

What is Essential? Ethics, Aesthetics, and the Purpose of the Novel in the Work of Hermann Broch and Wayne Burns

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Introduction

What is the essential purpose of the novel? How do questions of content and form play into the novel's effect? I will pursue these questions as they feature in the work of Hermann Broch and Wayne Burns, with three overall goals in mind: first, to give a brief account of Broch's and Burns' respective theories of the novel, focusing on concerns the two writers share across time and culture (Broch, an Austrian, died in 1951; Burns, an American, died September, 2012, and published the definitive version of his 'Panzaic' theory of the novel in 2009); second, to offer a shorthand diagnosis of how we inherit, co-create, and live meaningful reality; and third, to argue for the necessity of the prosaic art of the novel—to show why it is essential and enduringly timely, especially for us now.

I'm drawing together Broch and Burns for this purpose not only because of their relatively unknown—and certainly underappreciated—critical presence in the theory of the novel, but also because of their shared conviction that the novel is essential for understanding forms of culture and personhood, that the novel is a uniquely important mode of mimetic access to and way of coping with the various degenerations of a cultural era—a conviction which makes their comparison interesting for us now. In addition, Broch is especially important to my way of approaching the relationship of life to religion and ideology (which continues to concern us today), as he insists that the purpose and effect of the novel—an art form inseparable from life—may be best understood by appropriating a specific theological language for critical ends—a language that to some lies in the realm of unhealthy abstraction. In doing so he grants validity to theological language for discussions of art and life, and offers a critical inhabitation and rehabilitation of a language that in our time is all too often given to the worst excesses of theological thinking, which has permeated culture beyond recognised religions and has grounded various ideological fundamentalisms which continue to afflict us, yet to which prosaic art and thinking provide a healthy antidote.

I.

The involved relationship of art to life is of central importance to Broch and Burns, and they both insist that the essence of the novel cannot be considered apart from the question of its epistemological effect on readers, which is an ethical question. For Burns, the purpose of a novel—what makes it “genuine”—is its “vision” of what is real in life, and the way this vision produces “illumination” and possible change in a reader. He writes that the “vision of a genuine novel challenges or undercuts many or all of the reader's values, ideas, and beliefs, or, in a word, his or her ideals” (*Panzaic Theory of the Novel*, 2)—ideals which, because abstract and disconnected from life, work to subvert or obscure concrete reality for the individual. Broch, in turn, construes the purpose and effect of the novel in ethical terms: he states that “to raise literature to the level of cognition ... is an ethical task” (“Joyce,” 92). For Broch, because literary knowledge becomes a part of cultural knowledge, which impacts human doing and making,

art—"the ethical become reality" ("Evil," 13)—is a tangible and important part of the general struggle against spiritual and physical death, the final nemeses of human flourishing, meaning, and greatness.

Both Broch and Burns, in their emphasis on the connection between art and life, fundamentally oppose what may be called a 'closed' text or novel, the sense of which is present in or perhaps essential to *l'art pour l'art* (art for art's sake), and also various forms of ideological and religious fundamentalism. A 'closed' text is self-sufficient: it does not require 'completion' from elsewhere; it does not require an experiential context or a cognitive response in order to be whole. Importantly, the closed text plays a central part in various twentieth century critical schools—essentially, any theoretical approach that holds texts and textuality as a mode or thing self-sufficient, not requiring 'completion' from lived, concrete life, and which often approach works through the question of form and neglect or reject the validity of engaging with the work's content, and further hold that texts are neither dialogic nor in need of a response. As Jerry Zaslove has noted (writing about Burns' work), a problematic outcome of what I call the closed text is "*the death of readers*" (xiv)—that ontological state where the novel ceases to be a vital, potentially transformative event or experience for the reader, and instead tends to confirm or reinforce the reader's own prejudices and illusions by provoking passive rather than active reading.

The kind of novel (a 'closed text') that has this effect is what Burns calls "counterfeit" and Broch calls "kitsch." The counterfeit novel, for Burns, results in "symbolic insulation against the real world rather than symbolic illumination of it" ("Genuine," 126), a possibility the novelist must oppose by trying to "push beyond the existing frontiers of knowledge and experience" ("Novelist," 145) in order to unsettle intellectual and spiritual complacency and provoke a critical re-engagement with the concrete world. Broch, in similar terms, states that when evaluating cultural-artistic works "one must distinguish between annulling death and fleeing death, between shedding light on [it] and fleeing from [it]" ("Evil," 35); the former activity is proper to art specifically and culture in general; the latter is born of the fear of confronting human finitude, and involves avoiding the non-rosy aspects of life without which, however, we are reduced to caricatures of bravery and endurance. Kitsch helps us forget ourselves and our world, and in no way contributes to a mindful confrontation with things; it does not strive to join insight with form; it is content with received ideas rather than wisdom or practical knowledge. "The essence of kitsch," Broch writes, "is the confusion of ethical and aesthetic categories; kitsch wants to produce not the 'good' but the 'beautiful'" ("Evil," 33). Because the ethical origin and result of art—which ought to be a catalyst for change via transformative insight—is neglected or altogether absent in kitsch, what is left is the compelling form of art, but no real substance. In contrast, a genuine or good novel realises the "epistemological nature of art," its "discovery of new insights and new forms of seeing and experiencing" ("Evil," 17) that may deepen and clarify the reader's engagement with meaningful things, and as a result may fructify and thicken the reader's life, not render it more frozen and lifeless.

II.

So the major purposes of the novel for Broch and Burns are to explore or interrogate reality, and to critique or sound out the idols of ideology and religion that weaken or deaden reality (a process akin to Nietzsche's 'sounding out' of the idols of his time, both new and old, in *Twilight of the Idols*). These purposes arise from a dissatisfaction with abstractions (abstract ideals), and a kind of 'faithfulness' to life and the various indeterminate aspects of the everyday that works to clarify and clear away the idols or illusions of culture that stifle concrete, everyday life. In fact, Broch makes this nearly a battle-cry: "Without a concern for reality there is no genuine art!" (*Hofmannsthal*, 41), writes Broch. He adds that "Art is made up of intuitions about reality, and is superior to kitsch solely thanks to these intuitions" ("Notes," 61).

Out of the novelist's thoughtful experience and considered reflection arise the intuitions, given appropriate depictive form, that make up art. Pursuing these intuitions, working out their implications for art and life, is an involved process—one that renders a novel as much a dialogue between author and work as it is between work and reader. For an intuition must be given flesh, must be realised in a lived context, in order for its essential aspects to become clear. Seeing how an intuition or idea plays out in the depicted world of the novel provides a litmus test for how the intuition or idea may play out in the undepicted world of everyday life. This 'test' may result in a clearer sense and definition of the particular illusions or idols through which we may live unwittingly, for along with the forms of meaning that we live consciously, our minds are also often unconsciously furnished; even if a person participates in a tradition of thought or spirit, the sources and results of our idols and illusions are often related to our deepest sense of self and our image of the world, and thus difficult to discern insofar as they involve our own self-image.

This is not meant to disparage the reality of tradition and culture, as if any form of meaning that arises from elsewhere is illegitimate; rather, I want to emphasise that the novel is particularly adept at clarifying the ongoing negotiations between self and other, between now and then, between here and there, negotiations that give form to any sense of personal meaning (meaning that we can call our own). For a tradition of thought—often arising from another time, place, and person—need not necessarily lose its vitality and turn into dead formalism in a different context. (This is where the problem of the 'closed' text becomes significant for culture. Never having been part of a cultural context, there is nothing of transferrable value for a new context either.) What is essential in a tradition can be translated—it can become appropriate for another time, place, and person. What is initially different can become one's own through a process of thoughtful appropriation and realisation. Through its depiction of the inward and outward registers of the person and of the interpersonal concrete world, the novel remains perhaps the best art form for probing the question of what it means to be a human being contending with the richness and poverty of the past and present, with what is different and what has come to be one's own: "only with the novel," writes Broch, "does the totality ... of the individual attain a comprehensive portrayal, inwardly and outwardly unfettered" (*Hofmannsthal*, 36). On a similar note, in his reading of Burns' theory, Jerry Zaslove notes that Burns sees novel reading as part of "discovering the self

in the making” (x)—an essential aid to understanding the various registers of how and who we are.

I also do not mean to blindly affirm culture and tradition, however, for if the only point of culture is human meaning, coping, and flourishing, then the danger of culture as ideology (culture for its own sake, culture as idolatry) remains an ongoing concern—for culture as ideology has taken leave of the personal, concrete world of everyday life, and has turned into kitsch. Thus along with recognising the human propensity to turn culture into ideology, it is necessary to discern within a culture or tradition of thought elements which tend toward kitsch or idolatry—and yet which become clear when set into the prosaic world of the novel.

III.

Within a culture or tradition of thought a value-system is present that orders and arranges meaning for its participants and that has its own particular central ideas and insights; as Broch puts it, “Into every value and value-system a value-setting subject is projected, latently or openly, a ‘god’ who creates value” (“Evil,” 13). The value-setting ‘god’ or ‘Absolute’ is something akin to the ‘intuition’ about reality that lies at the origin of the work of art. In each case, when the ‘god’ or ‘intuition’ is false, the value-system becomes idolatrous and the work of art becomes kitsch. Interestingly, Broch uses the language of theology to diagnose both events, and holds that “at the centre of every culture is its theology” (“Style,” 57).

Broch’s use of theology is significant—he seems to find something enduring in religion, which he says “reaches out toward totality of cognition” (“Joyce,” 90) (cognitive totality is valuable for Broch, as it is the strongest opposite to the value-lessness of death). In his public lecture “Notes on the Problem of Kitsch,” he states that “the basic structure of the human problem seems to remain constant in all its various disguises, and in the last analysis will show that it is still conditioned by theology and myth” (65); further, in a letter to Aldous Huxley written near the end of his life, Broch states that he is “concerned with the processes which lead the human being to the loss and regaining of his *vérités fondamentales*, in short, his religious attitudes” (10 May 1945; qtd. in Steinberg, 27). Broch’s continued interest in the form and content of religion is particularly significant for us today, as we live in a culture that is still largely shaped by its religious origins (not least in our morality), yet we live in a world where religious fundamentalism has a large and dangerous presence.

Despite having both Jewish (born) and Catholic (converted) roots, however, Broch doesn’t often dwell at length on particular religious themes or realities in his essays. Largely limiting himself to using theological terms in his work on literature and philosophy, Broch emphasises the theoretical usefulness of theological language more than the practical implications of a religious tradition. Thus in analysing kitsch art, he writes: “Kitsch’s ... relationship to art can be compared—and this is more than mere metaphor—to the relationship between the system of the Anti-Christ and the system of Christ” (“Notes,” 62). Recognising the deep theological (and ontological) insight behind the notion of the Anti-Christ—which means not ‘over against,’ in the sense of an obvious foe, but rather ‘in place of,’ in the sense of an idol—Broch notes that “The Anti-Christ looks like Christ, acts and speaks like Christ, but is all the same Lucifer” (“Notes,”

63). The Anti-Christ, in fact, becomes a central idea in Broch's assessment of how life becomes "value-less." He writes that the "essence of the Anti-Christ" is that "God becomes an idol, truth dogma, beauty effect; an infinite system becomes a closed one" (*Hofmannsthal*, 170-1). An infinite system, in Broch's theory, must not become a finite system, closed, solipsistic, self-satisfying, for in turning in on itself it becomes deathly. Like a closed text, it becomes its own goal, its own idol, and forgets its human context.

As I've suggested, the idolatry that inheres in certain value-systems has a counterpart in human relations, which begins in unwitting projection and ends in a loss of the capacity to be present to the other person; it has as its ontological ground the incapacity for one to reach beyond one's own to what transcends or is outside of it. While the idolatry of a value-system has to do with its internal elements, primarily the 'god' or Absolute that determines its various values, the state of idolatry proper to humans has to do with how the 'gods' and Absolutes of the various value-systems through which we live are appropriated and applied in our interpersonal life. For mistaking the value of something and projecting that mistaken sense into our everyday life inevitably ends in our own image of the world taking precedence, not our being present to what is real in that which we face. On this ground, exploring and sounding out the presence of idolatry in our thinking and being, whether individually or communally, becomes one of the essential endeavours of life—an endeavour given concrete form in the novel (in Dostoevsky and Kafka, among others).

To return to Broch's favoured image: as the figure of Christ is the appropriate realisation of transcendence and immanence and the figure of the Anti-Christ is the inappropriate realisation of the same, the genuine novel, with its mixture of ideas and the concrete, is the art form best equipped to explore and illuminate the appropriate or inappropriate blending of transcendence and immanence that is part of any meaningful reality. To put it another way: because the novel cannot forget or forgo the concrete, prosaic world and the concrete, prosaic person as well as the ideas which grant these realities sense, the novel presents its readers with an image of appropriate measure for human living and making—that is, the novel offers criteria for what is essential to human being and meaning.

IV.

The question of an appropriate prosaic measure for meaning-making, because it involves grounds and limits, inevitably involves as its counterpoint the question of freedom. The question of freedom is always a fraught one, not least because it involves ideas of *freedom from what* and *freedom for what*—ideas which, as they often lie unexamined at the root of our self-image and our particular ways of coping in life, may threaten to unsettle us when brought to light. Even if the 'whats' in question—freedom from what and for what—stand up to our initial inquiries, as we are partly determined by our historical time and our cultural place our *whats* must remain ongoing, open questions. For the subtler forms of spiritual, emotional, and intellectual bondage are never addressed and healed all at once.

As the question of freedom involves the grounds of our being, then the measure involved in assessing and evaluating these grounds must somehow touch and draw out what is essential

about these grounds—the measure must be a flexible criterion, not confined to any one set of ideas or commitments, and it must bring to light our various assumptions and idols of the mind and heart otherwise left unaddressed. It is in this light that Broch’s following assertion makes sense: “if art can or may exist further, it has to set itself the task of striving for the essential, of becoming a counterbalance to the hypertrophic calamity of the world” (“Style,” 111). Thinking of the novel, I take him to mean that it must provide an essential antidote to the spirit of the times which scatters, diffuses, falsifies, catches us up in its whirlwind and prompts self-forgetfulness on both personal and communal levels. If this self-forgetfulness were not a significant and shaping part of everyday life, I think it would be harder to justify the art of the novel as Broch and Burns do—in terms of epistemological engagement and possible ontological change. The connection between knowledge and change isn’t new to art criticism, but Broch and Burns aren’t concerned with novelty. Indeed, we must be careful to understand the emphases Broch and Burns place on cognition or ‘new knowledge’ appropriately. For the point is not to perpetually discover something new, as if any truth or insight in time necessarily has a shelf-life; rather, it is that the novel offers its reader “a new awareness of himself and the world he lives in” (Burns, *PTN*, 16).

So we may see the novel as a cognitive dialogic partner to the reader’s own experiences, offering a contrapuntal image of transcendence and immanence in concrete, open-ended prose; it is a work of art that embodies an ongoing engagement with the question of what it means to be human, and thus also of the “inexhaustibility of the human spirit and its transformations” (Broch, *Hofmannsthal*, 169). The novel as critical depiction offers an essential prosaic measure for the grounds of being through which we cannot but find meaning, and has as its effect the freedom of remembrance and presence: both for our own person and in confronting the world in which we live.

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