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The Sleepwalkers



Synopsis

With his epic trilogy, *The Sleepwalkers*, Hermann Broch established himself as one of the great innovators of modern literature, a visionary writer-philosopher the equal of James Joyce, Thomas Mann, or Robert Musil. Even as he grounded his narratives in the intimate daily life of Germany, Broch was identifying the oceanic changes that would shortly sweep that life into the abyss. Whether he is writing about a neurotic army officer (*The Romantic*), a disgruntled bookkeeper and would-be assassin (*The Anarchist*), or an opportunistic war-deserter (*The Reluctant*), Broch immerses himself in the twists of his characters' psyches, and at the same time soars above them, to produce a prophetic portrait of a world tormented by its loss of faith, morals, and reason.

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Customer Reviews

Born in Vienna in 1886, Broch is considered one of the great names of 20th Century German literature. Critics will place him in a pantheon that includes Joyce, Musil, Kafka, Mann, and Proust. Son of a well-off Jewish textile manufacturer (at an early age he converted to Catholicism), Broch had thirst for high intellect. Eventually he gave up his academic plans, his future as an industrialist, in pursuit of literature, through which he would deal with ethical questions and realms of experience rejected by the Vienna Circle of logical positivists. Likewise he devoted his life to the study of mass psychology and politics. "*The Sleepwalkers*" (published when the author was 40) is a trilogy, a three-dimensional work with one underlying philosophical unit. The first book, "*The Romantic*" portrays 19th century realism with von Pasenow as main character, a Prussian aristocrat clinging to ethical values considered outdated. The second book, "*The Anarchist*," portrays the accountant

Esch who is in search of a "balance" of values in unstable pre-war Germany. Both characters will meet in the third book "The Realist," and will find hope in a fanatical religious sect, which foresees the coming of a Redeemer (fascism, Hitler). They will be defeated by Huguenau, an army deserter and opportunist, representing the new ethical standards of a society free of values or to put it correctly "with no values." There are several parallel plots, a number of alienated characters, and cumbersome symbolism. To make things a bit more complex and elaborate, there are 16 chapters of poetry, and 10 chapters (Disintegration of Values) of sound and intensive philosophy.

Broch's Trilogy is the chronicle of the evolution of Germany in particular and the whole Europe in general between the years 1888 and 1918. The philosophical focus of the trilogy should be searched for in the third novel, Huguenau or the Realist and within that in the essay 'Disintegration of Values', which is allegedly written by a Bertrand Mueller, who according to Broch himself is the same Bertrand who appears in the first two novels of the trilogy. The essay on disintegration of values closely follows Max Weber's Protestant Ethics and the Spirit of Capitalism. In fact not before we understand Weber's theory of modernity and the role of the protestant reformation in the rise of modern Capitalism can we appreciate the full vigor of Broch's narrative. In ten separate parts, Broch explains masterfully the notion of style of an age, the relation of plastic arts with the the style, the concept of inner logic within each individual value-system and the effect of it on the life of the individual. The third part of the novel, the realist, is the culmination of the trilogy as such. It is where all the characters meet and it is there that Broch uses all different narrative modes. A certain air of inevitability is prevalent in Broch's narrative of the disintegration of values, which, in turn, appears to follow a certain Hegelian Historicism. This third novel of the trilogy consists of five separate parts, three of which are stories taking place in a German city near the Belgian borders and the other two are the story of the Salvation Army Girl in Berlin, which is Bertrand Mueller's journal and then his essay on the disintegration of values.

I could not have finished *The Sleepwalkers* without the able assistance of reviewers. I assumed that this would be a novel similar to *Embers* or *The Radetzky March*. I could not have been more wrong. This is a very complex novel that can be read on many levels, philosophical, moral, and psychological. Regardless of which level you read, *The Sleepwalkers* is not a novel to take or read lightly. It requires great concentration and will inspire much reverie about modern life, values, and philosophy. *The Sleepwalkers* is a trilogy taking place in Prussia and Germany, starting in 1888 and ending in 1918. The first of the trilogy, *The Romantic*, takes place in 1888 and is about a Prussian

aristocrat who adheres to the strict moral code of his forebears, leading to a loveless marriage that his family desires him to make. The second of the trilogy, *The Anarchist*, involves a bookkeeper struggling to find his place in Cologne and Mannheim in 1903. These two parts are fairly straightforward to read. The final part of the trilogy, *The Realist*, is longer and more difficult to read. Taking place in the final year of the First World War, it is a combination of five parts. The most straightforward part concerns an army deserter who settles in a German small town and insinuates himself into their society. He joins *The Romantic*, now a much older commander, brought forth from retirement to become Town Commandant, and *The Anarchist*, who has become editor of the local paper. Other fairly straightforward parts involve patients at the town's hospital and an alienated young woman whose husband is away at the war. The final two parts involve a character who has appeared in the other parts of the trilogy, Bertrand, who apparently represented the author himself.

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