

Is the Zerfall der Werte an Essay? Essayismus and its consequences on theory in Die Schlafwandler (H. Broch)

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“Is the *Zerfall der Werte* an essay ?
Essayismus and its consequences for theory in *Die Schlafwandler*”
Vincent Ferré (Paris 13/ CENEL)

I would like to consider today a fact which is usually taken for granted by many Brochian specialists: the classification of the *Zerfall der Werte* (in Hermann Broch's *Die Schlafwandler*, 1931-1932) as an essay. I shall focus on the reasons why the *Zerfall der Werte* is systematically identified in this way, while, in fact, there is substantial evidence that it can be called neither an *essay* nor *philosophy*

This will lead me to mention some important questions (the nature of the writing *I* in the *Zerfall der Werte*, the link between the *Zerfall der Werte* and the essay on Hofmannsthal), but I will do this in the perspective of considering the *nature* of the *Zerfall der Werte*.

First, is the *Zerfall der Werte* an essay? The question may seem odd, since there is a consensus among Brochian critics on the nature of these chapters in *Die Schlafwandler*: to mention some of the most famous, Ernestine Schlant in her *Hermann Broch* and Dorrit Cohn in her *Elucidations of Hermann Broch's Trilogy*¹ (forty years ago) use the term *essay*; as well as Alfred Kern, Paul Michael Lützel, Ernst Schönwiese, Sigrid Schmid and Milan Kundera in his *Art du roman*² and many others.

Indeed, the construction of *Die Schlafwandler* surprises many readers and critics, who insist on the heterogeneity of this novel which combines fictional narrative, the *Zerfall der Werte* chapters, poetry and the peculiar “Geschichte des Heilsarmeemädchens in Berlin”. And most critics identify the *Zerfall* with an “essay”, or with “philosophy”³, sometimes with a “philosophical essay”, without explaining the reasons why or without considering the problem of such designation which associates philosophy and essay. In this regard, it is very telling to see that the *Zerfall der Werte* is published twice in the first edition of the *Gesammelte Werke*: in *Die Schlafwandler*, of course, but also in the volume *Erkennen und Handeln* (1955), subtitled *Essays. Band II*⁴.

But this identification is always made, as far as I know, in reference to The Essay, which is an abstraction and does not exist as such; and without explaining *which* essay is being referred too (of what culture and time? German essay, Austrian essay? Grimm's,

¹ Ernestine SCHLANT, *Hermann Broch*, Boston, Twayne, 1978, p. 50, 78; Dorrit COHN, *The Sleepwalkers. Elucidations of Hermann Broch's Trilogy*, The Hague-Paris, Mouton & Co., 1966, p. 18, 31.

² Alfred KERN, “Hermann Broch et son temps”, *Cahiers d'études germaniques. Broch*, 1989, 16, p. 15; Paul Michael LÜTZELER, “Hermann Broch und Spenglers *Untergang des Abendlandes: Die Schlafwandler* zwischen Moderne und Postmoderne”, in Adrian STEVENS, Fred WAGNER, Sigurd Paul SCHEICHL (ed), *Hermann Broch: Modernismus, Kulturkrise und Hitlerzeit (Londoner Symposium 1991)*, Innsbruck, Institut für Germanistik an der Universität Innsbruck, 1994, p. 27; Sigrid SCHMID, *Hermann Broch, éthique et esthétique*, Paris, P.U.F., 2001, p. 49; Milan KUNDERA, “Troisième partie : Notes inspirées par *Les Somnambules*”, in *L'Art du roman*, Paris, Gallimard, 1986, p. 87.

³ Manfred DURZAK, *Hermann Broch, Dichtung und Erkenntnis*, Stuttgart, Berlin, Köln, W. Kohlhammer, 1978, p. 61; E. SCHLANT, *op. cit.*, p. 169; D. COHN, *op. cit.*, p. 31; Guy SCARPETTA, *L'Impureté*, Paris, Grasset, 1985, p. 233, etc.

⁴ Hermann BROCH, *Erkennen und Handeln. Essays. Band II*, ed. H. Arendt, Zürich, Rhein-Verlag, Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 1955, 298 p.

Musil's essay?), and which reasons or criteria allow critics to categorize the *Zerfall der Werte* as an essay.

Of course, this hypothesis is to be taken seriously, and I would like to clarify the implicit reasons for this assimilation.

As you may know, definitions of the essay stress the difficulty of defining this “puzzling” or “eccentric” genre (I quote here Chadbourne and Bensmaïa⁵): let us remember, in German criticism, Max Bense's analysis of the elusive nature of essay⁶. It is true that one usually speaks of *essays* instead of *the essay*, given the range of topics and forms; and that the term is sometimes applied to very different books and used as a synonym for *nonfiction*. Lukács and Adorno, in 1911 and 1954, both refer to the bad reputation of this genre in German studies because of its lack of a distinctive form⁷ – and when I say *genre*, even this status is sometimes questioned.

Still, interesting definitions exist of specific types of essays – see Chadbourne, Rohner, Chevalier, Haas or Berger's works, among others⁸. Limiting myself to the essay as it is practiced in the first half of the century in Europe, and especially in France, in Germany/Austria and in England, I may say that the essay (the word comes from Latin *exagium*, which means ‘weight, to weigh’) is 1) a nonfictional text in prose, with an argumentative purpose, 2) diverse in its topics and its realisations, 3) with a specific relation to truth (it is the aim of the essay, and implies a sort of experiment⁹), a relation that is different from the relation of Science (*das Wissen*); 4) but is also characterized by subjectivity: the *I* is always present in an essay, explicitly or implicitly, and refers to a real person¹⁰; 5) related to subjectivity, the rejection of any system is essential to the essay, as well as the rejection of method in argumentation, of exhaustiveness (which may be related to the fragmentary writing) – leading to an opposition between *essay* and *philosophy*: one recalls of course Adorno's position, or the definition of Essay in *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften*¹¹.

But this kind of definition, referring to specific time and country (or language), is seldom mentioned explicitly by the critics who call the *Zerfall* an “essay”. It is a pity, since such a definition would explain and ground more firmly the comparison, and clarify the meaning.

Indeed, the presence of abstract terms in the *Zerfall der Werte* and the meaning of articles and tenses (gnomic present) show the theoretical dimension of these chapters: for

⁵ Richard M. CHADBOURNE, “A Puzzling Literary Genre: Comparative Views of the Essay”, in *Comparative Literature Studies* (Urbana), 1983, 20, p. 133; Réda BENSMAÏA, “Essai”, in J. DEMOUGIN (ed.), *Dictionnaire historique, thématique et technique des littératures française et étrangères*, Paris, Larousse, 1986, p. 528.

⁶ Max BENSE, “Über den Essay und seine Prosa”, in *Merkur*, 1, 1947, p. 414-424.

⁷ Georg LUKÁCS, “Über Wesen und Form des Essays”, in *Die Seele und Formen: Essays* [1911], Neuwied, Berlin, Luchterhand, 1971, p. 7-31; Theodor ADORNO, “Essay als Form”, in *Gesammelte Schriften, 11., Noten zur Literatur*, Frankfurt, Suhrkamp, 2003, 708 p.

⁸ R. CHADBOURNE, *op. cit.*; Ludwig ROHNER, *Der Deutsche Essay, Materialien zur Geschichte und Aesthetik einer literarischen Gattung*, Berlin, Luchterland, 1966, 927 p.; Tracy CHEVALIER (ed.), *Encyclopedia of the Essay*, London-Chicago, Fitzroy Dearborn, 1997, xxi, 1002 p.; Bruno BERGER, *Der Essay. Form und Geschichte*, Berne-München, Francke, 1964, 283 p.; Gerhard HAAS, *Studien zur Form des Essays und zu seinen Vorformen im Roman*, Tübingen, Max Niemeyer, 1966, 152 p. and *Essay*, Stuttgart, Metzlersche, 1969, 88 p. (Realienbücher für Germanisten, Sammlung Metzler, 83).

⁹ M. BENSE, *op. cit.*; Charles E. WHITMORE, “The Field of the Essay”, in *PMLA*, 1921, XXXVI, 1, p. 552

¹⁰ See for instance Jean MARCEL, “Prolégomènes à une théorie de l'essai” [1986], in *Pensées, proses et passions*, Montréal, L'Hexagone, 1992, p. 318 (Essais littéraires) – or my review of René AUDET (ed.), *Dérives de l'essai, Etudes littéraires*, vol. 37-1, Fall 2005: “Dynamiques plurielles de l'essai”, in *Acta Fabula*, March 2006 (<http://www.fabula.org/revue/document1252.php>).

¹¹ Robert MUSIL, *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften*, ed. Adolf Frisé, Reinbek, Rowohlt, 1992, vol. 1, p. 250.

instance “in der Wesenheit des Begriffes”, “der Begriff eines ”Denkstil““, “die Wirklichkeit”, “Religionen”¹²; or in the opening sentence of the first chapter, “*Hat dieses verzerrte Leben noch Wirklichkeit?*” and later, “wahnsinnig oder groß kann niemals eine Zeit [...] sein”¹³. But *theoretical dimension* does not mean *essay*: here, the fragmentary writing of the *Zerfall* and the subjectivity (the presence of the *I*) are more decisive and may explain the impression, shared by some critics, of closeness between the *Zerfall* and an essay – one has to be careful with words here, and I shall speak of *closeness*.

One may first guess the presence of the *I* in articles (“[...] dieses verzerrte Leben”¹⁴) before it becomes obvious as the *I* expresses feelings (“Und doch liebe ich die großzügige Klarheit der Schinkelschen Architektur”¹⁵), beliefs (“Ich bin überzeugt, daß in keiner früheren Zeit der Mensch die architektonischen Ausdrucksformen mit Ekel und Widerwillen betrachtet hat [...]”¹⁶) and makes a demonstration¹⁷. There is no need to recall this last point at length; let us nonetheless stress the way in which the *Zerfall der Werte* develops theories, by digressions, repetitions, questions without answers or rhetorical questions, and so on.

Thus, one may easily understand why theoretical books about essays mention *Die Schlafwandler* as an example of *Essayismus*, not in the French sense (the act of writing essays) but in the German one: that is when a discourse resembling the essay invades a novel¹⁸. All the more understandable for the Brochian reader since most ideas exposed in the *Zerfall der Werte* are echoed in essays written by Broch, *repetition* being one of the features of his writings. For instance, Broch presents the *Logik einer zerfallenden Welt* as an abstract of the *Zerfall der Werte*¹⁹; and among numerous examples, I shall mention a few points where the *Zerfall der Werte* is close to the essay on Hofmannsthal (which is another object of our Section today): the analysis on romanticism, the link between *Zeitgeist* and architecture, and the dynamics of reason, the importance of a *period (Zeit)* – but this is also something that *Die Schlafwandler* shares with other texts such as “Zur Erkenntnis dieser Zeit” or “Philistrosität, Realismus, Idealismus der Kunst” (1913)²⁰.

Nevertheless, such common points justify a comparison between the *Zerfall der Werte* and contemporary essays, not an assimilation or a confusion. Indeed, when critics speak of *essay*, they forget that the *Zerfall der Werte* does not have the same status as those essays published by Broch: the *Zerfall der Werte* is *inside* a novel, is not signed by Hermann Broch, and it refers to examples taken in the narrative, not only in the outside world. I would like now to consider some of the reasons why it is impossible in my opinion to call the *Zerfall der Werte* an *essay* in the strict sense.

Broch explained that, in the case of *Huguenau* (the last part of *Die Schlafwandler*), he first wrote a short story²¹, before adding the *Zerfall der Werte* to the narrative, only a few months before its publication: an *additive Verfahren*, as he describes it in a letter to Frank

¹² Hermann BROCH, *Die Schlafwandler: Eine Romantrilogie* [1931-1932], ed. P.M. Lützel, Frankfurt, Suhrkamp, 1976 (1986), p. 444, 470, 418, 578.

¹³ S, p. 418, 419.

¹⁴ S, p. 418.

¹⁵ S, p. 436.

¹⁶ S, p. 437.

¹⁷ See S, p. 461: “Gewiß”, “sondern”, “trotzdem”.

¹⁸ See for instance G. HAAS, *Essay*, op. cit., p. 4.

¹⁹ See H. BROCH, *Philosophische Schriften. 2. Theorie*, ed. P.M. Lützel, Frankfurt, Suhrkamp, 1977 (1986), p. 156-172 and a letter to E. Muir (October 1931) in H. BROCH, *Briefe 1 (1913-1938), Dokumente und Kommentare zu Leben und Werk*, ed. P.M. Lützel, Frankfurt, Suhrkamp, 1981 (1986), p. 159.

²⁰ See “Hofmannsthal und seine Zeit” and “Philistrosität, Realismus, Idealismus der Kunst” in H. BROCH, *Schriften zur Literatur. I. Kritik*, ed. P.M. Lützel, Frankfurt, Suhrkamp, 1975 (1986), 111-284 and p. 13-29.

²¹ H. BROCH, *Novellen, Prosa, Fragmente*, ed. P.M. Lützel, Frankfurt, Suhrkamp, 1980 (1986), p. 37-126.

Thiess, in 1932²². This is to be taken seriously, as when Marcel Proust uses part of the *Contre Sainte-Beuve* (the project of an essay) in his *Temps retrouvé*: the pages do not have the same status if they stand outside the novel, the fiction, or inside. This fact seems very simple, but it is overlooked by critics – the fact itself, and its consequences.

My hypothesis is that the *Zerfall der Werte*, as well as other moments in the book which share the same features, is not an essay, but a type of fictional discourse mimicking essays, which I shall call *fictional essay* – I leave aside here the discussion of the fictionality or nonfictionality of the essay. Close enough to essays strictly speaking (that is to say, published on their own by authors under their name) to be mistaken as such, but not enough to be essays. They are fictionalized as soon as they enter fiction, a novel: lying behind this hypothesis you will recognize Bakhtin and his studies on Dostoevsky (the first version having been published a year before *Die Schlafwandler*, in 1929) and on the novel²³.

I will focus on two facts: the nature of the *I* and the use of examples in the *Zerfall der Werte*.

As I have defined it previously, subjectivity is one of the features of an essay, in which the pronoun *I* refers to a real person, speaking in one's own name. It is part of the "essayistic pact", we might say: to use Käte Hamburger's terms (in her *Logik der Dichtung*, 1957), the *I* which is the "origin" of discourse in our world is real, not a fiction; on the contrary, in fiction (for instance in a novel), a character saying *I* is not a real person – obviously – and we can have access to his thoughts²⁴. What is important to notice in the *Zerfall* is the consequence of the nature of the *I* who expresses his ideas and conceptions: the *I* is not Broch, but is as fictional as the *I* in the "Geschichte des Heilsarmeemädchens" or any of the characters in the narrative chapters.

You are familiar with the debate concerning the identity of the narrator in *Die Schlafwandler*: is there only one narrator? is he von Bertrand? To cast a light on this problem, the essay on James Joyce and the notion of *der "Erzähler als Idee"*²⁵ are often quoted, as well as the idea that there is an image of the observer, of the narrator inside the novel, a *mise en abyme*: "Das Werk soll selber aus der Beobachtung entstehen, *der Beobachter ist immer mitten drin, er stellt dar und stellt sich und seine Arbeit gleichzeitig mit ihr dar.*"²⁶ This image of a narrator bridges the gap between narrative and discourse: to begin with, it bridges the gap between "die Geschichte" and the *Zerfall der Werte*, since Bertrand Müller appears to be the narrator and "writer" in both cases. I will not deal in detail with the stylistic evidence (sentences almost similar), the identity of atmosphere, the closeness of feelings expressed in both types of chapters – for more details, I refer to Grimrath for instance²⁷ –, but you may remember a letter to Willa Muir (August 1931), in which Broch explains that the *Zerfall der Werte* has a strong link with the "Geschichte"²⁸. If both *I*'s refer to the same person, how could the *I* of the *Zerfall der Werte* be nonfictional? All the more so since some critics (after

²² H. BROCH, *Briefe I*, op. cit., p. 186.

²³ See Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, ed. and transl. by Caryl Emerson, introd. by Wayne C. Booth, Minneapolis, MN : University of Minnesota press, 1984, XLIII-333 p. and 'Discourse in the novel', in *The Dialogic Imagination. Four Essays by M. M. Bakhtin*, ed. by Michael Holquist ; transl. by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, Austin : University of Texas press, 1981 (1986), XXXIV-444 p. (University of Texas press Slavic series).

²⁴ Käte HAMBURGER, *Die Logik der Dichtung*, Stuttgart, Klett-Cotta, 1994, 273 p.; see also Dorrit COHN, *The Distinction of Fiction*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999, ix, 197 p.

²⁵ H. BROCH, "James Joyce und die Gegenwart", in *Schriften zur Literatur. I. Kritik*, op. cit., p. 78.

²⁶ *Ibid.* (emphasis mine).

²⁷ Harmuth GRIMRATH, *Hermann Broch, Die Schlafwandler. Die Heilsarmee-Geschichte, der Zerfall der Werte und ihr Zusammenhang mit den erzählerischen Partien des Romans*, Bonn, Univ., Philos. Fak., Diss., 1977, 336 p.

²⁸ H. BROCH, *Briefe I*, op. cit., p. 148

Theodore Ziolkowski and Karl R. Mandelkow²⁹) argue that this narrator is the same as in other chapters, that are fictional (and narrative) chapters: we note, indeed, the presence of leitmotifs (fear, solitude, redemption, and so on), the repetition of sentences or expressions (*ein verlorenenes Geschlecht*, among others³⁰). If we follow this demonstration, the narrator is thus fictional and represented inside the fiction; if we do not, the *I* of the *Zerfall der Werte* is still fictional, the same as in the “Geschichte”.

The second proof is the nature of examples used by the *Zerfall der Werte*. Beyond the differences in their use of examples, all essays refer to reality, to prove, by examples, their conceptions, to ground them in reality; and sometimes their authors imagine examples to illustrate their conceptions: thus, they use *fiction*³¹. The historical discourse of the *Zerfall der Werte* refers to reality, too, and also refers frequently to examples taken in fiction: that is, in this particular case, taken from the fictional narrative, from the surrounding chapters, which represents a strong difference from an essay in the strict sense.

Thus, chapter 31 of the *Zerfall der Werte*, dealing with the question of style and its incarnation in a given time, mentions explicitly the main character of the third part of *Die Schlafwandler*: “[...] inwieweit sich der Stil in einem Durchschnittsmenschen, etwa in einem Agenten von der Art Wilhelm Huguenaus, verkörpern sollte”³²; and of course, the last chapter refers at length to Huguenau and his desertion to illustrate theories on liberty in value systems: “und dies gilt für Huguenau zumindest seit jenem Tage, da er im Morgengrauen den Schützengraben verlassen um eine anscheinend irrationale, nichtsdestoweniger sehr rationale Handlung im Dienste der Freiheit begangen hatte [...]”³³. But implicit references are sometimes as obvious: the eighth chapter of the *Zerfall der Werte* explains the evolution of religions, their advent and decline, mentioning Protestantism and the Salvation Army; it would prove difficult not to think of Esch and his conversion to Protestantism, or of the young Mary. In all these cases, the *Zerfall der Werte* refers neither (or not only) to reality, to the outside world, nor to fictional examples made up by an essayist, but to the fictional frame, to the narrative of *Die Schlafwandler*; and so, it is extremely *relative*: a word that I use on purpose, given Broch’s theories on relativity in literature (as expressed in “James Joyce und die Gegenwart”). Here, the relativity he aimed at gives birth to another one.

As surprising as it may be, since it argues against the critical comments on Broch’s works, the chapters of the *Zerfall der Werte* are not essays nor parts of an essay, but a fictional discourse imitating the essay on several points. I could mention other evidence, like the strong link (on the semantic level) between the *Zerfall der Werte* and the fictional narrative, which creates an *interaction* between them³⁴; but the nature of the *I* and of examples in the *Zerfall der Werte* sufficiently show that it is not possible to speak of *essays*. And the same demonstration could be made about *philosophy*, which also refers to nonfiction: transferred into the fictional frame of the novel, Broch’s theories are no longer philosophical

²⁹ Theodore ZIOLKOWSKI, “Zur Entstehung und Struktur von Hermann Brochs ‚Schlafwandler‘”, *Deutsche Vierteljahresschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Geistesgeschichte*, 1964, XXXVIII, p. 57, “Hermann Broch and Relativity in Fiction”, *Wisconsin Studies in Contemporary Literature*, 8, 1967, p. 206-216 ; Karl Robert MANDELKOW, *Hermann Brochs Romantrilogie Die Schlafwandler, Gestaltung und Reflexion im modernen deutschen Roman*, Heidelberg, Carl Winter, 1962, p. 150-152.

³⁰ S, p. 163, 339, 342

³¹ See Olivier GUERRIER, *Quand « les poètes feignent » : « fantaisie » et fiction dans les Essais de Montaigne*, Paris, H. Champion, 2002, 517 p. (Études montaignistes).

³² S, p. 461

³³ S, p. 710.

³⁴ On these points, I refer to my *L’essai fictionnel chez M. Proust, H. Broch et J. Dos Passos (A la recherche du temps perdu, Les Somnambules et U.S.A.)* (PhD., Rennes, Université Rennes 2, 2003)..

theories strictly speaking, but *images, prototypes*, to use Bakhtin's terminology; and the same process may be observed in the case of other writers, like Marcel Proust : let us recall Paul Ricœur's analysis in *Temps et récit*. For critics, the first lesson is caution: we may refer to *Zerfall der Werte* when it coincides with Broch's "real theories" as exposed in his real essays; otherwise, one has to be aware of the fictionality of these theories.

I am thus inclined to suggest that we call *fictional essay (essai fictionnel)* this type of fictional discourse integrated into a novel; and not (to quote other propositions, on Proust, Musil or Broch) *forme mixte* (Roland Barthes) or *third form* (Adolf Frisé), *essai spécifiquement romanesque* (Milan Kundera) nor even *essayistic novel*. The last expression refers too clearly to the German (or Austrian) tradition, while it is important to try to think on a European level, so as to grasp the endeavours of several of the greatest writers of the time, who try – is it an effect of the *Zeitgeist*? – to combine ideas and fiction: Broch, Proust, Joyce, Gide, Sartre, Dos Passos (an American in Paris), Th. Mann, and, of course, Musil. The same Musil who, in a letter, links up the works of Thomas Mann, Joyce and Proust, as experiments to combine narration and ideas as an answer to "the same problem: the inadequacy of the old narrative naivety regarding the development of intelligence".

But what are the consequences of the fictionality of the *Zerfall der Werte*? If the *Zerfall der Werte* does not (or not exclusively) refer to the world outside, as real essays do, but to the world of the novel, of *Die Schlafwandler*, what is the value of its theories, their applicability to our world? It is a real question, since we know that in Broch's view, the aim of literature is knowledge; but how is it possible to reach knowledge with a fictional essay, whose theories are likely to reflect the subjectivity of the fictional *I*, tainted with the same "Zerfall der Werte"? Does it mean that such a fictional essay must give up on the project of approaching truth and knowledge?³⁵

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Commentaire [DeV1]: ajout nov 08

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³⁵ I would like to thank Manuel Durand-Barthez, Delphine Martin, Daniel Lauzon and Dr. Mark Burde for their help and comments.

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