Hermann Broch

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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*, skilfully 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 erosion of resistance against this authority.

Suchoff’s theory of symbols and the consequences he draws from it, however, are not without problem. 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 Böck’s view of sacrifice. In Böck’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 Geyer's actions adhere to this pattern. Sacrifice as commitment to truth differs radically from sacrifice as self-inflicted suffering, or as submersion 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 is as if they represent resistance to authority or the essence 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 reveals 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 of non-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 the 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 Brody's characters (and his narrator) are 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. Certainly, a week will not 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 cognizance 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—in a Hegelian sense—validates, not material forces, that very insight in a Hegelian sense—renders a general law false from 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 Faust, 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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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." 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, purely 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 erdärt" (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-


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, another parallel to Grillparzer's tragedy presents itself: the power of the inanimate Rudolf, a man unable to claim validity for any of his positions, passes over into the hands of the assertive individuals Kleist 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 Schöffer condemnation 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 and 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.

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 accustom 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 the narrative begins.
both the actions of Huguenau and the seeds of National Socialism are to be found. 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 Nazi is Huguenau, then the truth of Nazism 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. 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 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. 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. The only legitimate absolute is the one that takes opposing positions seriously and exhibits their internal contradiction. An immanent critique would not rest with the negativity of Bertrand or Huguenau; it would reestablish the validity of intersubjective structures and values by obliterating 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. 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 predictive 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 Sterneleute may want to work with Schöffl'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-cancellation such as Plate and Heigel. Though Broch, indeed to the southwestern school of neo-Kantianism, was skeptical of an ultimate ground (see Friedrich Vollhardt, Horst Rau: Die geschichtliche Stellung: Studien zur philosophischen Öffnung und zur Berufung "Die Schöffl'sche" 161-143, 1691-143, 1691, Sterneleute, 222-226, 81 [Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1980] also K 1: 367, 6991, Sterneleute, 222-226, 81 [Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1980]), the plot of The Sterneleute seems to call forth the dialektisch gespannten an tension of such skepticism. The reflection of all first principles to dogmatism, infinite regress, or circularity leads to the empirical possibility, and logical necessity, of partial value options, i.e., systems with divergent outcomes, whose validity remain hypothetical. From this originates the chaos and destruction depicted in the novel.

8 See, for example, the conclusion of Alfred Rosenberg's Die Mythos des 20. Jahrhunderts (Munich: Höfe, 1932) in which the philosopher of National Socialism champions 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: "sad circumstances been more favorable, he could have become as staunch a supporter of revolution as he was now of commerce." The Sterneleute, trans. Wills and Edwin Mintz (San Francisco: North Point, 1983), 637, "dass er [...], unter gesteigerten Umständen sich als höchsten revolutionäre halten werden könnte, wie er ein tüchtiger Kaufmann geworden ist" (K 1: 701).

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.
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 exhaustered 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 blau 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.