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Formalism and the Figure
of Self-Cancellation in *The Sleepwalkers*
A Response to David Suchoff

SINCE SYMBOLS are generally said to mirror abstract thoughts or positions, symbols in Hermann Broch's *The Sleepwalkers*, as for example Herr von Pasenow's gait, might be viewed as part of the form in which the narrator expresses the disintegration of values. David Suchoff would replace this mimetic model of symbols with an ideological one: the novel's symbols do not neutrally represent ideas; they serve authority.

The sociology of symbols Suchoff proposes brings to light a dimension of *The Sleepwalkers* that also plays a role in *The Spell*, a work that focuses more directly on the origins of fascism. In this later work symbols are invoked as a shield against moral decay and are even employed as the formal apparatus with which to initiate a conservative revolution. Suchoff, restricting himself to the *The Sleepwalkers*, skillfully illustrates the complexity of specific symbols in the novel. The deer hunt, for example, symbolizes: first, self-sacrifice; second, resistance to the authority that encourages self-sacrifice; and third, the erasure of resistance against this authority.

Suchoff's theory of symbols and the consequences he draws from it, however, are not without problems. If reverence for authority stems in part from a fear of cultural decay and if symbols are adapted to serve authority, then the novel's symbols might simply represent, in mimetic fashion, the ideological potential of symbolism. That is, Broch uses symbols such as Herr von Pasenow's gait, the cross, and the pony mimetically in order to present his argument that symbols can be used for ideological purposes. Pasenow's encounter with the pony, for example, might function as a symbolic corollary to his ambivalent attitude towards Bertrand and Ruzena, his initial attraction to them and his eventual disillusion. Symbols contribute, as does the plot, to a presentation of the romantic hero's resistance to and subsequent return to authority. Suchoff's insight into the sociology of symbols does not necessarily undermine one's reading of symbols as formally neutral or mimetic. If symbols are inherently neutral, one can of course adapt them for ideological purposes. Moreover, the philosopher of cultural disintegration knows that the symbols of authority hold special attraction for figures who have lost their orientation. Thus, the sociology of symbols does not conflict with the philosophy of cultural disintegration, nor is it indifferent to it; rather, the sociology of symbols represents a moment within this philosophy.

Suchoff, however, sees the sociology of symbols as not a moment but a whole, that is, the philosophy of cultural disintegration does not annul, it encourages, the ideological use of symbols. Thus, in a deconstructive turn Suchoff contends that even as the narrator unravels the ideological import of symbolism, he himself succumbs to this ideology. I would like to counter this reading with a series of arguments. First, expanding my original point, I would suggest that symbols can be used to serve or to undermine authority. In this sense they resemble secondary virtues such as loyalty, sacrifice, or discipline, virtues that are purely formal and derive their legitimacy only from the primary virtues they serve. Indeed, in its abstract structure, and despite its inverse content, Suchoff's view of symbols might be said to resemble Esch's view of sacrifice. In Esch's mind the very act of sacrifice (not necessarily sacrifice for a universal) will bring about salvation. For Suchoff the very use of apocalyptic or sacrificial symbols seems to imply service to authority. One must distin-

guish, however, the meaning of apocalyptic symbolism for the characters in the novel and for the narrator. The narrator depicts how individual characters, fearing a dissolution of values, return to the figures of authority. The narrator thus provides a motivation for his characters, but his ironic tone underscores the untenability of their positions. In his analysis of sacrifice as submission, Suchoff overlooks a tradition of self-sacrifice where the act of sacrifice indicates resistance to false authority and adherence to a higher one: the individual does the good knowing that he will suffer for it. Martin Geyring's actions adhere to this pattern.[1] Sacrifice as commitment to truth differs radically from sacrifice as self-inflicted suffering or as submergence in an arbitrary collective. Sacrificial symbols then, like acts of sacrifice, often serve authority only as they undermine other forms of authority. Suchoff's analysis of symbols insofar as they represent resistance to authority or the erasure of such resistance gains meaning only when sacrifice and authority are seen in their particular contexts. In fact, the very question of authority and resistance loses its significance in a world where values have become arbitrary. Why resist one value system if alternative systems are equally arbitrary? Suchoff unveils Esch's lack of resistance to authority as a form of weakness, but one must ask whether Esch's intended sacrifice of Bertrand represents a legitimate attack on authority and the suppression of this act an untenable regression toward conservatism, or whether Esch's scheme is the outgrowth of an unsettled mind, unsettled in the sense that Esch seeks a simple (and arbitrary) solution to a wide-ranging contemporary crisis. Esch's act or non-act of resistance seems less significant than his initial loss of orientation. The core problem of *The Sleepwalkers* is not symbols but the lack of universals, though it is not without interest that in periods of romanticism or counter-enlightenment, when figures fail to reflect on universals, formalism, in terms of both the ideological use of symbols and the valorization of secondary virtues, predominates.

When Suchoff discusses the dangers of symbols, it is not entirely clear whether he means that Broch's characters (and his narrator) are

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[1] On Geyring's importance for a reading of the novel see especially Paul Michael Lützeler, *Hermann Broch—Ethik und Politik: Studien zum Frühwerk und zur Romantrilogie "Die Schlafwandler"* (Munich: Winkler, 1973), 116-20.

necessarily guided by symbols and there is no way out, or whether he's suggesting that their adherence to symbols is the problem and that action should replace subservience to the figures of authority. If Suchoff is asserting the first position—a seemingly fatalistic, if also deconstructive, one—then the following correction must be proposed: the knowledge of an error frees us, at least in principle, from that error.[2] Certainly, a weak will might interfere with a solution, and one cannot deny the sobering experience of recognizing a problem but being unable to find the correct solution. However, these are contingent, not necessary, obstacles. The consciousness of an error as error frees us, in principle, from any compulsion to continue to err. Symbols not only support authority, they provide us with knowledge that they support authority. The narrator's very act of uncovering the ideological potential of symbols weakens their hidden power. This act of cognition allows the narrator, and his readers, to penetrate the ideological usage of symbols, to employ symbols in other ways and, where appropriate, to discard them. To introduce a parallel example: if one argues that man is determined by material forces, that very insight is—in a Hegelian sense—idealist, not material. Materialism established as a law is idealism. Recognition of a general law frees us from our subordination to material forces: we act in accordance with the law and so control the material forces that once might have controlled us. If Suchoff is arguing that the narrator's recognition of ideology fails, necessarily, to free the narrator from its force, then Suchoff, too, must be under its sway. He, too, would be unable to transcend the ideological use of symbols. He would be no better off than Pasenow, Esch, or the narrator, and there would be little significance in the composition of his article. In short, his position would be untenable and self-canceling. On the other hand, if Suchoff is asserting that we can (and should) free our-

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[2] Even if one were to agree with Suchoff that the narrator's symbols encourage adherence to a false authoritarian order, the narrator's failure would have to be viewed as contingent, not necessary. Thus, if he were to fail, the novel's statement about his failure would transcend this failure, and he would become—in the evaluative, if not mimetic, sense of the term—an unreliable narrator. Finally, one can concur with Suchoff's statement that the narrator is a figure in crisis without assenting to the claim that the narrator's use of symbols remains on a level with that of Pasenow or Esch.

selves from subordination to symbols, that we should *act*, the question arises, *how* should we act. In focusing on symbols as a deterrent to action, Suchoff illuminates a significant dimension of the text, but the problem is not solely weak men who fail to act, the solution not simply the abandonment of symbols. The attachment to symbols derives from the very instability and uneasiness that arises when the question "How should one act?" has, or seems to have, no suitable answer. The characters fail to act correctly because they lack grounds for action. They suffer from what Broch elsewhere calls "the problem of relativism, for which there is no absolute truth, no absolute value, and therefore no absolute ethic."[3] Symbols are symptoms; the problem is the lack of ethical content.

A further implication of Suchoff's argument on symbolism is that the philosophy of disintegration cannot answer the question of how that authority still has a hold over us after its internal support disappears. Suchoff believes that the answer to this question lies in the sociology of symbols. I would like to counter with precisely the opposite claim: just as symbols, merely formal entities, do not suffice as the ground for values, so do they fail to explain the dissolution of such grounds or even their own attraction for individuals suffering from this dissolution; for an answer one must turn to the disintegration of values. The line Suchoff quotes more than once in support of his non-mimetic theory of symbols, "a simile counts for nothing at all," reads in the original: "mit einem Gleichnis [ist] noch nichts erklärt" (KW 1: 12). The sentence, following a barrage of symbols, might be read ironically, a possibility Suchoff does not consider. But if one were to take the statement at face value, one could certainly agree that symbols or similes, *taken by themselves*, explain nothing; they are purely formal. One needs to work with their content and with the context of their expression in order to explain anything.

When the content disappears from a central and overarching value system, what remains are mere forms: the structures of society and government, the formal display of power, empty ritual, a king's robe, the military uniform. The world is held together by pure forms. Broch's analysis of this movement, though not unique, is ex-

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[3] "... das Problem des Relativismus, für den es keine absolute Wahrheit, keinen Wert und sohin auch keine absolute Ethik gibt" KW 10/2: 195.

tremely illuminating and together with his innovative narrative devices the reason for his novel's world-class reputation. A not unsimilar formalistic structure is at work in Franz Grillparzer's mid-nineteenth-century drama *Ein Bruderzwist in Habsburg*. The Emperor Rudolf has no content to give to the absolute and is thus crippled in action. Rudolf attempts to hold on to power through the form of his office alone. To conceive of Broch in the midst of a particularly Austrian tradition, one might also consider Joseph Roth's contemporaneous *Radetzkymarsch* with its portrayal of the dissolution of content amidst the preservation of imperial rituals and symbols. The numerous formal, historical, and evaluative differences between these works should not overshadow their common motif: loss of ethical content and dependence on form.

When societal values dissolve, the security of one's life is threatened. Pasenow and Esch experience such threats: Pasenow fears Bertrand, Ruzena, and the worlds they represent; Esch feels threatened by the "bookkeeping" mistakes that have ripped his world apart—from Nentwig's corruption and the jailing of Martin to Ilona's theatrical victimization. Pasenow and Esch desperately seek identity and order: Pasenow in the uniform an idealized love relationship; Esch in his dreams for the future and his marriage with Mother Hentjen. Because the two characters fear the chaos elicited by the disintegration of values, they seek authority and embrace the vestiges of order. Suchoff is right in arguing that Esch ultimately fears his own ideal, freedom, but the symbolism of Esch's encounter with Bertrand hardly explains the source of this fear; an understanding of the ways in which antithetical freedom undermines stability and values does explain it. Though Pasenow recognizes that his ideals are illusory, he does his best to suppress this insight. Esch confusedly searches for a black-and-white solution, be it sacrifice, be it a messiah. Pasenow's denial of Bertrand's devastating critique of institutions and Esch's associative patterns of thought bring home the irrationalism of the romantic position.[4] It is not by chance that for Pasenow and Esch a religious framework of belief increasingly

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[4] I follow Leo Kreutzer, *Erkenntnistheorie und Prophetie: Hermann Brochs Romantrilogie "Die Schlafwandler"* (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1966), 106, in viewing Esch as a *romantic* lost in an increasingly anarchic world.

predominates. The desire for order, even if ungrounded, and for scapegoats (Pasenow's and Esch's transference of guilt to others) reflects not only the counter-enlightenment tendencies of romanticism but also its political dangers. Nonetheless, Pasenow's marriage with Elisabeth, ill-founded as it is, and Esch's judicial consciousness, as confused as it is, reflect legitimate desires for objectively recognized and binding social institutions. The weakness of the romantic lies in his fearful unwillingness to think through his own critique of the decaying system and his consequent inability to ground the structures on which he would base the system's strength and stability. Ultimately, his position must cancel itself and pass over into another.

Bertrand fascinates, even as he terrorizes, Pasenow.[5] Huguenau destroys Esch and assumes the latter's role as owner of the newspaper and the physical lover of Mother Hentjen. These actions reflect the fact that Pasenow's and Esch's romantic positions find their truth in the rationalism of Bertrand and Huguenau. In contrast to the romantics Pasenow or Esch, Bertrand recognizes no social conventions or institutions. He leaves the military, recognizes no homeland, and shuns any lasting intersubjective relations. Though his insight into the falsity of institutions frees him from social obligations, it also makes his relations meaningless. His abandonment of values encompasses even the value of his own existence. Bertrand consequently commits suicide. His position is no less self-canceling than that of Pasenow or Esch.

Huguenau, like his partner in success Bertrand, is characterized by his freedom and pragmatic rationality. Like Naphta in Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain*, Bertrand and Huguenau are figures of

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[5] Pasenow's interactions with Bertrand make clear to Pasenow the untenability of his own position. Because reason undermines traditional values, the individual seeking security tries to negate reason; Pasenow would free himself of Bertrand and return to the unreflective affirmation of life or of the institutions of stability. Similarly, Innstetten in Fontane's *Effi Briest*, after recognizing that his code of honor is illusory, wants to abandon his faculty of cognition and return to a primitive life in Africa, but this cannot work (chap. 35). Reason employed as the negation of reason cancels itself. Pasenow, like Innstetten, has recognized the untenability of his position, and he has attempted to escape reason, but the tortures of self-doubt do not cease; reason prevails. On Pasenow's inability to break free of Bertrand or to fully suppress his knowledge see Kreutzer, 69f.

negativity cleverer than competing characters who naively affirm traditional positions. Huguenau, with his manipulative rationalism and his freedom from social restraints, fails, however, just like Bertrand, to provide a legitimate answer to the romanticism of Pasenow and Esch, even if his actions are consequential.[6] Another parallel to Grillparzer's tragedy presents itself: the power of the inactive Rudolf, a man unable to claim validity for any of his positions, passes over into the hands of the assertive individuals Klesel and Ferdinand. The consequence of a content-free, ungrounded absolute is ultimately its passage to an arbitrary and potentially more ruthless absolute. The fear of freedom Esch exhibits, and Suchoff condemns, is, if ultimately unjustifiable, nonetheless understandable. Freedom in the form of anarchy is just as dogmatic as authority, indeed it passes over into tyranny, an insight not lost to objective idealists such as Plato or Hegel. Huguenau, freed of any external laws, freed of any symbols of authority, kills Esch. The character ruled by symbols of authority does not revolt, but the character beyond symbols of authority revolts blindly. The prophecy of totalitarianism is mediated not only through authority but through the spirit of false freedom.[7] If authority and the symbols of authority are abandoned, then all partial value systems are free to claim equal validity. To eliminate objective knowledge and absolute values is not only to distance man from God but to accentuate man's proximity to animals. Huguenau is a kind of hedonist: true for him is what is useful to him. Huguenau returns us to a new authority, a new absolute, but it is an arbitrary one: it is the absolutization of the finitude of the particular subject. Huguenau takes nothing seriously save the arbitrary claims of his own subjectivity; and it is not by chance that he is a ruthless liar and swindler or that he fails to develop a serious relationship. It is in this self-contradictory (and unwittingly romantic) spirit that

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[6] Huguenau is free of reflections on disintegration, free of the fear of apocalypse, and free of symbols, but if he is, implicitly and *ex negativo*, therefore the answer to Suchoff's call for an independent individual, he hardly represents the solution to the problems the novel portrays.

[7] Cf. Broch's own reflections on the novel's prophetic dimensions: KW 13/3: 115.

both the actions of Huguenau and the seeds of National Socialism are to be found.[8]

If the absolute is without content, if the formal structures of society become impotent, assertive individuals are free to assume power. Their own partial value system becomes law. If the truth of Esch is Huguenau, then the truth of Huguenau is Esch; that is, partial value systems may crumble into anarchy and relativism, but relativism allows for the resurrection of new partial value systems. To use the Nietzschean phrases, passive nihilism always passes over into active nihilism, and the content of active nihilism knows no guidelines: it can range from humanism to barbarism.[9] The only way out of this cycle (or hidden identity) of partial value systems and arbitrary relativism is reflection on the grounds of the assertion that there are no grounds, that there is in principle no *a priori* truth. This negative assertion is of course one and the same with the claim: there are only arbitrary founded partial value systems, each of which has an equal right to existence or, more precisely, an equal right to assert itself at the expense of others.[10] Any solution to the problem of relativism and partial value systems must originate with the figure of self-cancellation, that is, with the argument that there are *a priori* structures on which the relativist and romantic depend even as they deny them.[11] The only legitimate absolute is the one

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8 See, for example, the conclusion of Alfred Rosenberg's *The Myth of the 20th Century* (*Der Mythos des 20. Jahrhunderts*, 2nd ed. [Munich: Hoheneichen, 1932]) in which the philosopher of National Socialism chastises those systematic philosophers who assert the validity of *a priori* or absolute truth, those thinkers who base values on logic and the law of non-contradiction.

9 The narrator, aware of Huguenau's merely formal virtue of discipline, can thus write: "had circumstances been more favorable, he could have become as staunch a supporter of revolution as he was now of commerce." *The Sleepwalkers*, trans. Willa and Edwin Muir (San Francisco: North Point, 1985), 637: "daß er [. . .] unter geeigneteren Umständen ein ebenso tüchtiger Revolutionär hätte werden können, wie er ein tüchtiger Kaufmann geworden ist" (KW 1: 703).

10 Whereas Bertrand kills himself, Huguenau murders *another* and so displays the political consequences of his stance. The deserter is a warrior after all but a warrior in his own interest.

11 The figure of self-cancellation, which functions as a negative proof for the absolute, has a prominent position in the works of transcendental philosophers

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that takes opposing positions seriously and exhibits their internal contradictions.[12] An immanent critique would not rest with the negativity of Bertrand or Huguenau; it would reestablish the validity of intersubjective structures and values by sublating not only the unfounded objectivity of Pasenow and Esch but also the merely subjective rationality of Bertrand and Huguenau.

Broch's novel seems to move in this direction.[13] By way of its double negation of ungrounded objectivity and instrumental subjectivity it would seem to call for objective social structures that are not only asserted but also grounded, an authority (or necessity) that is one and the same with autonomy because it is none other than adherence to *a priori* principles. The legitimacy and the realization of this vision are to be obtained outside the realm of the novel; this explains the narrator's doubts about the ultimate value of art, but it does not conflict with art's inherently proleptic function. Not only is philosophy important for a reading of the novel, the novel exhibits structures important for the development of philosophy.

Future research on Broch's *Sleepwalkers* may want to work with Suchoff's insight into the sociology of symbols but relate it more directly to the content of the novel, above all to the disintegration of values, the assertion of partial value systems, and the self-cancella-

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such as Plato and Hegel. Though Broch, indebted to the southwestern school of neo-Kantianism, was skeptical of an ultimate ground (see Friedrich Vollhardt, *Hermann Brochs geschichtliche Stellung: Studien zum philosophischen Frühwerk und zur Romantrilogie "Die Schlafwandler" 1914-1932*, Studien zur deutschen Literatur, 88 [Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1986]; also KW 1: 470ff, 689ff, *Sleepwalkers*, 422-26, 625-27), the plot of *The Sleepwalkers* seems to call forth the dire ethical consequences of such skepticism. The reduction of all first principles to dogmatism, infinite regress, or circularity leads to the empirical possibility, and logical necessity, of partial value systems, *i.e.*, systems with divergent axioms, whose validity remains hypothetical. From this originates the chaos and destruction depicted in the novel.

12 The only way to evaluate autonomous value systems, perhaps even to allow for communication among them, is by way of immanent critique, *i.e.*, the refutation of alternative positions on their own terms. This is the first step towards establishing a legitimate and coherent totality rather than the totalitarianism of an arbitrary standpoint.

13 Because Suchoff does not consider such a third moment, he concludes that the narrator's own fear of apocalypse returns him to the authoritarianism of Pasenow or Esch.

tion of, in turn, romanticism, anarchy, and matter-of-factness. Not only can Broch's ideas illuminate the symbols of his text, his theory of partial value systems has—to my knowledge—hardly been exhausted in terms of its application to the Weimar period as a whole. Slogans such as "business is business," "war is war," "love for love's sake," or "an order's an order" illustrate the crises faced by many a Weimar hero. One thinks of works as diverse as Georg Kaiser's *Gas*, Erich Maria Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front [Im Westen nichts Neues]*, Josef von Sternberg's *The Blue Angel [Der blaue Engel]*, or Carl Zuckmayer's *The Captain from Köpenick [Der Hauptmann von Köpenick]*. These texts also point toward the National Socialists' attempted integration, in some cases neutralization, of these doctrines in their own partial value system, a system that did use symbols ideologically. The romantic use of symbols betrays, however, a lack of genuine content, a lack that is as universally necessary as is the ideological use of symbols.