

HERMANN BROCH

HE DEATH OF VIRGIL

'Broch is the greatest novelist European literature has produced since Joyce' *George Steiner*



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The Death of Virgil



Translated by

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Introduced by

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INTRODUCTION

BY BERNARD LEVIN

COMPARED with French (surely a legitimate comparison), German literature is very little known in the English-speaking world—little known and even less understood, the latter no doubt consequent upon the former. Translations of Goethe are few, modern ones fewer, good ones fewer still; Schiller is in an even worse plight, Heine's prose worse again, though handsome amends have recently been made, as far as the verse is concerned, by Mr Hal Draper's extraordinarily successful version of the complete poetry. The rest is very nearly silence: Lessing, Klopstock, Stifter, Jean Paul, Hölderlin, Schlegel, Novalis, Tieck, Freytag, Chamisso, Hebbel, Uhland, Grillparzer, Herder, Kotzebue, Hoffmann, Moses Mendelssohn, Schelling—the list could be extended to several pages without including a single name known to thousands who would be ashamed of an equivalent ignorance of French writing, though many who can find nothing in Racine and only uncomprehending boredom in Mallarmé would thrill to Hebbel's *Herodes und Mariamme* and respond to the true poetic ring of those minor lyricists—Mayrhofer, Schober, Rückert—who so inspired Schubert and other composers. If Wagner had never been born, the very *Nibelungenlied* might remain unknown in English, and many a lover of *Die Meistersinger* is amazed to learn that Hans Sachs was a real person, and that some of his poems are extant—in German.

But if that is true of German literature in general, how much more so is it of modern German writing. (It is significant that those German novelists who have come to prominence abroad since the Second World War, such as Heinrich Böll and Günter Grass, stand in no German literary tradition whatever, and their attitudes, themes and even use of language are largely indistinguishable from their British and American contemporaries.) Hermann Hesse enjoyed a brief vogue, started by the *jeunesse enragée* of the fifties and sixties (he found it necessary to publish a gentle admonition to those who had misunderstood *Steppenwolf*), but has since sunk back into the grossly

undeserved neglect that had earlier been his fate. As for Thomas Mann, not one in a hundred of those who feel that a knowledge of Proust is an essential part of the literary equipment of a civilized English monoglot has read *Buddenbrooks*, and not one in a thousand *Joseph and His Brothers*. (The *Times* obituary of Mann likened him to Galsworthy.)

The reasons for this sorry history are many and complex; fortunately, this is not the place to explore them. But perhaps the most remarkable and unforgivable instance is Hermann Broch's masterpiece and the widespread indifference with which it has, hitherto at any rate, been treated in Britain; it is much to be hoped that this new edition may remedy that state of affairs, and if it doesn't the case is hopeless. For *The Death of Virgil* is one of the great classics of the world's literature, its riches comparable to those of *Ulysses*, *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, and *The Magic Mountain*.

It is true that no one without a perfectly fluent knowledge of German could read it in the original, but that, at least, is no excuse; for the astonishing achievement of Jean Starr Untermyer in translating with such complete success a work that must have posed almost insuperable difficulties has rendered it accessible to English-speaking readers for nearly forty years. It remains a book by no means easy to read; Broch's ambiguities of meaning, form and style, and in particular the colossal, flowing prose-poem of the final section, do not permit of instant unravelling. Yet there is nothing here of the crossword-puzzle element in *Finnegans Wake* or the *Pisan Cantos*, nor even of the legitimate linguistic demands made by Mr Anthony Burgess in *The Clockwork Orange* or, more recently, and more extensively, by Mr Russell Hoban in that remarkable and haunting *tour de force*, *Riddley Walker*. The difficulty experienced by the English reader of Broch (and indeed it must be felt by the German reader, too—but what native English-speaker ever found *Ulysses* an easy book to read?) comes from the demands made by his imagination: unless we can stretch ours to match those demands, we shall find it heavy going. But the reader may be assured that if the effort is made, the rewards are very great indeed.

That promise may be tested immediately by anyone, however sceptical, with half an hour to spare. Let the sceptic read the first three-quarters of the book's opening section, from the arrival of the

Imperial fleet at Brundisium with the dying Imperial poet aboard to the installation of the poet and his mysterious guardian in the guest quarters of the palace. It is difficult to think of any descriptive passage, in any language, that can be compared, for gripping mastery, with the series of sights, sounds, smells and feelings that Broch puts before the reader as he sets his scene.

The author is already planting the clues, of course, as he does so. Virgil, 'a lodger in his own life', clings to consciousness 'with the strength of a man who feels the most significant thing of his life approaching and is full of anxiety lest he miss it'; the approaching battle has 'turned him back to the evil which had overshadowed all his days'. Virgil, it is already clear, is about to face not only Caesar, but the truth that he and Caesar, in their symbiotic friendship (but a Caesar can have no friends), have conspired to shut out. Augustus will continue to do so, naturally; there is no such understanding in world-conquerors, and the Caesar's role in the book is to demonstrate precisely that. But for the Caesar's hymnodist there is no such escape into limitation; between the stirrup and the ground he is to come to terms with the lie he has lived, and *in articulo mortis* he must extirpate that lie:

... overcome by the bronze omnipotence, overcome by its gentleness, overcome by anxiety for his work that was to be snatched from him, overcome to desiring the judgment that would demand just that, overcome by fear as well as hope, overcome to the point of extinction and self-extinction for life's sake, imprisoned and liberated within the compass of his own significance, unconsciously-conscious under the power of the unformable, yearned for, universal chorus, that which he had long known, long suffered, long understood was wrung from him, escaping him in a tiny, inadequate expression of the inexpressible, looming large as the aeons, escaped him in a moan, in a cry: 'Burn the Aeneid!'

That cry, with feeling no less intense than Virgil's, has been heard, *sotto voce*, in many a classroom; can it still be the custom that the Latin-learning young are fed Virgil and Horace, whom no child can understand (thus ensuring that few children will want to understand those poets when they are mature enough to do so) rather than Catullus and Ovid, who are instantly understood and loved by anyone who can read them? But Virgil's realization that his life has been a lie,

and that the lie is summed up in the *Aeneid* and its dedication, must not be read only, or even mainly, at the literal level. It is true that the poet is horrified and ashamed at the crime against art he has committed in putting it at the disposal of the State, indeed *writing* it at the disposal of the State; and so he ought to have been, too, though we should not go so far as to think of him in terms of Stalin's tame novelists and composers; the *Aeneid*, whatever its corrupt didactic intent, is still a masterpiece. But the desperate wish of Broch's Virgil to destroy it springs from a realization far deeper than that the artist's duty is to render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and unto art the things that are art's.

In the massive interior monologue that comprises most of the book (it is possible to read it as though the *whole* of it is subjective, and the tremendous debate with Caesar in Part III, and even the scene-setting introduction, a figment of Virgil's fever-dream) the poet wrestles with the true nature of his betrayal. Closely-packed and multi-faceted though the argument is, there is no room for misunderstanding:

. . . this, the disclosure of the divine through the self-perceptive knowledge of the individual soul, this was the task of art, its human duty, its perceptive duty and therefore its reason for being . . . but he knew also that . . . whenever beauty existed for its own sake, there art was attacked at its very roots, because the created deed then came to be its own opposite, because the thing created was then suddenly substituted for that which creates, the empty form for the true content of reality, the merely beautiful for the perceptive truth . . .

Therein lies Virgil's condemnation of his own work: as he says to the two friends who act as Caesar's harbingers in the debate, 'Nothing unreal is allowed to survive.'

But the schoolboys rejoice too soon: we know, after all, that the *Aeneid* was *not* burnt. Are we to read *The Death of Virgil*, then, as a defeat? It can be so construed, though only by ignoring the overwhelming evidence of the book's final section. But first, there is other evidence that would have to be ignored. Virgil wants to destroy the *Aeneid* because he sees that it is perjury; but towards the end of the argument with Augustus another note creeps in. Virgil begins to hint at the destruction of his poem as a sacrifice through which redemption

may be achieved; then he broadens the point (the suspension-points are here Broch's own):

'The redemptive deed of perception is imminent; I must sacrifice in order to fulfill the pledge... salvation lies only in fulfilling the pledge... for everyone... for me.'

Caesar's reply is a sneer—'Oh, your salvation, always your salvation... well, your saviour will not arrive a day sooner because of your sacrifice'—whereupon Virgil becomes even more explicit:

'I must destroy what is without perception... it constitutes the evil... it is imprisonment... unliberated... redemption will come through the sacrifice... it is the highest duty... the imperceptive must lead to perception... only by doing this can I serve the people's truth and further their salvation... this is the law of truth... this the awakening from the encircling twilight.'

And more explicit still:

'Some day there will come one who will again live in perception; in his being the world will be redeemed to truth.'

Virgil died in 19 BC; the point hardly needs labouring. But what of the poet's resignation to Augustus of the poem, its manuscript and the dedication? Had he failed to free himself from the wheel, did his inability to complete the sacrifice vitiate his last-minute understanding? Not on any but the most strained reading of the final section, in which Broch manages the almost impossible feat of presenting, in a single continuous stream-of-consciousness passage (it includes one paragraph of 12,500 words), the merging of an individual soul in a unified world-soul; the sacrifice, though never carried out, is accepted, the will taken for the deed.

All this makes *The Death of Virgil* sound as didactic as the *Aeneid*. So it is, in one sense. But its meaning, though naturally it dominates the book, does not swamp it. An imagination of altogether exceptional richness is at work here, combined with the power to control and direct a complex symbolism, and the result is a book full of vivid images and a strong narrative line. Take the boy who attaches himself to Virgil as the fleet comes to harbour. Is he Virgil's guide in any sense comparable to Virgil's role as Dante's? Why can some of the bystanders see him and

others not? Why is that true also of the three yahoos outside the poet's window, and what is he meant to learn from the murder committed among them? Of whose imagination is the slave—a magnificently-realized figure, who, all unheard, interrupts Caesar again and again with the voice of a different world—a figment? The symbolism of Misery Street, through which Virgil is borne on a litter, and in which he sees (through windows and doorways) human degradation in its most extreme form, is clear enough; he is passing—literally being *carried away*—through the last reminders of earthly reality (contrasted with the artificiality of the uncomprehending Caesar). But what exactly is the significance of his lingering visions of Plotia, his mistress, whom nobody but he can see? And what are we meant to draw from Broch's symbolic use of the constellations?

There are no unambiguous answers to these questions: *The Death of Virgil* is not a lock with a single key. But when Virgil tells Augustus to his face that 'There is but one kind of piety, and the barbarian whose piety betokens growth is better than the Roman whose soul shuts itself against growing', we can be sure that we are near the heart of the author's mystery, just as we can be sure that we are in the innermost recesses of that heart when through Virgil's mind there passes the thought that

—although he had never dared face this truth—his poetry could no longer be called art, since, devoid of all renewal and development, it had been nothing but an unchaste production of beauty without real creativity . . . without any real progress in itself, aside from an increasing extravagance and sumptuousness, an un-art which was never able of itself to master existence and exalt it to a veritable symbol.

Growth . . . progress . . . renewal and development. The fact is, no one could take seriously a novel about Shakespeare in which the dying poet wants to burn *The Tempest*, or about Beethoven in which the composer wants to destroy *Fidelio*. To make the transition from imperfect understanding to full knowledge, from sleep to waking, from the part to the whole, is the duty which life, never mind art, imposes. Caesar Augustus understands nothing of this; nor does the Virgil who wrote the *Aeneid*. But the Virgil who wants to eradicate his masterpiece from the world has not only understood it; he has embarked upon the

journey, and in the final section of the book he accomplishes it. That is why the last movement (the musical term is inescapable, and surely intended) is the culmination of the work in every sense; the reader can feel the exaltation as the poet's soul mounts higher and higher, rushes faster and faster, is merged more and more completely into the fabric of the universe and of the principle that informs it.

The Death of Virgil is a literary masterpiece. But it is also an invaluable contribution to man's understanding of himself; its most tremendous metaphor is its depiction of the artist's duty to understand his art aright, through which metaphor that contribution is made. (The book is, after all, about Virgil, not Caesar.) Hitherto, this mighty, poetic and exciting book has been known to a comparatively small circle, among whom news of its quality has circulated like *samizdat*. Now it is available in English for the third time; may it at last achieve the apotheosis it deserves, as the dying Virgil, in its pages, achieves his.

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WATER—THE ARRIVAL

STEEL-BLUE and light, ruffled by a soft, scarcely perceptible cross-wind, the waves of the Adriatic streamed against the imperial squadron as it steered toward the harbor of Brundisium, the flat hills of the Calabrian coast coming gradually nearer on the left. And here, as the sunny yet deathly loneliness of the sea changed with the peaceful stir of friendly human activity where the channel, softly enhanced by the proximity of human life and human living, was populated by all sorts of craft—by some that were also approaching the harbor, by others heading out to sea and by the ubiquitous brown-sailed fishing boats already setting out for the evening catch from the little breakwaters which protected the many villages and settlements along the white-sprayed coast—here the water had become mirror-smooth; mother-of-pearl spread over the open shell of heaven, evening came on, and the pungence of wood fires was carried from the hearths whenever a sound of life, a hammering or a summons, was blown over from the shore.

Of the seven high-built vessels that followed one another, keels in line, only the first and last, both slender rams-prowed pentaremes, belonged to the war-fleet; the remaining five, heavier and more imposing, deccareme and duodeccareme, were of an ornate structure in keeping with the Augustan imperial rank, and the middle one, the most sumptuous, its bronze-mounted bow gilded, gilded the ring-bearing lion's head under the railing, the rigging wound with colors, bore under purple sails, festive and grand, the tent of the Caesar. Yet on the ship that immediately followed was the poet of the Aeneid and death's signet was graved upon his brow.

A prey to seasickness, held taut by the constant threat of its outbreak, he had not dared move the whole day long. Now, however, although bound to the cot which had been set up for him amidships, he became conscious of himself, or rather of his body and the life of his body, which for many years past he had scarcely been able to call his own, as an after-tasting, after-touching memory of the relief which had flowed through him suddenly when the calmer region of the coast had been reached; and this floating, quieted-quieting fatigue might have

become an almost perfect boon had not the plaguing cough, unaffected by the strong healing sea air, begun again, accompanied by the usual evening fever and the usual evening anxiety. So he lay there, he the poet of the Aeneid, he Publius Vergilius Maro, he lay there with ebbing consciousness, almost ashamed of his helplessness, at odds with such a fate, and he stared into the pearly roundness of the heavenly bowl: why then had he yielded to the importunity of Augustus? why then had he forsaken Athens? Fled now the hope that the hallowed and serene sky of Homer would favor the completion of the Aeneid, fled every single hope for the boundless new life which was to have begun, the hope for a life free alike of art and poetry, a life dedicated to meditation and study in the city of Plato, fled the hope ever to be allowed to enter the Ionian land, oh, fled the hope for the miracle of knowledge and the healing through knowledge. Why had he renounced it? Willingly? No! It had been like a command of the irrefutable life-forces, those irrefutable forces of fate which never vanished completely, which though they might dive at times into the subterranean, the invisible, the inaudible, were nonetheless omnipresent as the inscrutable threat of powers which man could never avoid, to which he must always submit; it was fate. He had allowed himself to be driven by fate and now fate drove on to the end. Had this not always been the form of his life, had he ever lived otherwise? had the pearly bowl, had the halycon sea, had the song of the mountains and that which sang painfully in his own breast, had the flute-tone of the god ever meant anything else to him than a circumstance which, like a receptacle of the spheres, was soon to draw him into itself, to bear him into immensity? He had been a peasant from birth, a man who loved the peace of earthly life, one whom a simple secure life in a village community would have fitted, one for whom because of his birth it would have been seemly to be allowed, even to be forced to abide there, but who in conformity with a higher destiny was not allowed to be free from nor free to stay at home; this destiny had pushed him out from the community into the nakedest, direst, most savage loneliness of the human crowd, it had hunted him from the simplicity of his origins, hunted him abroad into the open, to ever-increasing multiplicity, and if thereby something had become greater and broader, it was only the distance from real life, verily it was this

distance alone which had grown. Only at the edge of his fields had he walked, only at the edge of his life had he lived. He had become a rover, fleeing death, seeking death, seeking work, fleeing work, a lover and yet at the same time a harassed one, an errant through the passions of the inner life and the passions of the world, a lodger in his own life. And now, almost at the end of his strength, at the end of his search, self-purged and ready to leave, purged to readiness and ready to take upon himself the last loneliness, ready to start on the inner journey back to loneliness, now destiny with all its forces had seized him again, had forbidden him all the simplicity of his beginnings and of the inner life, had deflected his backward journey once more, had turned him back to the evil which had overshadowed all his days, as if it had reserved for him just this sole simplicity—, the simplicity of dying. Above him the yards cracked in the ropes and betweenwhiles there was a soft booming in the sailcloth, he heard the slithering foam of the wake and the silver pour that sprayed out each time the oars were lifted, their heavy creak in the oar-locks, and the clapping cut of the water when they dipped in again, he felt the soft even thrust of the ship keeping time to the hundredfold stroke of the oarsmen, he saw the white-surfed coastline slip by and he thought of the chained dumb slave-bodies in the damp-draughty, noisome, roaring hull of the ship. The same dull rumbling silver-sprayed down-beat resounded from the two neighboring ships, from the next in line and the one following, like an echo which repeated itself over all the seas and was answered from all the seas, for so they plied everywhere, laden with people, laden with arms, laden with corn and wheat, laden with marble, with oil, with wines, with spices, with silks, laden with slaves, everywhere this navigation for bartering and bargaining, one of the worst among the many depravities of the world. In these ships, however, the cargo was not so much goods as gluttons, the members of the court: the rear half of the ship up to the stern's end was given over to feeding them, from early morning it reverberated with the sounds of eating and there was always a crowd of guzzlers in the dining-hall, impatient for a triclinium to be vacated, waiting, after a tussle with rivals, to tumble themselves onto it, finally to lie down and do their part by beginning a meal or maybe by starting one all over again. The waiters, light-footed, smart, flashy fellows, not a few pleasure-boys among them, but now sweaty

and harried, scarcely had time to catch their breaths, and their forever-smiling head-steward, with the cold look in the corner of his eyes and the politely tip-opened hand, drove them hither and thither, himself rushing up-deck and down-deck because, apart from the progress of the meal, it was necessary at the same time to take care of those who—wonderful to relate—seemed to be already sated and now were taking their pleasure in other ways, some promenading with hands clasped upon their bellies or over their behinds, some, on the contrary, discoursing with expansive gestures, some dozing on their cots or snoring, their faces covered with their togas, some sitting at the gaming boards, all of whom had to be served and appeased incessantly with tidbits which were passed around the decks on large silver platters and offered to them, keeping in mind a hunger which might assert itself at any moment, keeping in mind a gluttony which was limned in the expression of all of them, ineradicably and unmistakably, as much in the faces of the well-nourished as in those of the haggard, in those of the slack as well as the swift, of the restless and the indolent, in the faces of the sleepers and wakers, sometimes chiselled in, sometimes kneaded in, clearly or cloudily, cruelly or kindly, wolfish, foxish, cattish, parrottish, horsish, sharkish, but always dedicated to a horrible, somehow self-imprisoned lust, insatiably desirous of having, desirous of bargaining for goods, money, place and honors, desirous of the bustling idleness of possession. Everywhere there was someone putting something into his mouth, everywhere smouldered avarice and lust, rootless but ready to devour, all-devouring, their fumes wavered over the deck, carried along on the beat of the oars, inescapable, unavoidable; the whole ship was lapped in a wave of greed. Oh, they deserved to be shown up once for what they were! A song of avarice should be dedicated to them! But what would that accomplish? Nothing availed the poet, he could right no wrongs; he is heeded only if he extols the world, never if he portrays it as it is. Only falsehood wins renown, not understanding! And could one assume that the Aeneid would be vouchsafed another or better influence? Oh yes, people would praise it because as yet everything he had written had been praised, because only the agreeable things would be abstracted from it, and because there was neither danger nor hope that the exhortations would be heeded; ah, he was forbidden either to delude