exilic or estranged; more like pontifical.

In these speculations the image of the Jew and also the image of exile at first appear only negatively. In one of the theoretical excursuses in the third part of *Die Schlafwandler*, we read a reflection on the historical meaning of the Jew:

The Jew, by virtue of the abstract rigor of his infinitude, is the modern, the 'most advanced' human par excellence: it is he who devotes himself with absolute radicality to the once chosen area of value or profession, it is he who elevates the 'career', the gainful occupation which he has gotten into, to a hitherto unrealized absoluteness, it is he who, without a tie to any other area of value and devoted to his action with unconditional rigor, glorifies himself to the highest mental performance, degrades himself to the most animal-like depravity of the material: in evil as in good, yet always remaining in the extreme, – it is as if the current

3 Regarding the biography, cf. Lützel (1985).

4 Cf. Manfred Durzak (1978, 61–79).

5 Regarding this tradition cf. Kiss (1988, 109–121) and Vitzhum (1989, 69–100).

of the absolutely abstract, which has flowed for two thousand years like a hardly visible runnel of the ghetto next to the great river of life, should now become the main river [...]. (Broch 1978b, 581)

This characterization of the Jew as the epitome of the modern is not particularly original – and is not intended to be. It is, rather, a cultural topos that appears again and again in the stories about the genesis of the modern world, from Nietzsche to Werner Sombart and Max Weber.⁶ The Jew is radical, his monotheism is abstract – and precisely because of that he can represent modernity and its tendency toward abstraction. Because he is an outsider and lacks any fixed position, anything can become his calling; conversely, his professional work is inflated with religious import, so that the Jew – and not, like Max Weber claimed, the Protestant – stands at the origin of the ‘spirit of capitalism’. And this particular spirituality most effectively realizes itself in the ghetto, in the Jew’s situation of exile, in his isolation and rootlessness, for – thus reads the sociological subtext – it is the rootlessness that determines his spirituality.

So again, this is no original sociological or philosophical theory, but rather a quoting of the discourse of the period – and it shows that in this discourse, not only the Jew, but also exile were always and are repeatedly quoted, because the notion of the exile is always resonating along in public discourse. This was especially the case since the turn of the century. As the Kunstwart-debate about the Jewish role of the press exemplified, the cultural role of Jews is always being talked about, but also always in a masked manner, suppressed. Broch’s *Schlafwandler* is a discourse novel which picks up on this debate, thereby showing that exile is first of all a quotable cultural topos, a topos that imposes itself on discussion on the genealogy of modernity and is actually part of the self-conception of modernity – but on its concealed reverse side.

Moreover, Broch’s novel reflects this topos in a metafictional way. For it reveals that the historico-philosophical reflections on the crisis of modernity are in fact written by a desperate intellectual during the closing years of the war, who happens to live, of all places, in Berlin’s Jewish quarter among Jewish emigrants who are anything other than abstract, but accept and take care of him. The author of the quoted reflection ultimately refers to himself as a Jew and he writes a poem about Ahasver, the eternally wandering Jew. Jewishness thus has more facets than exilic estrangement, and that estrangement may be, at least in part, a mere projection of the modern subject.⁷

⁶ Cf. for example Liebschütz (1967).

⁷ Cf. Pazi (2001, 141–151).

Broch in exile

On March 13th, 1938, one day after the invasion of Austria by the National Socialists, Broch was arrested in Bad Aussee and imprisoned for three weeks. Because of his publications in the thirties, he was viewed as a dangerous liberal. After his release, he went to Vienna and experienced what he referred to in letters as a mass psychosis and a “moralische Schweinerei:” the Austrian's hysterical enthusiasm for Hitler and their shameless exploitation of their Jewish fellow citizens.⁸ In July of 1938, with 20 reichsmark in his pocket, he finally managed to emigrate to England. In October of the same year he relocated to the United States, where he lived until his death in 1951.

From the onset, Broch could rely on a strong and continuously growing network of friends and acquaintances. He came as an established author, and, most importantly, his first novel, *Die Schlafwandler*, had been translated into English and had received very positive reviews. He spoke English relatively fluently and was therefore often able to serve as a mediator between immigrants and the American public. He was soon active in a number of initiatives, the most prominent of which was presumably the City of Man group, an assembly of American and German-speaking intellectuals who produced various manifests for democratic politics.

So for Broch, exile did not entail isolation, as it did for many. On the contrary, he was soon complaining about the burden of correspondence. In this correspondence, not only does the aforementioned network manifest itself, but also the very condition of exile: It is precisely the excessive exchange of letters that marks the attempt to overcome distances and to maintain contact with the others in exile as an existential necessity. One could develop not only a poetics of postal correspondence, but also a specific poetology of exile from the countless and very diverse letters, from the engagement with the recipient and from the flood of everyday details, not the least of which was worry about the mail (did the letter arrive, was it stamped correctly, etc.).⁹

In spite of this high level of integration, Broch's lifestyle remained precarious. He had no place of permanent residence, but stayed in various boarding houses, in artist colonies outside of New York or in the homes of absent acquaintances. His financial situation was even more precarious. Although his numerous contacts secured an income for him, it was irregular and often hardly covered his

⁸ Regarding biography and exile cf. next to Lützel (1985) also Brude-Firna (1989, 132–160).

⁹ Cf. Scheichl (1994, 187–204). Even after the massive three volume edition of Broch's collected letters, further correspondences have constantly been published.

expenses; they were also often connected to obligatory assignments, such as editing a volume of Hugo von Hofmannstahl, whose writings Broch didn't really care for. Nonetheless, the preface, which was intended to be brief, ended up becoming an entire exposition that also served as a retrospective of his own life, as Broch constructed Vienna as the "center of the value-vacuum" and the "metropolis of kitsch" and read Viennese Modernism as a "gleeful apocalypse." (Broch 1975, 175)¹⁰

Most precarious of all, however, was the political experience, and not just the experience of what was happening in Germany and Austria. In historical retrospect, those who ended up in exile naturally appear as those who were saved in comparison to those who did not succeed in leaving Germany or Europe. But this is not necessarily the perspective of the exiled themselves. They were often not only affected by the grief of loss, but also by the fear of not being safe for long. Already in England, Broch had experienced massive anti-Semitism and had become aware of just how much sympathy Hitler had won abroad – specifically because of anti-Semitism. He also then discovered a fatal circle, that these sympathies were strengthened precisely by the refugees: "every emigrant ship must fuel the hatred against the uninvited guests, must ultimately function pro-Germanically." (Broch 1978, 32)¹¹ To the same degree as the western countries take in refugees, already existing resentments increase, as do the sympathies with their persecutors, because, as Broch finds: "nobody wants to abstain from declaring an unfortunate person guilty to boot." (Broch 1978, 32)

In the US he also senses a threat: "Besides, here is a wild country, and when it becomes nazified, which is by no means impossible, we will finally see what dictatorship really means." (Broch 1981b, 71) Not even America is a safe island, since for Broch it is far from impossible that here the "end of the world [...]" could take shape some degrees more intensively, and that the return to slavery for Jews, Negroes and other minorities will take place more brutally than elsewhere. Wall-street will have a quote for slaves, prime, subprime and defective [...]. By the way, who would purchase me privately anyway?" (Broch 1981b, 75)

There is certainly an aspect of cultural anti-Americanism in such interpretations, which is, however, broken by the humoresque turn from the political interpretation to the personal situation. What is of relevance here is that the experience of being endangered remains constitutive for Broch, regardless of how he views America. In other words, it is precisely because of the experience of exile

10 In a letter Broch writes that his book contained "a complete intellectual history– of course, only in basic outline – from 1860 through 1930." (Broch 1968, 138–188).

11 The first chapter of this text, written in 1939, entitled "Personal Observations," sums up Broch's experiences as an émigré.

that he attempts to encounter that experience not simply by means of cultural resentments – they can be vented in tirades about the food –, but rather by penetrating the situation politically. This is why there are numerous letters in which America is described very differently, much more positively: “As for me, I am certainly very happy to have decided on the crossing. Without knowing America, nothing valid can be said about democratic politics.” (Broch 1981b, 62)¹² Exile not only altered his political thinking, but, more importantly, it caused political problems to become essential questions for him in the first place.

Broch's letters written in exile therefore alternate between deep pessimism and hope, between fatalism and determination, as when he writes on April 1939: “If a miracle should yet occur – and it could only be a miracle –, that was capable of halting the disaster, then that miracle would have to be labored for.” (Broch 1981b, 134)¹³ Faced with the uncertainty of the private as well as of the political circumstances, Broch works as hard as he can; he constantly reworks his texts, his projects constantly get out of hand, without ever coming to an end:

More and more, I have come to the realization that one should really not start anything, because one never knows what might yet develop there; a novella suddenly becomes a novel, unawares a novel becomes a trilogy, that sprawls cancer-like and devours one. (Broch 1981c, 474)

It is this ‘sprawling’ [Wuchern] that particularly impacts his writing in exile, as a more detailed look will reveal.

The End of Art

Broch's desperation foremostly applies to his poetic work, because now, in the face of Europe's catastrophe, which was also a catastrophe of culture, literary writing seems senseless to him. In 1939 he writes to Else Spitzer that he always arrives too late. “I feel like a man who just quickly finishes writing his book only so that he can queue it into the Alexandrian library just before its burning.” (Broch 1981b, 72)¹⁴ The mention of the burning down of the Alexandrian library, which recurs in Broch's correspondence of this period, is itself a motif in his

¹² On the pertinence of America cf. Borgard (2005) as well as Weidner (2012).

¹³ For a psychoanalytical interpretation of his compulsive drive to work cf. Broch (1999, 76): “Work has become a frigid, jealous, sadistic, vengeful mother goddess, who can only be appeased, if I do soccage in her service day-in, night-out, but otherwise assigns horrible penance to me.”

¹⁴ Cf. also similar to this: Broch (1981b, 115; 137ff passim).

literary writings, particularly in *Der Tod des Vergil* [The Death of Virgil], the big novel that Broch wrote between 1938 and 1945. Remarkably enough, this novel was also translated immediately by Broch's friend Jean Starr Untermeyer, who undertook a painstaking effort to reproduce the specific tone and syntax of Broch's text in English.¹⁵

The novel describes the last day in the life of Virgil when, as legend would have it, he planned to burn his manuscript of the *Aeneid*. It therefore reflects two core experiences of Broch: the peril to life that Broch experienced during his imprisonment in Austria (a core part of the text was written in his prison cell) as well as a questioning of the usefulness of art. It is therefore of central relevance for a poetics of exile and simultaneously reveals how complex such a poetics must be.

The vision of a world in flames is omnipresent in the text, especially in the second part entitled *Fire – The Descent*. There, the poet is depicted as laying half asleep, haunted by memories and worries:

Oh, who wants to sleep while Troy is burning! Again and again! Now are the waves of the sea set to foaming, churned by the oar-strokes, cut by the furrowing ships, as their triple-beaked prows cleave the waters [...] –, the images persisted and were not to be banished; night after night terror had lifted him through the silence of the spectre-filled craters [...]!
(Broch 1972, 168)

We read a visionary dream-monologue that evokes a seemingly endless series of images transforming into one another, constantly losing their shape and form. Broch describes how for Virgil, in the process of recollecting his Aeneis,

[t]he memorable content of the poem was disappearing; whatever had been celebrated by the poem – seafaring and sunny strands, war and the sound of armies, the lot of the gods and the orbits of the starry courses – this and more besides, written down or unwritten, fell quite away, all of it stripped off, the poem had discarded it like a useless garment and was returning back into the unveiled nakedness of its hidden being, into the vibrating invisible from which poetry stems, subsumed again by the pure form, finding itself there like its own echo, like the soul housed in its crystal shell, singing of itself. (Broch 1972, 197)

As in many other passages, the text presents its own poetology: The act of recollecting the earlier work of writing decomposes its content and thereby negates that which the recollecting poet had achieved. The plan to incinerate the manuscript is only the consequence of this experience of dissolution, which is itself carried out by the text, as all that is told dissolves into uncertainty. This

¹⁵ Cf. Hargraves (2003, 217–229).

occurs on the one hand by way of the *style indirect libre* that is used throughout these passages. The third-person, simple past narrative remains dually focused, relating the visions of the poet both from within and without. On the other hand and most particularly, this dissolution occurs by way of the syntactical construction of the text, namely by the characteristic length and complexity of the Brochian sentences, which produces a floating discourse full of ambivalences, as when the text names its objects – sea voyage and sun shore – and simultaneously evokes their disappearance.

Both of these traits are characteristic of Broch's writings in exile, and perhaps also of exile literature in general. They reflect a labor on the language that is responding to the European avant-garde – for Broch, Joyce is the point of orientation in this regard –, but also to the specific conditions of the writer in exile, who is cut off from his native language and thus either has to reach back to historical objects or to create a language and a style of his or her own. Broch once wrote that it was important to him to explore what was linguistically possible in German, particularly for him as a Jew (Broch 1981b, 221).¹⁶

But the poetics of disappearance and dissolution also poses a political question, namely, the question about the usefulness of art. The third part of the book depicts Virgil's encounter with Augustus, who was once his friend and is now Caesar who has come to visit him on his deathbed to save the Aeneid from its planned destruction. The chapter consists of a dialogue about the relationship between art and politics in a crisis-ridden world that is transitioning from an old order to a new one. For the emperor, art should serve the needs of the audience and glorify life; Virgil, by contrast, attempts to illustrate that art doesn't represent life but rather death, that it is merely parabolic and can no longer portray the old order and not yet tell anything new.

“No longer and not yet,” Caesar, much dismayed, was weighing these words – “and between them yawns an empty space. [...] The empty spaces between the epochs” – Caesar's words continued, as if they were speaking by themselves, as if they were unfolding without his help, as if the words and not Caesar were soliloquizing: “the empty nothingness that yawns wide, the nothingness for which everything comes too late and too early, the empty abyss of nothingness beneath time and the aeons [...] must not be allowed to gape open [...]” Was it actually Caesar who said this? Or had the words of his most secret fear been speaking? Time flowed past mysteriously, the empty, shoreless stream that led to death, always cut into by the present, the present that constantly and elusively was being washed away: We stand between two epochs, Augustus; so call it expectancy, not emptiness. (Broch 1971, 335)

16 Regarding language in exile cf. Koepke (1985) and, specific for Broch, cf. Lützel (1988, 14–31).

In this passage, the present is interpreted as an epochal period of transition in which there can be no fulfilled art, i.e. in which art must necessarily fail. This is precisely the reason why Virgil intends to burn the Aeneid, as he explains here and throughout the entire dialogue with Caesar. But his explanations, as they are presented in the novel, begin to dissolve themselves, for we can soon no longer be sure whether we are participating in the dialogue or in Virgil's reflections. 'No longer and not yet' describes a poetological problem, because it is 'no longer and not yet' clear who is speaking. More and more, the debate becomes a dreamlike monologue in which everything is caught up in change, both that which is rationally stated, and also the manner of description. More and more, the narrative voice obtrudes on the dialogue, blurring boundaries. The conversation becomes increasingly erratic and open, and for Virgil, not only art but also the Roman Empire itself becomes a parable, whose meaning does not lie within itself, but in that which it points to: that which is yet to come.

Viewing the Roman Empire as a parable is simply too much for Caesar, who now becomes very direct and charges Virgil with secretly envying and hating him, providing an analysis of the poet in turn:

[...] first with false modesty you hypocritically slander your own work so as to be able to disparage mine more easily, and then you want to reduce it to a windy semblance of a sham-image [...]. I know you, Virgil; you seem to be gentle, and you love to be worshipped by the people for your purity and your virtue, but in reality your allegedly pure soul trembles constantly with hatred and malice, yes, I repeat it, it trembles with a most abject malice [...]. (Broch 1972, 388)

For Augustus, the poet is a passive-aggressive narcissist – a charge that Broch, who underwent psychoanalytical treatment for many years, repeatedly raised against himself. In *The Death of Virgil*, at any rate, the emperor's sudden outburst causes the otherwise dreamlike scene to suddenly get real. His ranting causes the "invisible solid ground" that had increasingly dissolved in the course of the conversation to again show itself. It is only now that Virgil decides to hand over the manuscript to Caesar, who by now, however, no longer wishes to accept it. It is not without humor that the long and convoluted conversation about the desired object should end with Caesar's getting loud and saying: "Now I no longer want it!" But ultimately the manuscript is handed over and the text becomes very clear and calm at this moment: Virgil and Augustus recall their old friendship and they talk about the color of a particular horse, which they once purchased. In concise, clear sentences about the concrete, they briefly engage in pure dialogue without the presence of a narrator and without the constant ambiguation of a dual focus. But this lingers only for a moment before Caesar has to depart for Rome with the manuscript, leaving the dying poet behind.

These dialogues on art are an important supplement to the negative aesthetics of the dream visions, which depicted the world in dissolution. They argue that there is something insufficient even about this depicting for it is based on ulterior aggressiveness and certainly does not equal reality. The question about the function of art in exile receives no answer, not even a negative one. Instead, it remains clamped between the poor alternatives of an endless stream of subjective images and the sheer facticity of a banal talk about horses.

If one recalls the above-cited passage about the burning of the library of Alexandria, it seems that the book is not that which will remain after the fire, but rather the fire itself. It is art itself in the mode of permanent self-destruction. It does not thereby exceed art, but remains at this limit. It is therefore not a 'solution' to the problem of art in exile, but rather a demonstration of the unresolvability of that problem. Furthermore, as the scene with Augustus indicates, even this demonstration is insufficient and must see itself confronted with the question of whether it is not merely based on narcissism. During these years, Broch often talks about the 'temptation to tell stories' [Versuchung zum Geschichttel-Erzählen] that one had to withstand today – the same temptation to mirror oneself that Caesar, the politician, accuses Virgil, the poet, of underlying.¹⁷ Broch repeatedly emphasized that the work on *The Death of Virgil* was cathartic for him. It was a work of writing to break loose from literature and to become more directly and immediately active. When he stated that whoever wanted to think politically today would need to have the courage to "come to terms with the burning of the Alexandrian library," (Broch 1981b, 123) he not only pointed to the need to write a book depicting the self-destruction of art, but also to this other form of writing.

Slavery, anti-Semitism, Victims

How can one write both politically and somehow popularly in exile, if exile is precisely determined by a separation of authorship from *populum*? How can one bridge the gap between one's own experience and concern about Europe, on the one hand, and the culture and community in which one lives, on the other? How can the experience of democratic politics be made fruitful? Hermann Broch saw himself confronted with these questions and problems of exile literature and tried to develop new forms of writing.

In February of 1940, the author went to the cinema to see *Gone With the Wind*. Afterwards, he wrote a short text, which begins: "Once there was *Uncle Tom's*

¹⁷ Cf. e.g. Broch (1981b, 151ff; 192–193).

Cabin, today we have *Gone With the Wind*. The emancipation of the slaves began with sentimental trash – does this new sentimentality not announce the reintroduction of slavery?” (Broch 1981a, 237) This somewhat shocking opening introduces Broch’s argument which points first to the glorification of the ‘lost cause’ for which the film is notorious, then to the popular function of cinema as the factory of dreams for the masses, and finally and most importantly, to the coincidence of *Gone With the Wind* with the publication of Hermann Rauschning’s *Conversations with Hitler*, which revealed the global political aims of National Socialism – namely the domination of the entire world whilst degrading all other nations to servants. Slavery, as Broch’s argument continues, is the sign of the time, both for economic reasons, since high capitalism can no longer rest on paid labor, and psychologically, because slavery implies a vision of an ordered world as represented in *Gone With the Wind*, a vision which totalitarian propaganda efficiently confronts with the chaos and discontent of modern civilization. Only if democracy develops its own vision and symbolism, namely a “democratic propaganda,” as Broch does not hesitate to call it, can it hope to counter the totalitarian threat, a propaganda that might evoke the glorious figure of Abraham Lincoln to counter the demonic attraction of Hitler.¹⁸

Broch’s small text is a piece of political analysis and theory in the form of critical commentary on film and literature. He imagined that it could be widely distributed, and he was open to making all sorts of concessions in order to enable that – but the text was actually never translated, let alone published. Soon afterward, Broch was overcome by doubts as to whether his expositions might have been too sketchy, and he decided to continue working on what he referred to at the time as the “slavery book,” which had become his primary enterprise. It was a political theory that was to replace his writing novels, a project that was to encompass both a theory and scientific explanation of ‘mass delusion’ [Massenwahn] and a program for combating it with new politics.

This project also expands ultimately to a planned three volumes, which are also never published and never completed. It is only from his posthumous papers, that the torso of a project appeared in print, whose form and content remain difficult to appraise. The published text is not only wide-ranging in its subject-matter, but also highly idiosyncratic. It has a scientific and philosophical objective, but it contains hardly a footnote and barely mentions other research. It is interesting since it represents one of the first attempts to develop a comprehensive theory of “Totalitarianism,” although Broch himself never uses this term (Müller-

¹⁸ Already in 1938, Broch raised the charge against democratic states “that they didn’t consider it necessary to have set up propaganda ministries” (Broch 1981b, 51). Cf. Also Broch (1978a, 64).

Funk 2003). It is also a theory of exile, since the true impulse to this project is Broch's attempt to comprehend his own situation and to interpret it politically. This attempt – and this makes Broch's texts particularly rich – is inseparably linked to his very situation; it becomes unstable, and precisely this lability, one might assume, belongs to the situation of exile.

Broch interprets National Socialism primarily as a practice of exclusion and enslavement: “For whether Nazi, whether Soviet, whether fascist, the terror of the totalitarian state is based on the magic of enslavement. An ultimate objectification of man occurs; with every fiber of his being and thinking he is made ‘property’ of the state, actually becoming the ‘corpse left alive’, which the slave was in the very beginning.” (Broch 1979, 484) This theory is based on Freud's and Le Bon's theories of mass psychology and on Durkheim's early sociology. It goes back to the theory of sacrifice according to which society constitutes itself by way of the exclusion or destruction of one of its elements. Like Freud, Broch finds that society is founded on an act of violence, but for him, this is not an event of the mythical past, but rather the very concrete outburst of violence in the present: “The devilish amusement of lynching is an act of sacrifice legitimized by the respective value-theology, the sacrificial act of a madman who wants to free himself of fear so that he can become ‘normal’ again (and in point of fact, the people become strangely ‘normal’ again after a lynching, without any remorse about what happened).” (Broch 1979, 392)

Broch also explored this event in fiction: In the novel *Die Verzauberung* [The Enchantment] – in other versions also entitled *Der Bergroman* [The Alpine Novel] or *Demeter* –, a text, the first version of which Broch wrote in 1935 and which he again reworked shortly before his death. It is a parable of mass psychology in which the malicious agitation of a mountain village populace ultimately culminates in a human sacrifice and the banning of a merchant, who obviously stands for a Jew. The text is, however, much more than a parable: The mythical atmosphere of the village is central – drawing forth the accusation that Broch was being ideologically regressive – and the narrative perspective even more so. The story is told through the eyes of the village doctor, who is increasingly infected by the occurrences., as Broch comments: “All of these occurrences are participated in and told by the doctor, and without his noticing it himself, he who had initially stood across from the fool more coolly and critically than any other, is seized by the delirium. And without his actually noticing what has happened, the diary also ultimately makes a turn back into everyday life.” (Broch 1976, 384) No less important that the fundamental irrationality of mass hysteria is its ephemeral nature, for the people become completely normal again after the lynching and seem to have forgotten everything – a thought that will play an important role in understanding the aftermath of the catastrophe.

The uncanny infection of mass hysteria doesn't leave Broch's theoretical text untouched either. The theory of sacrifice to which Broch refers is problematic in itself, because it also assigns a mythical status to the violence of the present. What that can entail is demonstrated in one of the most remarkable aspects of Broch's mass hysteria texts: in his reaction to the annihilation of the Jews. When speculating that the specific 'modernity' of the Jews might be the origin of the "dumbest of all the dumb anti-Semitic accusations," namely, the idea that the Jews governed the world, Broch continues as following:

Yet as dumb and easy to refute this idea might be, it remains irrefutable that anti-Semitism derived from it the alleged need for a general eradication of Jews, after which the conditions of the world would reliably improve. Here, the limit of refutability is already exceeded, all the more when the intention to eradicate has already been put into action. (Broch 1979, 399)¹⁹

For us, this passage, which was written by 1941 at the latest, sounds harrowingly prophetic – and it is prophetically voiced as a warning to the world, to western democracies: “they could not imagine – although the fate of the Jews should have given them a clear signal – that with today's technical means one was readily able to simply eradicate entire peoples by way of torture in concentration camps, scientific withdrawal of vitamins and through cold.” (Broch 1979, 332)

These formulations are indeed most remarkable, because they are written while the annihilation of the Jews about which they speak is actually happening, at a time when first attempts to describe National Socialism by no means placed its anti-Semitism in the foreground – on the contrary, anti-Semitism was often viewed merely as an epiphenomenon, and the genocide, if it was mentioned at all, was often referred to more as a derailing.²⁰ For Broch, by contrast, the “Jewish question” plays a central role, and it is not only anti-Semitism that must be understood to understand Nazism, but rather the *occurrence* of the annihilation of the Jews itself. As in the case of lynching, it is the *event* of the murder that brings about the cohesion of the masses, whereas all explanations (even irrational ones as with anti-Semitism) represent rationalizations after the fact. It is precisely the event that creates the strength of Nazi-propaganda and its irrefutability by rational argument, it is the event which calls for a new understanding of politics, a theory of mass delusion and, most of all, for an active ‘reverse conversion’. For him – and also for us – the Shoah is an occurrence after which nothing is as it was before.

¹⁹ On the role of Judaism in Broch's writings during exile cf. also Steinecke (2005).

²⁰ Cf. for example Ziege (2009).

The radical nature of this event does also affect Broch's own text. The passage on the putting into action of the extermination of Jews is continued by a further reflection:

Viewed from a magical realm, the thought might arise that the human sacrifice to which an entire people was to fall prey could become a symbolic reference elevated into the mass character of modern life, a repetition, elevated into mass character, of the divine self-sacrifice with which Christ, even as a member of the same people, initiated our calendar. Yet this is almost a Nazi thought, just as blasphemous from a Christian as from a Jewish standpoint. (Broch 1979, 400)

This is because, Broch continues, the Jews didn't die as martyrs, but rather as merchants, civil servants, lawyers – simply as average people: "The Jewish fate is gruesome, but unceremonious." (Broch 1979, 400)

One positively senses how the text begins to fishtail here, how Broch interrupts himself in order to avoid thinking the "Nazi thought" that imposes itself on him to its end. He must repel the association of sacrality and of expiation that goes along with the model of sacrifice and realign his perspective, which threatens, for a moment, to shift into the perspective of the persecutors or, at the least, of the spectator. This fishtailing is not singular, but rather recurring throughout the entire text. It reflects the fundamental ambivalence of the notion of sacrifice, which always alternates between destructive and expiatory force. It also shows how dangerously Broch's thinking moves between politics, anthropology, and theology. If according to him a conventional understanding of politics – of interest-driven action, rational decision-making, etc. – does not suffice in order to comprehend National Socialism because one has to take into account its irrational forces; and if these forces must furthermore be understood not by means of simple psychology, but rather with the aid of religious models, then the entire approach comes into dangerous proximity to what it is attempting to critically describe. For National Socialism itself speaks of sacrifice, self-sacrifice, a new calendar and of magic.

Essentially, if one comprehends totalitarianism, and especially the Shoah, as the decisive occurrence as described above, then it also has epistemic impact. It is then no wonder that one cannot simply talk about totalitarianism without being exposed to the danger of surrendering one's own discourse to it, just like this happens to the doctor in the alpine novel. The way Broch's texts on mass psychology must at times surrender to their object makes for an especially interesting but also irritating reading, since they are both testimony to and theory about the annihilation of the Jews. It is also clear that this surrendering is intensified in exile, in as much as the discourse in exile is generally dis-located; it is lacking a context, a discipline, an assignment and recipients, it loses the

firmness that especially politic theory often has, be that because it is being produced professionally or because it is addressed directly to the bearers of political sovereignty in the form of constitutional argument. By contrast, Broch is writing as an autodidact, almost solely for and by himself – and that’s precisely why his writing begins to skid and swerve. This can be recognized even in the style of the quoted passages, where the argumentation repeatedly shifts into a sort of theoretical monologue that is hardly structured by clear concepts, let alone by way of an argumentative interaction with other positions. Instead, it is characterized by the constant shifting of ideas and figures of thought. Much like the ‘Fire’ chapter of *The Death of Virgil*, these texts read as if he were writing in a half sleep, very much in correspondence to the comatose state of the masses he is describing. Like his poetic texts about that state, Broch’s theoretical expositions about it tend to undermine clear differentiations, and it is this quality that makes his texts especially interesting.

Politics, Religion, Human Rights – Secularization and Poetology of Politics

The figure of the slave, the refugee, the prisoner is central in contemporary political theory. Most notably, Giorgio Agamben declared the concentration camps to the paradigm of the political, and saw in the ‘Homo Sacer’, the sacred victim of roman law, the basic figure of modernity (Agamben 1998). This led to a wide debate in political theory. Among others, Agamben refers to Hannah Arendt, whose *Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951) famously takes a central view of the concentration camps and also of the refugees. Since Agamben essentially reads these historical analyses universally, as a general theory of politics, he creates a wide-ranging theory of modernity as state of exclusion and of exile. Arendt’s political analysis is overwritten with the figure of the sacred, as a result, the matter takes on an ontological and even theological tone, which is anything but accidental, since, at least in the Jewish context, the category of exile has always been religious and theological. Thus, in Agamben’s adaptation of exile, its metaphorization from a concrete political situation into a general political category meets with a de-metaphorization that occurs when the original religious meaning of exile once again surfaces.²¹ Both shifts, metaphorization and de-metaphorization, may be considered as parts

21 On Agamben and Arendt with particular references to the question of human rights see Menke (2008).

of a larger problem – of the dialectics of secularization which also determines the category of exile in modern political thought.

This ambivalence too can be observed in the case of Hermann Broch, and that much more clearly than in the case of Arendt, who leaves religious connotations in the background. It is most obvious in a brief piece entitled *Human Rights and the Earthly Absolute* [Menschenrechte und Irdisch-Absolutes], which is part of the theory of mass delusion and about which Broch intensively corresponded with Arendt while both were working on their theories of totalitarianism.²² Broch's text attempts to develop the basis of a new politics and thereby represents to a degree a positive counterpart to his theory of totalitarianism. It begins with a strong claim: "All politics commence with the human. It is exercised by him, for him and often against him. In order to be able to talk about politics, one must have a concept of man, one is otherwise talking about empty mechanics." (Broch 1979, 458) Broch claims that political theory must be grounded in a political anthropology that contains both a theory of mass psychology and a theory of human rights. But what then is human? What is man? His nature is anything but comprehensible and recent political experiences far exceed what had been viewed as human-like and humanly possible. If the essence of man is thus undeterminable, it is precisely this lack of a foundation that must become the cornerstone for a new understanding of politics.

How can this non-nature of man be described? Broch's text continues with an odd twist: "Man may disclaim the existence of God, but never that his own is in its likeness." (Broch 1979, 458) This statement seems paradoxical, because it assumes a likeness without its prerequisite, i.e. the existence of God. In what follows, this being-in-likeness is negatively developed. Broch refers to the paradise myth, to Augustine's idea of original sin, and to the ten commandments in order to demonstrate that being-in-likeness to God requires too much of man. Man is not capable of doing good on his own, but must rather be held to it by way of the law. His relationship to nature is also negatively determined: because he is free, he does not obey any natural law. This 'eccentric positionality', to use a term of Helmuth Plessner's, is also elaborated by way of referring to pagan and biblical mythologies: Man, created in the likeness of God, becomes creative himself and thereby free. He is a Prometheus, rebellious, godless like the devil, like the inhabitants of Babel. He tries to replace divine law with natural law, "forgetting that revelation cannot be replaced by anything." (Broch 1979, 462)²³ Remarkably,

²² Cf. Broch (1979, 456–510). On Broch's correspondence and relation with Arendt cf. the editor's afterword in Arendt and Broch (1996); and Sauerland (2008).

²³ Cf. also: "If man only renames the divine law as law of reasons or calls it as 'natural right', without searching for new earthly contents, he did not fulfil the task but only executes a super-

the text that argues consistently with religious analogies also emphasizes that it is impossible to secularize the sacred.

The ‘negativity’ of man is not just theoretically present in his indeterminacy; it has a concrete and therefore political existence. Man is negative in as much as he might be negated, as he might be deprived of his humanity, as this occurs in the totalitarian state. This figure of exclusion is central to Broch’s attempt to formulate a positive theory of human rights and politics. It is posited as a negative axiom, which Broch formulates as follows: “The total enslavement epitomized so horribly paradigmatically in the concentration camps must not occur.” (Broch 1979, 468) Broch’s theory of democracy is based on the fact that everything is possible for and with man. He can be made sub-human or super-human – and so it was possible to carry out the annihilation of the Jews as a ‘rational’ process, and to even undergird that process by way of affirmative legislation. This radical openness asks for a limitation, which is the negative foundation of politics: Man may not be entirely subordinated, may not be made into an object of politics. Consequently, Broch argues vehemently for the abolishment of capital punishment, noting that western democracies could show how seriously they take human rights by way of such a measure.

The postulate of non-enslavement is ‘earthly absolute’ for Broch. From an anthropological standpoint, this is paradox, because the absoluteness is not founded in man’s higher faculties, in rationality and the calling of mankind, but rather in his fragility, i.e. in the fact that his ‘nature’ can be taken from him. This ‘earthly absolute’ is consequently not actually derived from the being-in-likeness of man, but is, as the end of the essay shows, a plea for future development:

To be sure, an image of man will ultimately develop from the sentences of these human rights, and to be sure, it will [...] ultimately converge more and more with a being-in-likeness, while the human liberty connected to it will then stand at the end of the sequence of definitions instead of dogmatically at its beginning, a target definition of human approximation, without ever being able to be reached: successively developing from legal rules, each of which says about the empirical occasion what may not be done to man, if he is to remain man [...]. (Broch 1979, 468)

The length and syntactical complexity of this sentence, which is typical for Broch’s prose, describes an unfolding process in which the boundary between ideal and reality is constantly shifting and the relationship between cause and effect permanently inverting. In this manner, the sentence conveys what it de-

fluous atheistic demonstration”(Broch 1979, 472). On the critique of a political theology implied in this argument see Koebner (1988).

scribes. The earthly absolute is paradoxical, because it is always accidental, precisely because it remains *earthly* without ever becoming transcendent and thereby actually absolute. This is because, as Broch repeatedly emphasizes, the truly absolute is absent and it functions essentially as an absence. Nothing can replace what is given in revelation.

According to Claude Lefort, the democratic absolute only functions as an empty space (2006). Broch's theory of democracy also stresses the emptiness, instability, and even non-existence of any fundament for politics. But what does it mean to create an empty space in epistemological terms? In Broch's thought, the center is empty by talking about that which is revealed, without taking advantage of it for his own discourse, by alluding to the sacred without properly determining it. It is therefore only consistent that it never directly appears in Broch's own text, but merely figures in the various religious paradigms – the fall of mankind, the tower of Babel, etc. – and is evoked by the circular motion of the text, as when the being-in-likeness that appeared as a prerequisite reveals itself in the end to be a future goal.

This textual motion in which beginning and end interlock allows us to better grasp Broch's political reflections as a poetology of politics. Various languages and metaphors with which the political situation can be described are played through, without generating a stabile meta-language. This is again centrally related to a theory of exile in the double sense of the genitive preposition, for it assigns the banishment, fragility and unnaturalness of man a central position, while it also lacks a discourse that could describe that condition from a secure distance. Especially the religious discourses disrupt such stabilization, because, as we have seen, it is difficult to keep them under control.

After Exile – Exile as a Figuration of the Subject

Exile is a condition, but it is also a phase. There was something before exile – and something can also come about after it. In light of the tendency toward a hypostatization of exile mentioned at the beginning of these reflections, its absolutization as the *conditio* of modernity, this should be duly noted. If exile becomes total expulsion, radical displacement, an existential desert, then it becomes all the more difficult to recognize the different thresholds that do also always connect exile to its other: The threshold to a recollected past, the threshold to the place where one lives – to America –, but also the threshold to the future. To name a truly paradigmatic example, the people of Israel in the desert are not only characterized by a departure from Egypt, a radical flight into the open and abandonment of former ties, but also by a longing for the meat pots of Egypt.

Perhaps more importantly, the people don't remain in the desert. At the end of Deuteronomy, they stand at the border of the promised land.

Broch's last novel, *The Guiltless* [Die Schuldlosen], published in 1949, contains a poem about precisely this site: about Mount Pisgah, from which Moses saw the land of Israel that he was not permitted to enter:

Foreign brother, whom in my solitude
I do not yet know,
we want – the time has come – to
set out to climb Mount Pisgah,
(a little out of breath admittedly as usual
at our age) but all the same we will
make it, and then at the summit of Nebo,
there we want to rest.²⁴

For the exiled, exile is also a figure of biographical reflection, a figure which allows him to construct and narrate his own life story. This occurs precisely from the edges of the situation – for Broch, from the standpoint of his situation after the war, where neither his apocalyptic fears nor his hopes for a peaceful world have been fulfilled, where steps must once again be taken, albeit in a weakened state, where confidence must once again be mobilized to at least find a resting place.²⁵

The end of exile is not only envisioned in a poem, but also again in a letter. In July of 1945, Broch corresponds with Volkmahr von Zühlsdorff, another exile and associate of the *American Guild for German Freedom* who is preparing to return to Germany. Broch writes that he himself has too much to attend to in America: “Moreover, in my opinion, Jews can and may not return at present; no guilty conscience can grow in the sight of victims, and Germany needs contrition, because consciousness can only develop from there: particularly the non-Nazi needs contrition, he needs it for the Nazi brother, who himself will never be capable of this.” (Broch 1986, 21) Zühlsdorff responds with fierce incomprehension: In the meantime, Germany had itself become victim of war and displacement, yes, the Germans had suffered “like presumably no people yet prior in history,” one should assist in its reconstruction, and Broch in his emigration was comparatively well off (Broch 1986, 23). Whereupon Broch clarifies that he doesn't see himself personally as a victim. He is rather quite happy about the new life that his displacement had enabled.

²⁴ Cf. Ziolkowski (2003). Cf. the critical discussion by Steinecke (2002, 171–183).

²⁵ Earlier research viewed *Die Schuldlosen* and especially the poems uncritically as ‘testimonial poetry.’

But impersonally I am a victim. Namely, as a Jew. It will perhaps surprise you that I emphasize the Jewish problem so [...] but I don't do this out of resentment but after very thorough reflection. The 'guilt' of the German people shows itself in the Jewish problem: throughout an entire 20 years the German viewed the most crazed-idiotic persecution of Jews with complete indifference, and by this indifference he became the accessory of a bestial-systematic mass murder. (Broch 1986, 25)

Yet Zühlsdorff can understand this even less. For him, most Germans had not actually known what was happening and had not been Nazis – that claim, he alleges, stemmed from allied atrocity propaganda. Moreover, if one differentiated between Jews and Germans in such a manner, one was drawing on the same racist categories as the National Socialists, and so on.

It is frightening to observe how here, among exiled, immediately after the war, patterns of discourse emerge that came to overshadow the history of postwar West Germany. Yet on the other hand, the correspondence reveals Broch's precise position. From that position, he speaks about 'personal' and 'impersonal' victims, about 'guilt' in quotation marks and contrition without them, attempting to work in a differentiated manner with categories that shift between moral, legal, political and religious discourses. For Broch doesn't want to comprehend the guilt of the Germans purely in terms of criminal law, nor morally nor even metaphysically; he is more closely concerned with the *political* question of how to reconstitute democracy – an aim that can only be achieved by way of knowing the past. Here, again, Broch's position is a difficult one, between the various discourses; one that doesn't exhaust itself in radical pessimism nor in speechless horror in view of the catastrophe, but one that instead still seeks perspective and opportunity for action.

In this respect, for Broch, throughout his life, exile remains anything but a 'pure' condition. It is a multi-dimensional experience of real and metaphorical exile, of exile both in poetry and in politics, of political exclusion and the opposing assertion of human rights, and it is the interplay of these dimensions that makes it fruitful and complex. The 'neither – nor' in the story of the two friends' passing encounter on the Atlantic, which thwarted any clear reading of exile, therefore reflects how thought about exile remains as fruitful as it remains unsettled.

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