



PROJECT MUSE®

"Sich an den Tod heranpürschen . . .": Hermann Broch und Egon Vietta im Briefwechsel, 1933-1951 ed. by Silvio Vietta and Roberto Rizzo (review)

Jacob A. van der Kolk

Journal of Austrian Studies, Volume 46, Number 1, Spring 2013, pp. 107-109 (Review)

Published by University of Nebraska Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/oas.2013.0005>



➔ For additional information about this article

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/501663>

7, 1940, an additional 300,000 Reichsmarks in stolen jewelry and personal belongings to underwrite the return to Vienna of the surviving Jews. Ironically, Löwenherz himself was able to take advantage of Eichmann's rapacity by securing supplemental assistance to facilitate the continued emigration of Austrian Jews abroad.

Evan Burr Bukey
University of Arkansas

Silvio Vietta and Roberto Rizzo, eds., *“Sich an den Tod heranpürschen . . .” : Hermann Broch und Egon Vietta im Briefwechsel, 1933–1951*. Göttingen: Wallstein, 2012. 373 pp

This volume publishes for the first time the epistolary exchange between the Austrian novelist and literary critic Herman Broch (1886–1951) and the German travel writer and dramaturge Egon Vietta (1903–1959). Edited by Silvio Vietta, Egon Vietta's son, and Roberto Rizzo, the collection includes the 81 letters between the two men (and their proxies) not destroyed in Broch's flight from post-*Anschluss* Austria and also adds extensive supplemental materials. The primary source material covers a breadth of topics from the personal to the arcanelly academic, touching on their health, brushes with death at the hands of the Nazi regime, insecurities and struggles as writers, and post war geopolitics. Nevertheless, the discourse revolves around both authors' common interests in literature and philosophy. The nearly two-decade-long dialogue displays how each man saw the literary text as a new basis for philosophical knowledge in the face of nihilistic modernity. To this end, Broch found in Vietta—a lifelong adherent of Heidegger—an apt interlocutor for his own existentialist tendencies, and Vietta realized in Broch's aesthetic project an extension of his own philosophical inclinations. Together, the two men developed a theoretical rapprochement that frames the rest of their dialogue. Indeed, in the last letter before his flight from Austria and a nearly eight-year break in their exchange, Broch directly expounds his near-death experience in terms of literary production: As the volume's title alludes, death itself becomes a window into the “Wesen des Dichterischen” (47), a sentiment they resume upon their reunion.

In addition to the letters, supplemental materials comprise over half of the volume. The editors provide thorough annotations to the individual let-

ters, clarifying everything from biographical details to the broadest of topics. Additionally, the editors reprint several essays—among them several postmortems—by Egon Vietta recapitulating the Broch's literary project in light of his oeuvre. Finally, the editors also include an afterword containing an account of the letters' transmission, cursory biographies on the two men, and a commentary on the source material. The commentary discusses the content of the discussion between the two men over their friendship, such as their similar existentialist aesthetics and conceptualizations of his story, their reactions to geopolitics, and their personal lifestyles.

The primary source material in this volume provides an invaluable resource for those interested in either interlocutor, although Broch gains special prominence. The novelty of the text resides not so much in Broch's letters to Vietta, which have long been available, but rather in Egon Vietta's portion of the dialogue, which appears here for the first time in published form. As such, it provides a context to some of the most dogmatic letters in Broch's corpus and helps to situate the Austrian's fervor in relation to his wider oeuvre. Moreover, Vietta's responses to Broch also provide a very valuable resource to those interested in the reception of the Austrian, especially his novel *Der Tod des Vergil* (1945), which has a marked presence in their postwar exchanges.

However, the most significant contribution of this volume lies not in the novelty of its source material but rather in how it rarefies latent tendencies in both authors. Broch's and Egon Vietta's relationship resembles that of Gershom Scholem and Walter Benjamin, which drew out the latter's inclination toward Jewish mysticism. In a similar fashion, Egon Vietta excises the humanistic existentialist in Broch, illuminating the influence of figures such as the Catholic humanist Theodor Haecker. By isolating these discussions in Broch's oeuvre and placing them within an ongoing dialogue, Silvio Vietta and Rizzo have opened up to Broch scholars a whole new series of connections that have not been explored yet, such as the Austrian's interest in phenomenology or his occasional flirtations with Heideggerian *Existenzphilosophie*. As a minor fault, the commentary does not explore this new connection in great detail, leaving it to the reader to piece together this interconnection through the source material itself as well as hints in the supplementary sections. In this respect, the biography on Egon Vietta and the Hamburg *Weißer Rose*, the more passive and literary-minded counterpart of its Munich counterpart, is especially helpful, as it draws out the wider scene of humanistic existentialism and its basic tenets in the early twentieth century.

If one must find another minor fault in this volume, it would be the im-

balance in the supplementary materials regarding each interlocutor. Mirroring Broch's more assertive position in the exchange, the editors' treatment tends to favor the Austrian over Vietta. Their biography of Broch covers the intellectual development of its subject more extensively than that of Egon Vietta. In fact, the majority of the latter's biography comprises an excursus on the Hamburg *Weißer Rose* during the Second World War and hardly mentions Vietta. Likewise, Silvio Vietta and Rizzo underscore the contribution which Egon Vietta plays in his discourse in their commentary. They primarily discuss Broch's speculative program, with Vietta playing more of a foil who clarifies his interlocutor rather than representing his own point of view. This nevertheless reflects a certain asymmetry in the exchange itself, where Broch would more often dogmatically assert while Vietta would challenge and clarify, and as such should not detract from the unique contribution that this volume brings to scholarship, especially for students of Broch.

Jacob A. van der Kolk
The Pennsylvania State University

Carol Tully, ed., *Zeugen der Vergangenheit: H. G. Adler–Franz Baermann; Steiner Briefwechsel 1936–1952*. Munich: Iudicium Verlag, 2011. 365 pp

Thanks to recent centennials of their births, H. G. (Hans Günther) Adler (1910–1988) and Franz Baermann Steiner (1909–1952) are receiving overdue scholarly attention—especially Adler, as a recent special issue of *Monatshefte* (103/2, 2011) attests. Carol Tully's volume of the Adler–Steiner correspondence, compiled from the Deutsches Literaturarchiv Marbach with the permission of Adler's son and executor Jeremy Adler, joins the new editions of novels, poetry cycles, essays, documentations, and now biographical treatments of both men, such as Franz Hocheneder's *H. G. Adler (1910–1988). Privatgelehrter und freier Schriftsteller* (2009) and Ulrich van Loyen's *Franz Baermann Steiner. Exil und Verwandlung* (2011).

Tully's 23-page foreword introduces the correspondents, while her 77 pages of annotations clarify intellectual figures and mutual acquaintances. Both are extremely helpful, and the final two pages of the book offer an up-to-date bibliography. Most of the volume's 221 letters, postcards, and telegrams are Adler's. Letters in Czech are translated into German, but the few short notes in English from Steiner remain in the original.