“Without knowing America, you cannot say anything valid about democratic politics.”

Hermann Broch and the Ethics of Exile

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In a letter dated September 1950, the American scholar Hermann Salinger asked Hermann Broch about America’s influence on his writing. In response, Broch makes a distinction between its influence on his poetry and on himself as a person. He begins with poetry (’Dichterei,’ he writes, slightly ironically): “As far as I see, the influence is zero. And I would consider this as quite natural. For the irrational structure which underlies the business of poetry is formed in early youth.” True, one might speak of a literary influence in terms of the technique of the modern novel, “however, it was not necessary to go to America for that just as it wasn’t necessary to travel to Russia to succumb to the influence of Dostoevsky.”

1 Broch, Hermann, Kommentierte Werkausgabe 13/3, ed. Paul Michael Lützeler, Frankfurt/M. 1981, 498f. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations from the German original into English are mine, DW.

2 Ibid., 499.
hand, he wrote his magisterial novel, *The Death of Virgil*, a highly avant-
gardist text which bears hardly any relation to his actual experiences, and
on the other hand he not just participated in various political initiatives of
emigrant policy but also worked on a comprehensive theory of modern
politics, as mentioned in the letter. How do these two dimensions –
the irrational and the rational, the literary and the political, the esoteric
and the exoteric – relate to each other? Are they to be conceived of as
a passage that links one continent to another or as one that passes from
the irrational to the rational, even in political terms? For in his early
years, Broch seemed to have been a conservative cultural critic. Born
into a Jewish home, he was baptized in his early youth and started idealiz-
ing medieval Catholicism in his early essays; he even dedicated one of
these texts to Carl Schmitt. Upon his arrival in America, however, he
seems to have turned to the democratic camp. It is debatable whether
or not his new political orientation was no more than a reworking of
his older positions. One might doubt, for instance, that his early work
is truly conservative, and it has been argued that Broch’s theory of
democracy is fundamentally undemocratic. The same is true with respect
to the relation of literature to politics. Even if Broch proclaimed time and
again that he would turn from literature to politics, the fact remains that
he continued to work constantly in both fields. Moreover, on closer
inspection the difference is far from absolute. *Death of Virgil*, despite
being one of the most esoteric texts of modern German literature, con-
tains quite a concrete message and, what is more, opposed to staying in
the writer’s closet, it was eventually published and immediately translated.
Broch’s theory of democracy, on the other hand, was never finished and
published only posthumously; this is not surprising given the enigmatic
character of these reflections, which are not as exoteric as one might
expect.

Thus, the relation between art and politics is not that clear. Indeed, it
remained a constant practical problem for Broch to decide on which side
to place his efforts. The relation of the esoteric and the exoteric therefore
implies an ethic of exile: What does the writer have to do in exile, both in
terms of the way in which exile affects one’s writing, and the manner in
which one is able to react on this influence? In what follows, I will
attempt to unfold this question in its different dimensions: after (1) a
brief outline of Hermann Broch’s situation in exile, I will (2) analyze
the textual logic at work in *The Death of Virgil* before I (3) comment
on Broch’s theory of mass delusion and finally (4) on his politics of
Human Rights.
I. Experience of Exile – Experience of America

Hermann Broch arrived in New York on October 10, 1938. In his homeland of Austria, he had been arrested immediately after the national socialists’ rise to power in March 1938, but managed to leave the country – first to England and then to the U.S. On his first day, he was quite busy: He met for lunch with Richard A. Bermann of the American Guild for German Cultural Freedom, which supported him financially, and also met Erich von Kahler on this occasion, who would become a close friend. He had an appointment with Benno Huebsch from the Viking Press to talk about an English publication of his novels, and he went to Princeton in the evening to visit Albert Einstein, who had helped him to obtain the Visa – a journey he repeated three days later to also thank Thomas Mann for his support. As these first days show, Broch always had a strong and constantly-growing network of friends and acquaintances in place, mostly among the emigrants, but also including a number of American intellectuals. He arrived as a well-established author, all the more so since his first novel *The Sleepwalkers* from 1931/32 had been immediately translated into English. He spoke English quite fluently and was able to use this network for a number of political initiatives, the most prominent being the “City of Man” group which published several manifestos in favor of a democratic politics. Thus exile, far from amounting to isolation, meant quite the opposite for Broch. After a couple of weeks already he began to complain about having too many visitors and too many people for whom he had to care, and about the large amount of his time he had to dedicate to helping other emigrants.

Despite this integration, however, Broch’s life remained somewhat precarious. He initially lived in a boarding house near Columbia University before spending some time in the artists’ colony in Yaddo as well as in other mansions. In 1942, he lived as a guest in Erich von Kahler’s house in Princeton, where he would spend the next six years. Afterwards he returned to New York, and in 1949 he was a fellow at Yale University, living once again in a small boarding house under somewhat poor conditions, e.g., without a private bathroom. This is where he would eventually die of a

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stroke in 1951. His financial situation was even less stable. Although his network secured him some support, it was irregular and barely covered the cost of living, let alone his numerous initiatives to support other emigrants – he constantly complained that he was no longer able to afford the stamps for his countless letters. In 1940, he received a fellowship from the Guggenheim Foundation, and later a Rockefeller research grant that provided him with a monthly stipend of $166 over three years, as well as a support of $200 per month by the Bollingen Foundation to edit a volume of writings by Hugo von Hofmannsthal, a work he actually detested.

What does it mean to arrive in America under these circumstances? In December 1938, two months after his arrival, Broch wrote to Willa Muir, a friend in Scotland, about how much he had to do. He continued:

Thus I haven’t seen much of New York, but what I have seen was impressive. Needless to say that this is not our life, but it is the life of the modern city par excellence, and the life in the collective par excellence, which you can blame but which is nevertheless awesome, and interspersed with all dangers of Nazism [Nazitum] if nothing happens in time. Much of it would inspire you.4

Thus, even if Broch often expressed happiness and gratitude about having been able to emigrate, there is always a concern throughout his letters that America could be in danger as well: “This is a wild country, and if it should become nazified, which is by no means impossible, it will reveal what dictatorship actually means.”5 In a letter to Stefan Zweig he suggests that the “apocalypse” would be “some degrees more intense here, and slavery for Jews, Negroes and other minorities will be more bare here than elsewhere. Slaves will be listed at Wall Street, prima, secunda and discard [. . .]. By the way, who would buy me?”6

America is thus by no means a secure island – if the American society is paradigmatic for any modern mass society, it also represents the potential and danger of such a society: “Without knowing America, you cannot say anything valid about democratic politics. I have learned tremendously, and I have to repeat time and again how deeply the rough magnificence of this country and its institutions impress me.”7 Like some, but not all, emigrants, Broch thus tried to learn from his situation.

4 Broch, Werke 13/2 (Briefe 2), 43.
5 Ibid., 71.
6 Ibid., 75f.
7 Ibid., 62.
Given this ambivalence, Broch’s letters from exile consistently oscil-
late between dark pessimism and hope, arguing that “[i]f there were a
miracle – and it would have to be a miracle indeed – that would be
able to stop the disaster, even this miracle would have to be worked
for.” Therefore Broch worked as hard as he could, up to 17 hours a
day, developing new projects without being able to finish or control
them: They all swell up to multivolume books which far exceeded the
original plan. What is more, he felt that his efforts – and his literary
texts in particular – were deeply superfluous in a time of crisis: “I feel
like a man who hurries to finish a book only to include it into the library
of Alexandria before its burning.” Literary work appears to be doomed
to failure in face of the radical crisis of culture and humanity.

II. The End of Art

Broch’s comment about the burning of the library was made in connec-
tion with a work which itself deals with the burning of a book – his Death
of Virgil, the great literary work he finished in exile and which is funda-
mental for his negative aesthetics, self-positioning in literature, and the
relation of the esoteric and the exoteric in his writing. The Death of Virgil
was not conceived in exile but is an exilic text in so far as it parallels the
writer’s biography and reflects his experiences. Broch began to write on
the homecoming of Virgil in 1936 and continued to work on it for
nine years, even during his imprisonment, until it was finally published
in 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 structure of Broch’s text in
English.

8 Ibid., 34.
9 Ibid. 72.
10 On Broch’s “negative Aesthetics” see Lützeler, Paul Michael, “The Avant-Garde
in Crisis. Hermann Broch’s Negative Aesthetics in Exile,” in: Stephen D. Dow-
den (ed.), Herman Broch, Literature, Philosophy, Politics. The Yale Broch Symposium,
11 Cf. Hargraves, John, “‘Beyond Words:’ The Translation of Broch’s Der Tod
217–229.
The novel narrates the last day in the life of Virgil, when, according to legend, he planned to burn the manuscript of the *Aeneis*. Thus, the text reflects two basic experiences: the threat of death, which Broch encountered during his imprisonment in Austria, and the uselessness of art in a collapsing world. The vision of a world in flames is omnipresent in the text, especially in the second part entitled “Fire – The Descent,” which depicts the poet 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 [. . .]!12

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.13

Since the act of remembering the poem decomposes its content and thus also negates the achievement of the remembering poet, the idea of burning the manuscript is only the logical consequence of such an experience of constant annihilation. More importantly, this decomposition happens precisely in the text quoted, for, due to its visionary and dreamlike nature, everything narrated dissolves into uncertainty. This is achieved, on the one hand, by the style of *indirect libre* in these passages with their constant double focalization. On the other hand, it is the syntax in particular, the typical longitude, complexity, and ambivalence of Broch’s sentences,

13 Broch, *Death of Virgil*, 197.
that logically refigures the symbolic quality of the dream experience rather than mimetically representing it. Obviously, the text has a technical dimension in the sense Broch mentioned in the letter to Salinger, and it is also obvious that this technical dimension is influenced by the technique of the modern novel, namely Joyce’s interior monologue. However, in Broch’s case the text does not completely dissolve into the uncertain but rather comes to represent an intermediary state. In his visions, Virgil hears a voice, “[n]ot quite here, but yet at hand,” and he feels himself moving:

Without having taken a step, indeed without the least attempt to take a step or make any movement whatsoever, he had been moved forward, but still not moved across; it was still the forecourt of reality that surrounded him, he had not yet forsaken terrestrial things, it was still an earthbound dream, and he – a dream within a dream – realized the dreamy nature of what was happening to him: it was a dream on the borders of dream.14

This is again a very typical passage: things happen, yet they don’t happen; we face a dream, yet it is bordering on our awakening. The discourse decomposes itself, but it is not yet in the state of total decomposition. It is always about to become, to become either clear or nothing at all. That way the burning of the book, which designates the end of art, is simultaneously evoked and deferred. In his comments, Broch describes this process in the categories of the rational and the irrational that we already know from his letter to Salinger, and he claims that it was the constant reworking of the text which rationalized the irrationality of the experience of death to the degree of complete evaporation. Thus, in the text itself, the esoteric becomes exoteric.

Moreover, this does not only happen by the rationalization of syntax. The text has a second and even more rational and explicit layer in the debate between Virgil and Augustus in the third part of the book (a kind of platonic dialogue of nearly a hundred pages), which basically discusses the relation of art and politics in a world in crisis. On his deathbed, Virgil is visited by the emperor, his former friend, who wants to rescue the Aeneis as he believes that art must serve the needs of the public and glorify life. Virgil tries to resist, arguing that instead of representing life, art seeks the representation of Death, is parabolic, and is no longer

14 Ibid., 198f.
able to represent the old order and not yet able to narrate anything novel:

“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.”

This passage not only gives the Fire-chapter’s “not quite here but yet at hand” an epochal interpretation, it also shows the limit of this interpretation, for it is the rational debate which begins to dissolve. The “no longer but not yet” is both a category of the philosophy of history and it describes a problem of narration in which it is “no longer but not yet” clear who is speaking. More and more, the debate becomes a dreamlike monologue in which everything is in a state of transition, the narration as well as what is left of the rational discussion in it: For as Virgil argues in the following, the Roman Empire, too, is in transition: like art it is a parable, pointing at a world yet to come. And just like art needs a sacrifice, namely the burning of the Aeneis, so too does politics—the Christian connotation here is quite obvious.

Yet Virgil’s declaration that the Roman Empire is a mere parable is simply too much for Casear, who becomes very direct now, accusing the poet of hating him and developing a brief analysis of his motives 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.

15 Ibid., 335f.
with hatred and malice, yes, I repeat it, it trembles with a most abject malice . . .”

For Augustus, the poet appears to behave passive aggressively, a point which is by no means easy to dismiss and which can be read as a self-criticism of Broch, who underwent psycho-analysis during his entire life. In *The Death of Virgil*, the outburst of accusation has the effect that the dreamlike world around the poet becomes more real: “The Caesar was shouting, and strange, ah, most strange; the louder he shouted, the richer became the world.” Only now does Virgil offer his manuscript to Caesar — a slightly comical effect, not only because the very long and speculative discussion is ended quite abruptly by becoming loud but also since Caesar initially objects defiantly that he does not want the book any more. Finally, however, the manuscript is handed over, and for a moment, the situation and the text become very calm: Virgil and Augustus, reunited in some sort of friendship, dispute about the color of a horse they once bought, in short sentences and direct dialogue, without the presence of the narrator. It is a very short scene, for the Emperor has to leave for Rome and the poet is left behind, dying.

The dialogue thus represents Broch’s own skepticism about art and its role in contemporary society. It also shows that this rationalization is far from being complete. For even in the fictionalized realm of a historical dialogue, the criticism of art itself becomes artful; and the moral argument transforms into either the fluency of ever changing images or the facticity of a banal discourse about horses. The book actually remains in the state of permanent self-destruction, and this destruction represents the destruction of art in Broch’s present. Even if *The Death of Virgil* tries to go beyond art, it halts at art’s threshold.

Is there something beyond this threshold? “Whoever wants to think politically today,” Broch once wrote, “must have the courage to accept the burning of the Alexandrian library.” By writing a book which metaphorically speaking ‘destroys’ itself, Broch already accepted the burning of books, yet, is it possible to think the political in such a manner as to go beyond this acceptance, to transcend these consequences? How is it possible to act publicly and to rethink politics in a more exoteric way, beyond

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16 Ibid., 388.
17 Ibid.
18 Broch, *Werke* 13/2 (Briefe 2), 123.
the rationalization of style, which saved the Virgil-book from dissolving into nothingness and made it (barely) readable and translatable?

III. Slavery, Anti-Semitism, Sacrifice

In February 1940, the author went to the cinema to see Gone With the Wind. Afterwards, he wrote a short text, which commences: “Once there was Uncle Tom’s 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?”19 This somewhat shocking beginning 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 economical reasons, since high capitalism can no longer rest on paid labor, and psychologically, since 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. In the article mentioned above, he evokes Abraham Lincoln, whose glorious figure he contrasts with the demonic attraction of Hitler.

Broch imagined that his short text would be published widely; he attempted to write in a popular style and even conceded that an eventual translator might simplify his prose. However, the article was never translated, let alone published, and Broch continued to work on what he called his ‘slavery book.’ Typically for Broch, this idea developed into a more and more complex and voluminous project, which will later be referred to as his Theory of Mass Delusion. It is comprised of three volumes, the first of which deals with its philosophical and epistemological

foundations, the second with the psychology of the masses, and the third with the theory of democracy. None of these volumes were finished during Broch’s lifetime, and even posthumously the project remains a vast torso which is rarely read and still difficult to grasp. Nevertheless, it is interesting both as one of the first attempts to present a comprehensive theory of ‘totalitarianism’ (even if Broch does not use this term) and as a symptom of the very difficulty of this attempt. For it is far from clear, and is in fact topic of a heated controversy among the Brochians, how this theory is related to the object it describes – that is, if the entire discourse on the masses, on democratic propaganda, or even on total democracy is not itself totalitarian.

To understand the uncanny ambivalence of this text it is necessary to take into account the fundamental claims Broch made in rethinking politics as well as the fundamental crisis that the common understanding of politics underwent with the rise of fascism.

Why do we need a new political theory? According to Broch, the success of totalitarianism has shown the weakness of western democracies that naively believed that some form of progress would automatically result in the final victory of their principles. However, in the course of the 19th century, the moral foundations of democracy eroded; modern mass society was accompanied by discontent and resulted in a dreamlike existence, a half conscious ‘Dämmerzustand,’ a latent state of panic which we already recognize as the feeling of permanent instability, anguish, and uncertainty from the Virgil-book. The success of totalitarianism is based on its ability to manipulate this half-conscious state, while its main instrument is, as we already know, enslavement or more formal: exclusion. By excluding certain subjects, National Socialism creates its own coherence.

Being Nazi, Soviet or Fascist, the terror of the total state (Totalitäts-Staat) is founded on the magic of enslavement. The highest objectification of man takes place; he becomes the ‘property’ of the state in all his being and thinking; he actually becomes the ‘corpse left alive’ which the slave originally was.

The experience of exclusion has different dimensions for Broch. Personally, it is the experience of being a refugee. Already in England,
immediately after his emigration from Austria, Broch was confronted with a widespread anti-Semitism and he realized how many sympathies Hitler collected by his anti-Semitic politics. These sympathies, he stresses, are strengthened by the existence of the refugees: “Every emigrant-ship fuels the hatred against the uninvited visitors.”

Secondly, in theoretical terms, Broch’s concept of exclusion goes back to the role of sacrifice in society, as formulated by different socio-logical and psychoanalytical theories, according to which society is founded on an initial act of violence. For Broch, however, this is not a mythical act but the very concrete act of lynching, which gives the diffuse and unconscious panic of the masses direction and relief:

The hellish pleasure of lynching is a sacrifice legitimized by the respective theology of values, the sacrifice of a madman who wants to become normal again – and in fact, usually people become quite normal after having lynched someone, without any regrets on what they have done.

Broch’s unfinished novel, The Seducer, or, The Spell, actually depicts a scene of lynching that comes close to a mythical act even in its narrative representation, yet it eventually leads back to the old normality. Indeed, the lack of regret will be a phenomenon that Broch like so many other emigrants had to experience in post-war Germany, as can be read, for instance, in his correspondence with Volkmar von Zühlsdorff.

In the context of the Theory of Mass Delusion, it is more significant that the notion of sacrifice is so clearly linked to the most contemporary occurrence, namely to the extermination of the Jews. The reference to the Shoah, already implicit in the vision of modern Wall Street slavery, is indeed central for Broch’s theory of modernity. In his early novel, The Sleepwalkers, he had already figured the Jews as paradigmatically modern, representing all the ambiguities of modernity and thus being a perfect scapegoat for modern discontent.


23 Broch, Werke 12, 392.

“stupid and most stupid anti-Semitic idea,” namely that the Jews rule the world. This idea is not merely stupid, however; but also highly effective:

For as stupid and easy to refute as this accusation may be, the conclusion which anti-Semitism draws from it is irrefutable, namely the conclusion of a general extermination of Jews after which the condition of the world necessarily will become better. Here, the border of the refutable is already crossed, and this is all the more so if the intention to exterminate is already being put into action.25

The last half of this sentence, written no later than 1941, sounds uncan-nily prophetic to the contemporary reader. It is indeed a very concrete warning, an outcry to the public – as prophecies originally are – that is, however, heard only posthumously. It decries the naivete of Western democracies:

[T]hey did not imagine – even if the fate of the Jews could have been a clear hint – that today’s technical means make it easily possible to exterminate entire nations by means of torture in the concentration camps, by scientific deprivation of vitamins or simply by cold.26

The actual destruction of the Jews is a fundamental event, for, as in lynching, it is the actual performance of murder that constitutes the mass solidarity, in light of which all explanations must be considered belated rationalizations. It is the sacrifice itself which is irresistible, not least because men tend to sympathize with the persecutors rather than with the victims and will consequently maintain that either the enslavement is not unusually cruel or that the slaves are in some way guilty. Finally, due to this mechanism, mass delusion cannot be confronted by rational refutation but asks for an actual “reconversion” to democracy.

But it is not only the totalitarian practice which reaches a critical point with respect to the Shoah: Broch’s text does so as well. The above quoted passage concerning the enactment of extermination continues as follows:

26 Broch, Werke 12, 332.
If seen from the magical realm, one might suppose that the human sacrifice to which an entire people is going to be subjected could become a forceful symbol, augmented to the mass of modern life, to a massively enhanced repetition of the divine self-sacrifice by which Christ, precisely as part of the very people, introduced our era. But this is nearly a Nazi-thought, blasphemous both from a Jewish and a Christian perspective. 27

And, as Broch hastens to add, the Jews do not die as martyrs, but as businessmen, lawyers, employees, that is, as ordinary men. “The Jewish fate is horrible but unceremonious (unfeierlich).” 28

We can feel very clearly how Broch interrupts the course of ideas as if to avoid the consequences he is not willing to draw. Both this interruption and the uncanny implication of the mass human sacrifice which intrudes the seemingly political argument are symptomatic. They do not only display the general ambivalence of the idea of a sacrifice, but also show how dangerously Broch’s own theory lingers on the margins of politics, anthropology, and theology. This lingering itself becomes a long monologue, driven less by clear concepts than by a constant shift of metaphors with little structure and no references, seemingly having been written in a half-conscious state themselves. As in his *Virgil*, Broch’s theoretical texts tend to dissolve the clear-cut boundaries of meanings and positions; they also tend to become opaque and are thus much less outspoken than originally intended.

IV. Human Rights, Religion and Politics

Nowadays, the figure of the slave has reentered political theory, mainly through Giorgio Agamben’s figure of the *homo sacer*, the sacred victim, whose exclusion is the foundation of political order. Agamben refers to Hannah Arendt as well as to Carl Schmitt, but he could also have referred to Broch, who actually corresponded with Arendt about slavery, exclusion, and especially the theory of human rights in the mid 1940s, during a time when both wrote their respective books on totalitarianism. 29 In late 1945, Broch had sent Arendt a manuscript, “Remarks on the Utopia of an

27 Ibid., 400.
28 Ibid.
29 On Agamben and Arendt with particular references to the question of human rights see Menke, Christoph, “Die ‘Aporien der Menschenrechte’ und das ‘einzige Menschenrecht.’ Zur Einheit von Hannah Arendts Argumentation,” in:
‘International Bill of Rights and Responsibilities.’” In response, she sent her essay “‘The Rights of Man’ What are they?” in 1946; three years later, in February 1949, Broch sent a new manuscript on “Human Rights and the Earthly-Absolute” to receive in turn the chapter on human rights from the Origins of Totalitarianism in summer 1945. Without being concerned with priorities, it might be interesting to review Broch’s thoughts in this context, particularly because the relation of politics and religion, which today reappears so vehemently, is much more explicit in Broch than in Arendt. For not only does he conceive of National Socialism as a form of renewed paganism, he also uses political-theological figures in an affirmative sense. Facing totalitarianism, Broch argues, we cannot and should not get rid of theology, even if it is dangerous. This may be seen most clearly in the mentioned text on “Human Rights and the Earthly-Absolute,” a condensed version of Broch’s theory of democracy, which was intended to make up the last part of his Theory of Mass Delusion.

Again, the form of the text reflects the ambiguities and aporias of Broch’s argument in a symptomatic way. The text begins with a strong assertion: “All politics start with man. It is made by him, for him, and often against him. To speak on politics, one needs to have a concept of man, otherwise one speaks about empty mechanics.”

Politics is not an autonomous sphere of ‘the political,’ but has to be formulated as a political anthropology, to which both the theory of mass delusion and the ethics of human rights belong. But what, one might ask, is the nature of man? It is unknown, and it may not even exist. The same holds true, as it seems, for the foundation of politics. However, Broch asks, may not the lack of a foundation be used as a cornerstone of a different understanding of politics? He thus raises the question of the possibility of articulating the non-nature of man.

Broch gives a problematic definition: “Man may deny the existence of God, but never that his own existence is in the likeness of...
God’s." This sentence is of course paradoxical since it assumes a likeness without inscribing what seems to be the presupposition of it, namely the existence of God. Thus the paradox implies that, even in regard to his likeness, man can only be determined negatively. Referring to the myth of paradise, to Augustine and the Ten Commandments, Broch states that this likeness actually asks too much of man, since he is not able to do good in itself but must be regulated by laws. Moreover, being essentially negative, man cannot be related directly to nature, and therefore natural law may apply to animals but not to man, who is free and thus basically unnatural. Again, Broch illustrates this eccentric position of man, to use a term by Helmuth Plessner, by a double reference to biblical and pagan mythology: Man, created in the likeness of God, repeats the creation incessantly and is thus free; he is a Promethean and therefore essentially a rebellious creature; he is as godforsaken as the devil; like the people of Babel he tries to replace the divine law by natural law, “forgetting that nothing can replace what is revealed.” Paradoxically enough, a text that constantly argues by employing religious analogies stresses the impossibility of ‘secularizing’ the absolute. In fact Broch evokes a transcendent principle to call into question all immanent foundations of politics and of rights.

However, the negativity of man can also assume a very concrete political form. Man is ‘negative’ when being excluded, as he paradigmatically is in totalitarian regimes. This possibility of exclusion – the conception of the human as a slave or as no-longer-human – represents the non-nature of man, albeit negatively, and may thus serve as the cornerstone for which Broch looked. Broch states his principle:

The total slavery, which the concentration camps represent as a horrible paradigm, shall not take place. And indeed, one does not have to refer to the divine nature of men or to his freedom to know that in total slavery he is forced not only to the level of the sub-human, but even to the sub-animalic.

This formula is both a postulate in the Kantian sense and it refers to a very concrete fact in history. According to Broch, this facticity may, like the

32 Ibid.
34 Broch, Werke 12, 468.
discoveries of certain facts with respect to the theories of physics, have a ‘limitative’ function: It limits the speculation on formal possibilities. The second part of the essay unfolds this idea in relation to law; it is to large parts a critique of Carl Schmitt. Even if the law is a formal system operating autonomously, it must be limited, specifically by its relation to the human. Namely, the law must not exclude any of its subjects from the law, i.e. by making a law that prevents the fundamental law from applying to certain subjects. Law should not be allowed to exempt its own subjects; every politics is limited by the imperative that ‘this shall never happen again.’

The postulate quoted above, is, according to Broch, valid as an ‘Earthly-Absolute.’ Again, Broch stresses that the absoluteness assumed here is not a secularized version of divine law: “If man merely renamed divine law as the law of reason or as the law of nature without finding new contents, he would not fulfill the task but simply execute a superfluous atheistic demonstration.”\(^\text{35}\) Rather, the absoluteness of the postulate consists in the fragile nature of man, not in his higher capacities or his eternal vocation. This in turn means that the ‘Earthly-Absolute’ does not follow from a likeness (to God) but rather the other way round, and thus the essay closes with an appeal to future development, in a very long, typically Brochian and barely translatable sentence:

> It is sure that from the statement of the rights of men a new image of man will finally emerge, and surely [. . .] it will finally become closer and closer to the likeness, however, the respective human freedom will not stand dogmatically at the outset of the series of definitions, but at its end, an end of infinite approximation which nevertheless can never be completely achieved [. . .].\(^\text{36}\)

The length and syntactic complexity of the sentence tries to grasp a process in the making. The ‘Earthly-Absolute’ thus remains a paradox, since it is only expected to become absolute without ever being transmuted in a transcendent absolute. By contrast, as Broch stresses time and again, the absolute is absent and is essential as being absent: The democratic absolute, to quote a similar phrase from Claude Lefort, has to be an empty place, or, as formulated by Jacques Rancière, the political moment of the rights of men does not consist in their givenness but in the debate they initiate.\(^\text{37}\)

\(^{35}\) Ibid., 472.

\(^{36}\) Ibid.

Consequently, the Earthly-Absolute is actually never directly ad-
dressed in Broch’s text. Rather, it is sketched by evoking different reli-
gious allegories, both from the Bible and from Greek mythology, in a
circular movement by which the likeness of man to God that seemed
to be a presupposition of the entire discourse is revealed to be its future
telos. It is this textual movement which renders Broch’s theoretical reflec-
tions on politics into what I would call a ‘poetology of politics,’ and it is
quite obvious that, as such, it is principally no less esoteric than his poetic
texts.

V. Coda

Similar to many other emigrants, Broch thought of returning to Europe
after the war. But, as ambivalent as he was about coming to the U.S., he
proved to be reluctant about returning, especially because of his doubts
that Nazism had really disappeared completely, as some of his correspon-
dents suggested. In a letter to his friend Daniel Brody from 1951 he tells a
joke that may again be read emblematically: In the middle of the Atlantic,
two ships pass each other, one going eastward to Europe, the other west-
ward to the U.S. When the ships meet, two emigrant friends recognize
each other on board of the respective other ship, and they both shout
at each other: “Are you meschugge?”

Both ways of the passage remain
problematic. It is neither possible to simply go to the land of freedom,
for this freedom remains to be fundamentally endangered, nor is it pos-
sible to return ‘home’ again, for this home may no longer exist. More
generally, the joke may also apply to the passage Hermann Broch tries
to undertake: For him, the passage from literature to politics remains
problematic, for the exoteric parts of his work is by no means less esoteric
than his poetry. However, this is not to suggest that Broch simply re-
mained a poet, for his political concerns undermine all his poetry and
should not be dismissed too easily in favor of a Brochian aesthetics.
The ethics of exile consist in a double provocation, a provocation in
terms of cultures: American and German, as well as in terms of discourses:

2010, 62–75.

political, philosophical, and poetical. And actually, when facing The Death of Virgil, 450 pages of lyrical monologue, on the one hand, and the Theory of Mass Delusion, 450 pages of highly idiosyncratic speculations on modernity, on the other, one is tempted to exclaim: Are you *meschugge*? The problem with such a reading, perhaps, could be that it is still looking for some form of a home, a place of belonging. Only in certain moments Broch went beyond this problem, employing a category which is both political and religious – as we have seen, it is always the religious which intervenes in his ideas – and which is furthermore Jewish, namely the idea of Diaspora. In 1947, Broch wrote to Else Spitzer:

> My dearest, it is astonishing to me that you, and Fritz as well most likely, are bothered by the so called *Heimatlosigkeit*, the loss of home. In this respect I am much more Israeli, for even if I love certain landscapes, I felt my whole life solely diasporic – albeit with the exception of the Viennese cuisine, which establishes a strong bond of homeland, while as an American citizen I can’t stand the local grub. But apart from that I am quite happy without a sense of home, and I sometimes even write a kitsch poem about it.39

References


39 Broch, *Werke* 13/2 (Briefe 2), 143.
Hermann Broch and the Ethics of Exile


“Escape to Life”

German Intellectuals in New York: A Compendium on Exile after 1933

Edited by Eckart Goebel and Sigrid Weigel in cooperation with Gerome Bolton and Chadwick Smith

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