

A 'Novel' Approach to Hermann Broch's *Theory of Mass Aberration*

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Review of: Brett E. Sterling, *Hermann Broch and Mass Hysteria: Theory and Representation in the Age of Extremes* (Camden House, 2022), 268 pp. (hardcover). GBP 95.00. ISBN: 9781640140042

Brett Sterling's book takes a fresh look at Austrian novelist Hermann Broch (1886–1951) and his *Theory of Mass Aberration* by accessing Broch's treatment of the 'mass' not only through his crowd psychology but also through his novelistic representation of the mass. Sterling's analysis combines three separate projects from Broch's oeuvre (his novel *The Spell*, his theory on crowd psychology, and his political treatises on democratic reform) into a single examination of Broch's engagement with anti-authoritarianism. Sterling completed the book in the first years of the 2020s when the growth of nationalist populism and authoritarianism was evident, and he understood the book as a way of not only explaining what Broch argued but stressing why Broch's work would be relevant in the twenty-first century.

Sterling's book is well structured and elegantly written in its precise and direct prose. One of the strengths of the book is the detailed summary and explication of Broch's literary theory (second chapter) and his mass hysteria theory (fourth chapter). Sterling's deep dives into Broch's theoretical writings rely on a large amount of primary source quotation, and the book provides both the original German passages as well as English translations. The result is a tight and accessible outline of Broch's theory on mass hysteria and the role of the individual in the moments of mass aberration, as well as an elaboration of Broch's theory of the novel built around 'the concepts of syntax, symbolisation, expanded naturalism, and simultaneity' (pp. 49–50). For the general reader, Hermann Broch is most well-known for his modernist novels (*The Sleepwalkers*, 1932 and *The Death of Virgil*, 1945). Broch is a key representative of the generation of writers whose active career overlaps with World War II, the decline of European power, and the rise of state genocide. Broch, like Mann, Musil, Döblin, and Zweig, became a significant exilic commentator on these destructive histories. In the case of Broch, he focused his exile work on pragmatic solutions to the dangers of fascism.

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Sterling's book contains five chapters with an introduction and conclusion. He structures the book around a central motif of Broch scholarship: Broch as a 'poet against his will.' As Sterling sets out in the introduction, Hannah Arendt played the central role in framing Broch's oeuvre as a battle amongst his intellectual foci: literature, cognition, and action. Sterling will describe this as Broch's 'triple poles of literature, science, and politics,' and he sets out the purpose of the book as a means of elucidating 'the ways in which his oeuvre provides a unique opportunity to question the capacities of literature to grant access to new forms of knowledge that exceed the limits of theory' (p. 1). The first chapter provides a useful, both biographical and intellectual historical examination of Broch's experience with mass politics in the hectic years of interwar Austria. Sterling focuses on Broch's personal revulsion to such outbreaks of violence and murder. Sterling will suggest that these experiences inculcated a psychological distancing between Broch and 'the street,' resulting in a 'pessimistic rejection of politics' (p. 41). In the second chapter, Sterling examines Broch's turn to literature as a solution to outbreaks of mass violence: 'Broch proposed literature as the new guide to human understanding... the means to explore and comprehend the irrational aspects of existence' (p. 2). Broch's goals here are ambitious and do not address the mass in isolation but as part of a general collapse of social cohesion. Broch sought to build a literary language that would synthesise literature, science, and philosophy to create a new, all-encompassing system of knowledge. In the third chapter, Sterling focuses on the mass within this larger literary theory by analysing the representation of the mass in Broch's literary work of the early to mid-1930s. Sterling refers many times to the 'elusive', 'fluctuating', or 'vague' nature of the mass in these works. The chapter concludes with the claim that the rise of National Socialism pushed Broch away from this universal literary theory and towards action, namely a theory of mass hysteria and democratic protection of the individual.

In the fourth chapter, Sterling pivots from literature to focus on mass hysteria and its accompanying political works. Sterling outlines Broch's theory of twilight consciousness and the process by which the crowd (and even societies) embrace 'super-gratification' in the midst 'rational impoverishment'. He also examines Broch's move to action with his political theory on how to prevent fascism. In so doing, he explores Broch's embrace of a democratic ideology. Broch goes so far as to talk about democracy as a total ideology and to promote state propagandising of democracy. It would be fruitful to read Sterling's analysis

of Broch's theory alongside the work of Jonathan Maynard on ideology. Broch's explanation for mass hysteria, which is the insecurity of the individual, becomes in his political theory a question of how societies react to insecurity, national and economic. Broch concludes that fascist states react through violence and the targeting of an alien other. For Broch, however, the political explanation often remains removed from his individual examination of mass or mob violence. Maynard's work shows some important ways in which the distance between Broch's theory of mass aberration and his political ideas on propaganda could be tightened.¹

The fifth chapter returns to a literary focus; Sterling takes the view that Broch's systematic theory of mass hysteria proves limited in its ability to represent effectively the mass and moments of irrational and violent outburst. The chapter is a close reading of Broch's unfinished novel, *The Spell*. The basic plot of the novel mirrors Broch's theory of mass hysteria, where the central driver is the fear of death, heightened by the economic uncertainty in an Alpine mining village (the encroachment of the modern technology). Whether the village will resolve its fear through its positive sublimation or a negative super-gratification of irrational impulses hinges on the question of leadership. Sterling emphasises Broch's positioning of two Führer figures against one another. Mutter Gisson, a mystical figure 'possessing a genuine understanding and connection to nature and to death,' and Marius Ratti, a mysterious stranger who proposes to shut out urban modernity through a 'proposed pastoral idyll' and 'heathen spirituality' (blood and land philosophy). 'He [Ratti] quickly begins to spread a gospel of chastity and Luddism, espousing the triumph of masculinity over femininity and a return to handwork' (p. 165). The novel culminates in the ritual murder of Irmgard, a young woman in the village, under the prompting of Ratti and his gang. As the murder is about to happen, the frenzied intoxication of the villagers drive Mutter Gisson from the scene and Irmgard is stabbed. Nonetheless, over the last pages of the novel, it becomes clear that the murder did not bring about salvation, the sense of security, Ratti had promised—he is exposed as a false prophet. Yet, even after his role in the murder, he is allowed to settle in the village and live a normal life. 'Despite the violence and senselessness of Irmgard's murder, the incident is almost instantly absorbed and forgotten by the entire village' (p. 204).

1 Jonathan Leader Maynard, *Ideology and Mass Killing the Radicalized Security Politics of Genocides and Deadly Atracities* (Oxford University Press, 2022). See third chapter, 'How Does Ideology Explain Mass Killing?'.

Sterling notes that Broch leaves the question of reconciliation and memory of the ritual murder unresolved, thus obfuscating the notion of guilt – collective or individual. This is especially interesting as Broch had another, never completed, novel in progress at the time of his death titled *The Guiltless*. Nonetheless, Sterling's interesting and well-articulated discussion on how Broch understands crowd psychology as an individual experience could prompt classroom and community discussions that help humanise victim experiences. Such discussions could dynamise the often-static discussions of economic, social, familial, or state responsibility. This could open a new view of post-atrocity community reconciliation. When Sterling's book is read with an eye to scholars such as Peter Fritzsche, it opens a space where the public sphere meets the individual. Fritzsche asks about how we measure the response and responsibility of the people and concludes that powerlessness or ignorance of the populace can be rejected as conclusive pardons for inaction. By looking for the individual voice, Fritzsche uncovers evidence of opinion, purposefulness, and agency that problematise universal claims of innocence.² Broch's narrator in *The Spell*, as Sterling points out, forces us to see the problem between the capacity to act and decisions not to. In this way, literature finds a space in the questions of reconciliation and responsibility.

Sterling's book represents a fruitful shift in the treatment of Broch's political and mass psychological works through a recontextualisation of these ideas into Broch's literary theory. Though Broch shifted, as Central Europe fell under Nazi control, towards a conception of what Paul Michael Lützeler calls 'negative aesthetics', Sterling argues that Broch's most impactful analysis of mass atrocity was its literary depiction – the creation of individual experience within the crowd.³

Critically, Broch's efforts at rebuffing the spread of fascism went beyond the diagnosis of underlying causes – mass hysteria – to a proposed cure, namely an intense program of democratic conversion. For all its insight into the psychological mechanisms that make the individual susceptible to mass hysteria, the *Massenwahntheorie* fails to provide a visceral connection to its subject. In order to make the interior realm of the mass accessible to the individual, theory must give way to literature (p. 158).

2 Peter Fritzsche, *Life and Death in the Third Reich* (Harvard University Press, 2008) and *Hitler's First Hundred Days: When Germans Embraced the Third Reich* (Yale University Press, 2020).

3 Paul Michael Lützeler, 'The Avant-Garde in Crisis: Hermann Broch's Negative Aesthetics in Exile' in *Hermann Broch: Literature, Philosophy, Politics* (Camden House, 1988), pp. 14–31.

Sterling takes us back to Broch's literary impulse. He suggests that though Broch questioned the value of literature post Auschwitz, his fiction nonetheless provides us today an essential window into Broch's imagining and theorising of the crowd in midst of mass hysteria.

One of Broch's key terms that Sterling examines closely is *Rationalverarmung* or rational impoverishment. Broch is here engaging in ego-based psychology, where he explains the descent into anti-social or even insane activity as a result of embracing a value system of 'possession and subjugation' (p. 119). An individual descends into mass violence because of existential angst and the inability to incorporate irrational fears into a positive communal ethos. The individual disappears into the collective where the values of 'base gratification and empty intoxication' dominate. This psychological explanation for why a person may join in the perpetration of crimes connects in interesting ways with the recent scholarship of Perpetrator Studies, which have looked closely at the individual context of rape, humiliation, and murder. Broch's theory facilitates questions about whether or to what degree perpetrators can claim to be or can be viewed as 'impoverished,' 'intoxicated,' 'panicked,' etc. At the same time, however, one could question whether Broch's theory does not in fact push the individual within the crowd to the side in terms of culpability. Here Sterling quotes Broch directly, 'The average person of this age, especially the urban dweller, is subject to invisible, incomprehensible economic forces, called the economic situation, inflation, unemployment, unprofitability, and they can assume a hundred other names, but they are always overwhelming in an almost mythical way and so inescapable, that the average person will feel subject to them as a powerless plaything' (p. 123). Sterling here points out one of the problematic aspects of Broch's theory. On the one hand, Broch limits the actions of individuals through the forces of history, the economy, or the cultural construction of value systems. On the other hand, Broch refuses to give the mass a collective identity and argues that the crowd's actions remain tied to individual decision making which leaves a great deal of the empty space of inaction. Though, characters such as the doctor and Ratti do provide readers with the chance to interrogate perpetrators on the individual level and thus question their excusals and claims to victimisation.

Sterling suggests that Broch's solution to this contradiction is to evaluate a single individual or group to the decision-making role – specific individuals who lead the crowd – a *Führer*. Broch's discussion of the individual as leader of the mass aligns with his cyclical historical theo-

ry where civilisational advancement occurs when ‘historic personalities’ (p. 138) use their individual talents to endow their societies with new cultural gifts. In this way, Broch sets most of the population in the category of ‘average men,’ who remain wrapped in an animalistic rationality. As Broch writes, quoted by Sterling:

[S]ince the fixed lifestyles which accompany every cultural blossoming offer the most favorable ground for mere acceptance and therefore for the emergence of the average person; by virtue of such acceptance... the average person becomes a creature without a physiognomy, its visage becomes an ‘epochal physiognomy,’ devoid of any individual features whatsoever, indistinguishable in the amorphous, equally physiognomy-less mass of its fellow human beings, indistinguishable like a piece of livestock in the mass of its fellow animals, like these exclusively occupied in twilight fashion with immediate gratification of drives, and thus in contrast to the historically distinct great personality (that it displaces). Having become with its lack of physiognomy a ‘historically anonymous human being, it ushers in the demise of the epoch, the demise of the epoch’s culture’ (pp. 138-139).

Some of Broch’s social scientific terminology such as ‘ersatz super-gratification’ and ‘conversion’ have special relevance to the question of mass atrocity prevention. Both terms indicate that mob hysteria can be de-escalated through the intervention of social action or media, suggesting cultural and media spaces might fight dangerous propaganda through counter propaganda or through siphoning off energy through sports and public entertainment. However, Broch has also tied mass hysteria both in the general population (‘average men’) and in the individual to historical cyclical determinism that seems to overpower the process of conversion – positive values can decay, become nonsensical. This leaves one to wonder if democratic resistance can only be accessed in specific moments of the cycle. From the point of view of genocide prevention, this is a troubling conclusion. It leaves the prevention of mass atrocity at the mercy of historical patterns.

As Broch scholars have pushed his theory’s relevance to the fore over the last decade, it does give perpetrator studies scholars a fresh resource of fiction and theory to consider.⁴ And Sterling’s translation and

⁴ *Massenwahntheorie und Friedenspoetik: Hermann Broch und die bedrohte Demokratie des 20. Jahrhunderts*, ed. by Sarah McGaughey and others (De Gruyter, 2023); Paul Michael Lützeler, *Hermann Broch und die Menschenrechte: Anti-Versklavung als Ethos der Welt* (De Gruyter, 2021);

exposition of Broch's literary and crowd theory make the contours of its definitions and goals clear. Sterling's work, however, remains geared towards scholars of Broch, modernism, and the intellectual milieu of the 20th century Western world. Where Sterling's contribution will be most felt is in the scholarly discussions of Broch's unpublished drafts, his correspondence, his biography, and intellectual milieu. Certainly, the interdisciplinary nature of Perpetrator Studies and the significant position of Central Europe and the Holocaust in the field create a seemingly tight fit between Broch's historical experience and his attempts to find solutions to mass hysteria and its dangers. Yet, Sterling's book is not attempting to answer the questions that Perpetrator Studies scholars tend to ask – Broch is not centring mass violence in his literary work or his Mass Delusion theory. Even in his political theory he tends towards questions of democracy and human rights and not the examination of how, why, or by whom mass atrocities take place. For example, Broch writes a great deal about slavery, but he has very little to say about specific moments of enslavement, torture, or mass murder. What Sterling's book does is to chart effectively the intellectual conflict around the idea of the mass. His conclusion being that Broch fails to solve the problem either through theory or literature, but he hopes that the theoretical attempt can be more fully grasped when one reengages with this literature, especially his novel, *The Spell*. I do not disagree with Sterling on this point – Broch's literature does address the mass and even violence as a result of individual mass delusion. From the point of view of Perpetrator Studies, Broch's first novel *The Sleepwalkers* (1932) may, however, offer more insightful moments of individual action and decision making related to violence and murder than his unfinished novel, *The Spell*. In *The Sleepwalkers*, Broch uses moments of violence (rape, murder, illegal use of political influences and policing) as a means of defining social values and their disintegration and thus highlighting individual acts of violence and their motivations as important indicators of social breakdown. And, based on the complicated and unfinished nature of Broch's theoretical work, which remains limited in its accessibility to scholars able to work in his archives, his literary works

Daniel Weidner, 'Neither here nor there – Hermann Broch's Writing in Exile', *Yearbook for European Jewish Literature Studies*, 2.1 (2015), pp. 171–94, doi:10.1515/yejls-2015-0011; Sebastian Wogenstein, 'Die Letzte Utopie? Menschenrechtsengagement und Messianismus in Brochs politischem Denken', *Yearbook for European Jewish Literature Studies*, 4.1 (2017), pp. 105–24, doi:10.1515/yejls-2017-0009.

are a promising means for engaging the dangers of mass hysteria in a modern state.

Sterling's title suggests spaces where the examination of perpetration and violence could be deeply examined; the book is, however, in its main thrust, a book on Hermann Broch and his literary theory. It does not take a sustained look at the questions of perpetrators or social violence. This is not to devalue Sterling's book, which is an excellent study for scholars or graduate students of modernist literature and Hermann Broch. The limitation is simply an outgrowth of Broch's literature and theory; Broch does not explore deep moments of violence or the mental or social motivations of perpetrators. This is certainly true if one compares the work of Edward Westermann or Karčić Hikmet, who both do not separate a deep reading of perpetrators' acts of violence from their critical analysis of perpetrator motivations.⁵ The Westermann comparison is very telling in that both Broch and Westermann investigate the question of the individual's loss of rationality through a process of intoxication. It may be that Broch does not know or will not face the depth of atrocity or that modernist narratology itself cannot address, stylistically, such brutality. Whatever the cause, Broch's writing does not interrogate the violent acts with the clarity of much of Perpetrator Studies. When one thinks about Eva Mona Altmann's schema on how to read the voice and stories of perpetrators in literature, one finds few places to insert Broch's modernist work.⁶ Certainly, Sterling would have asked different questions about Broch's description of the ritualised and intoxicated moment of murder in *The Spell* if his focus was on genocide or perpetrator studies. Again, this is not a criticism of Sterling's book, his book asked a different question; he was concerned with the value of the novel for expanding Broch's theory of twilight consciousness and for representing the mass in a more concrete way than Broch's *Massenwahntheorie* allowed. Nonetheless, I think if one comes to Sterling's book with the instincts of Perpetrator Studies scholars, one will find a way to widen the literary criticism of *The Spell*. There is clearly a need to complement the dominant arguments (anti-modernisation, mythology, religion, and anti-Hitlerism) around the novel with more human-centred examinations of individual and social trauma, as well as gendered and sexualised aspects of the novel's violence.

5 Edward B. Westermann, *Drunk on Genocide: Alcohol and Mass Murder in Nazi Germany* (Cornell University Press, 2021); Hikmet Karčić, *Torture, Humiliate, Kill: Inside the Bosnian Serb Camp System* (University of Michigan Press, 2022).

6 Eva Mona Altmann, *Das Unsagbare verschweigen: Holocaust-Literatur aus Täterperspektive* (transcript Verlag, 2021), pp. 139-246.

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