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Abstract

Review of Graham Bartram, Sarah McGaughey, and Galin Tihanov, editors. *A Companion to the Works of Hermann Broch*. Camden House, 2019. xii + 278 pp.

Keywords

Hermann Broch, New Objectivity, Vienna Circle

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A well-read English-speaking reader might know Hermann Broch as yet another Jewish-Austrian author who wrote antifascist literature. *Die Schlafwandler* (*The Sleepwalkers*), his first and most famous novel, sits comfortably along other interwar and exceedingly long novels in German. The novel, praised later by Milan Kundera and others, tells of a degenerating world and contemporary critics placed its author next to writers like Robert Musil and Thomas Mann and, more distantly, James Joyce and Marcel Proust. With most translations to English done in the 1930s, Broch's work has been waiting to be rediscovered, and this companion is a good first step.

This companion, which was long overdue considering the relative dearth of introductory materials on Hermann Broch in English, offers important insight into his literary work. Its chapters cover all the ground a good companion volume should cover: some link Broch's writings on literature to his literary writing or situate his work within larger literary and philosophical movements, while others provide close readings of particular works or extend the discussion to Broch's place in a dense network of literary inspirations. The main strength of the volume is the space it gives to Broch's lesser-known works, thus avoiding the trap of becoming an introduction to the works readers can already learn about by perusing previous work in English, such as Malcolm Simpson's analysis of Broch's novels. All these qualities make it an important resource for teaching German-language, Austrian, and modernist literature.

One strand that runs through the volume is the role of literature in a changing world. For Broch, literature was a vehicle for generating insight on fields that science cannot explain. The first three chapters of the volume—Kathleen L. Komar's explication of *Die Schlafwandler*, Gunther Marten's on the "Dilemma of Literature in the Modern Age," and Galin Tihanov on what he terms Broch's postromanticist tendencies—all suggest a certain tension between the modernist pursuit of literature as an aesthetic experiment and Broch's concern with an ethically bankrupt world. This is particularly well demonstrated in Marten's chapter, which shows the slow transformation of Broch's writing from the earliest stories to *Der Tod des Vergil* (*The Death of Virgil*). The three chapters work well in situating Broch as an author in a greater time and place—in the aftermath of the Habsburg Empire and the heyday of modernism.

The chapters on some of Broch's minor works offer a fascinating, often untold, portrait of his work as grounded not only in bigger times and places but also in his personal biography. Brechtje Beuker's chapter on Broch's political plays ties his literary work to his role as a leading member of the Federation of Austrian Industries, while the following chapter by Gwyneth Cliver looks into Broch's

education in mathematics and logic. Cliver illustrates how, in a novel full of science, Broch still insists on trying to reach a certain mythical quality of human existence or an irrational remnant that the Enlightenment could not dispel, without which no true understanding, or *Erkenntnis*, is possible. Gisela Brude-Firnu returns the focus to international modernists and the bourgeoisie while exploring the more specific context of early Nazi literature, most notably Ludwig Klages, whom Broch effectively subverts. Students will appreciate these chapters as an opportunity to delve into contexts beyond the major categories of analysis (like modernism) and discover New Objectivity, the Vienna Circle, and Nazi-inspired literature when reading Broch.

The following two chapters are admittedly more presentist and focus on Broch as a thinker. Judith Ryan and Sebastian Wogenstein contextualize Broch within crowd psychology and human rights, respectively. Wogenstein's chapter, which ascribes a certain prescience to Broch when it comes to his ideas about the necessity of international institutions, should be read alongside recent studies by Natasha Wheatley and Quinn Slobodian, who both return to the Austrian attempt to construct an international order in the absence of empires. These fantastic chapters market themselves as relevant for the modern day, but they are also deeply relevant for the work of international historians who focus on contemporary issues rather than the past *an sich*. Both will be instrumental in convincing scholars to include authors like Broch—and not only figures who wrote explicitly political or policy-oriented works—when considering Austrian history. The remaining three chapters focus on Broch's later works and his legacy. This legacy, as the relative dearth of interpretive works in English suggests, is partial and fragmented. Paul Michael Lützel's chapter is built of spurts of interest in Broch rather than a continuous resonance of his work.

The focus on texts and contexts makes this volume indispensable for students and scholars of Austria, Central Europe, and twentieth century literature. The genre of the companion, however, forces some limitations on this largely fantastic volume. It is the delicate task of companion writers to balance their duty to introduce conventional readings with advocating for their own. Such highly interesting readings, therefore, must remain underdeveloped to the detriment of the reader. This is perhaps most clearly demonstrated in Komar's chapter on *The Sleepwalkers*, which is both commendable for not assuming prior familiarity with the novel and for considering the role of women, though without being able to pursue both lines of inquiry at deserving lengths. Other chapters, like Tihanov's "Interrogating Modernity," struggle to balance text and context, which can make the discussion somewhat difficult to follow or too abstract for the uninitiated (or skeptical) reader.

No book, however, can do everything. Given the generic limitations, the editors have produced a fantastic volume that introduces Broch, his work, and his

historical environment. This task is noble and its execution well done, and in this they have done a significant service to the field. Instructors should be encouraged to assign chapters from this collection—no given chapter is particularly long—to be read in tandem with the works they discuss.

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