

#12

VALUE AND
KITSCH IN
*THE DEATH OF
VIRGIL*

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Abstract || The following article studies the plot logic of the novel *Der Tod des Vergil*, in the context of Hermann Broch's value theory and his considerations about kitsch in art and society in the first half of the 20th century. First of all, we propose moving past the romantic interpretation of the novel to focus on the circumstances under which the story was written at the prison of Bad Aussee, and the fusion of author and character. For that purpose, we suggest paying special attention to the regularity of the book's composition, and the prevalence of ideas and symbols over facts. Furthermore, we approach some main notions of the aesthetics and ethics of Hermann Broch, such as his concepts of value, kitsch, and the opposition between literary creation and imitation. Finally, we analyze the ethos of value in some key scenes of the novel, in particular Virgil's journey and the crucial decision to burn the *Aeneid*.

Keywords || Value Theory | Kitsch | Hermann Broch | Virgil | Imitation | Aeneid

0. Introduction

In 1945, when Hermann Broch, then living in exile in New York, published what is considered his great work, *The Death of Virgil*, the immediate reactions were disparate in the extreme. Although appreciation of the novel has changed in subsequent readings, some recent opinions continue to be based upon the same assumptions that lead to its rejection when published initially: lyrical outburst, exaltation, Baroquism, deconstruction. These interpretations are not terribly compatible with the methodical, systematic personality of Hermann Broch who, as well as confessing on numerous occasions to being a poet against his will, also defended the didactic intention behind some of his works and considered that hierarchical ordering that could be realized by a system such as Platonism was desirable.

The image of Hermann Broch, condemned to death, writing the first drafts of the novel in the Bad Aussee prison has led some in the field of literature to extrapolate a degree of confusion between the author and the dying hero of the novel. This type of reading, despite providing us with certain hermeneutics, distracts from the systematic and decidedly conscious character of its composition. It can also lead to a glossing over of the conceptual logic behind the work's primary function: Virgil's attempt to destroy his *Aeneid*, which might have lacked interest for the scathing Austrian criticism of sentimental excesses, interpreted as personal outburst, if it failed to observe in both the author and in the character of Virgil a logos that enabled his elevation to the category of symbol for a civilization.

In the prologue to the English edition of his book, Hermann Broch presented the methodology he had followed in constructing its style, encapsulating it in three principles: 1) the constant attempt to reduce the contradictions of the soul to unity; 2) the attempt to maintain a constant flow of all the motifs (musical); and 3) the attempt to thus capture the simultaneity of everything happening (Broch, 1974: 334). His stylistic plan is accomplished in a methodical manner that originates with the project at hand, since, in Broch's opinion, the ultimate objective of every artist should be complete identification with the selected segment of reality so that this might become a symbol of the whole. Likewise, as we shall endeavor to demonstrate here, the elements that make up the novel are governed by a common internal connection. Its composition is not arbitrary, but rather the images, actions and characters are integrated within a coherent whole that aspires to be the concretion of the author's system of values and a prior reflection on the value of all things literary.

The prevalence of idea and symbol over facts was a constant in Broch's artistic production. Even in his autobiography, written during his period of exile, the anecdote is passed over in favour of

the almost mathematical presentation of certain psychoanalytical theories applied to his own life. In his autobiography we can see how his accounts of historical facts and emotions are rare, as reality for Broch did not reside so much in circumstance and experience as in his thought, in the Logos, the essence embodied by each empirical fact. For Broch, reality was the “símbolo hecho vida”, as he will observe in relation to Hofmannsthal (Broch, 1974: 180).

1. Hermann Broch's value theory

The Death of Virgil should be understood within the framework of Broch's reflections on the value theory, which was at the heart of his literary and philosophical thought. Value, for Broch, was a category born not of absolute consciousness but rather of life experience. On this point, in her introduction to *Poesía e investigación*, translated into Spanish by Ramón Ibero, Hannah Arendt explains how there are no oppositions in pure consciousness. However, the possibility for this consciousness to develop, (an antinomy Broch transferred from theology to his particular theory of consciousness), depends upon the world. At the point of departure (following from Fichte) the 'I' confronts itself and compares itself in the imagination to a 'not-I'. The 'I' is the space of all that is modelled, rational and alive, as opposed to the dark realms of the individual and the world: all that is shapeless, irrational, the unknown and what we fear, death. That which is presented as value according to Broch, is the continual assimilation by the 'I' of areas of this unshaped reality; hence, evil would be its diminishing or loss: rapture as opposed to panic. Thus absolute lack of value is death, and absolute value is the overcoming of this death.

Similarly, outside of the 'I' lies transitoriness, and within the 'I', space. As Arendt notes:

Broch alcanza una visión del tiempo extraordinaria, característica y peculiarmente suya; una visión según la cual el tiempo no representa el “sentido interior”, como ocurre en las especulaciones sobre el tiempo dentro de la tradición occidental, desde *Las confesiones* de San Agustín, hasta la *Crítica de la razón pura* de Kant, sino que, por el contrario, asume la función asignada comúnmente al espacio: el tiempo es “el más interior mundo exterior”. [...] Por otra parte, la categoría del espacio no es meramente la categoría del mundo exterior, sino que, además, le es dada con carácter inmediato al hombre en su “núcleo-yo”. (Broch, 1974: 24)

The dynamics of a gain and loss of reality are also observed by Broch in the society as a whole, which functions as a large organism, and in the distinct systems that comprise it. Man and world operate in a feedback loop such that every increase within the consciousness of the individual entails an expansion in the cosmic consciousness.

This process is never-ending, since the value is in the very act of giving shape to the new, and not only in the result:

Y él sabía también que lo mismo valía del arte, que este igualmente solo existe –oh, ¿existe aún, puede seguir existiendo?– en cuanto contiene testamento y conocimiento, en cuanto se renueva lo insuperado, en cuanto lo realiza, invitando al alma a un continuo dominio de sí y haciéndole descubrir de esa manera capa tras capa de su realidad, haciéndole penetrar capa tras capa más profundamente (Broch, 2003b: 161).

History, religion, art and science are value systems in a constant state of evolution. The more open the system, the more capable it is of encompassing new contents of reality. Evil appears when the systems become impeded, the values solidify and that which is already moulded prevents the discovery of new fields of reality, that is, when the attachment to what has been generated replaces that which generates reality.

For Broch, evil in the Art system lay in confusing the creative act with its result, in substituting the ethical demands with aesthetic demands, as, a creative act can be the object of an ethical evaluation (as an act) or the product of an aesthetic evaluation (of the result, what is formed), but under no circumstances can aesthetics exist for their own sake, or at least, not in the human spheres. Broch understood beauty as the fruit of a work accomplished, and believed that in loving it for what it is, one would find it to be an empty concept. According to the writer, the artist who pursues the creation of a beautiful object or whose ultimate objective is beauty, loves only the result, the effect, so that by confusing what has previously been generated with what is generated, he is restricting himself to imitating extant norms or styles.

For Broch, Beauty, Truth and Virtue belong to pure consciousness and would be meaningless concepts without life experience. As experienced in life, they are different facets of a single phenomenon: that of value, which is equivalent to creation and discovery. According to this approach, ethics and aesthetics cannot be dissociated, and their separation in modern aesthetic theories, since Kant, is what in this author's opinion gave rise to the dismemberment of the values of Western art as reflected in the lack of value of an entire era. and evil in art (its decorative and imitative expressions) would have surfaced with a potency that was hidden for centuries.

Broch believes that in the absolute love of beauty, the artist once more commits man's original error of considering himself equal to God, the sin of *hubris*. Turning the work of art into an object of adoration and worship, man confines himself to risking his own hope of salvation, and must confront his limitations time and again, since what is finite

has been placed at the same level as what is infinite. In denying the reality of that which he symbolizes and to which he must necessarily adhere, he exhausts himself. The symbol in itself has no value, and only makes sense in the capacity it possesses to transcend.

For Broch, in opposition to relative evil, which originates in the attack of one system of values on another (for example, the revolutionaries cutting off Louis XVI's head or Savonarola burning heretics), absolute evil consists in the attack of a system from within, since in this case it is the system itself that internally generates an inverse, which although identical in appearance and behaviour, lacks the former's value. This extreme evil, which Broch tends to portray via the antagonism between Christ and the Antichrist, is innate and cannot be eliminated from the system. In the system of Art it generates *kitsch*, or the religions of beauty, art for art's sake. Throughout the 19th century and even in the 20th, Broch would say, "el espectro horrible de la belleza divina, traída a la Tierra, aparece por doquier" (1974: 376). "La diosa de la belleza en el arte es la diosa del *kitsch*" (1974: 377). Replacing God with Beauty, and believing it possible to reveal his face in an earthly work, artists have sentenced themselves to pursue an attractive but sterile void, a purpose that wears itself out.

The trinity of reality (world, man, celestial spheres), what Broch considers the triad of the West, has remained in a two-sided game: the sign has become unfathomable in the absence of the final symbol (totality) that makes it possible to understand each one by their similarities.

Y aquí radica el problema. Solo cuando un sistema de valores superior se vuelva a hacer cargo de la lucha entre las distintas parcelas, que han devenido autónomas, y consiga establecer la paz, solo cuando los distintos sistemas vuelvan a ser eslabones al servicio de la idea platónica superior, distribuidos ordenadamente en escala jerárquica, volverá a bajar asimismo la tensión en el mundo y en el alma del hombre, cuya desintegración equivale a la desintegración de los valores del mundo. En su intento de escapar al mal, el individuo se pregunta: "¿qué debemos hacer?". Lo estético ha de volver nuevamente a lo ético, a fin de que se pueda reinstaurar la unidad del mundo (Broch, 1974: 434-435).

Kitsch for Broch is the crude imitation of something past without its creations having the breath that makes them possible. The style of *kitsch* differs from poetic movements that defended art for art's sake, but only in intensity and degree, since in *kitsch* it is exacerbated by the deceit of a more pitiful and conceited pretension. The shallowness with which it defends art for art's sake is as unjustifiable to Broch as that of an entrepreneur who takes pleasure in his excesses by saying that business is business.

In his article, "Algunas consideraciones acerca del problema del

kitsch", Broch makes use of various representations from different eras to exemplify *kitsch* art: Wagner in music, Dalí in painting, Hitler or Nero in politics. The image of Nero playing the lute, while in the garden, the burning bodies of condemned Christians form a pyrotechnic artifice, appears whenever Broch wishes to get to the very essence of *kitsch*. The fact that modern man, as Broch recognises even himself to be, comes to feel a certain liking for this type of art, clearly demonstrates the neurosis that has taken hold of an entire era.

2. Creation and imitation in *The Death of Virgil*

In *The Death of Virgil*, the author's implementation of his value theory, represents a poetic attempt to reflect the most extreme dispersal surpassed by the maximum unity: ecstasy; so that the segment of reality selected (the eighteen hours before Virgil's death) would be the symbol of the totality of consciousness to which man could gain access on earth: the earthly Absolute. Therefore, Broch narratively constructs a continuous transformation from external to internal, from temporality to space, by presenting consciousness's comprehension of all its contents. The successive discourse moves towards the simultaneity which makes the text resemble a symphony (for Broch, music was the highest degree of spatial art) in which, by means of progression, the various motifs adhere to one another and resolve in a unified meaning.

The action around which the contents are organised is the conversion of the poet, the action of greatest value: the overcoming of death and the move from a state of extreme evil to the recognition of one's guilt and the discovery of the ultimate objective: the integration of what is separate, Unity.

2.1. "Y estos eran los ítalos de la *Eneida*." Virgil's journey

Ordenando indeclinablemente que todo lo que había servido a la pseudo-vida y la había constituido debía desaparecer de tal forma que nunca hubiese existido, perdiéndose en lo no-ocurrido, caído en la nada, separado de todo recuerdo, separado de todo conocimiento, sojuzgado todo lo que había sido en lo humano y en lo real; oh, era la orden de aniquilar todo lo hecho, de quemar todo lo que había escrito y versificado; oh, todos sus escritos debían ser quemados, todos y también la *Eneida*.
(Broch, 2003b: 203)

The novel is structured as a downward journey to hell, in which Virgil, like Orpheus, Aeneas or Dante before him, will pass through the different zones of the underworld. Marked by the nearness of death, he who was the narrator of the catabasis of Aeneas or Alighieri's guide through the realms of beyond, now makes his own descent. The territories he passes through are also layers of his psyche.

The voyage he carries out in the first two chapters, the Water (or arrival) and the Fire (or fall), is that of a descent to confront the origin of evil, the absolute absence of value (the petrification of life, Nothingness). From his agonising disembarkment in Brindisi, Virgil is present at a series of scenes in which he recognises the vileness of his civilisation. In these, by way of the symbol, he comes to terms with his own guilty existence. Through this symbolic regression towards the origins of evil, Virgil experiences banishment, the baring of his soul, guilt, the sin that transforms man into beast and, finally, the original sin: the breaking of the pact between man and God, perjury. The error Virgil committed throughout his existence is that which represents for Broch a case of extreme evil within the system of art: he loved beauty for itself, meaning he loved that which did not generate a new reality. He sang the praises of and glorified the non-existent. In his works he failed to depict events as they were but rather wrote them as he had wanted them to be, and in this way, he had contributed to the perpetuation of Roman society's ambitious and corrupt nature.

Virgil's verification of the difference between the myth he had created in the *Aeneid* and the historical reality of his age commences at the dawn of the novel. Virgil lands in Brindisi with Augustus's retinue and sees the hoard that has gathered to receive Caesar: an enormous, heaving amphitheatre, "victorioso, estremecedor, desenfrenado, aterrador, magnífico, sometido, invocándose a sí mismo en la persona del Uno" (Broch, 2000: 10). A rabble he describes as avid, avaricious, animalistic and without possible joy. In the midst of panic, the poet asks himself the question: "¡Ensalzado y no descrito..., tal había sido el error, ay, y estos eran los ítalos de la *Eneida!*" (Broch, 2000: 10)—his guilty sentence, since Virgil's poetry created the myth by which his culture was praised and glorified. The poet establishes that his Dionysian poetry has only served to intoxicate men, to tame the beasts and make them forget their misfortune for a brief period of time.

The mistake Virgil assumes is the same that Broch attributed to *kitsch* or the poetic theories of art for art's sake during his lifetime: the sin of imitation, in which the artist violates man and God and, above all, the obligation that unites both: the creation of reality, which constitutes value.

He witnesses the representation of this original sin once settled in Augustus' palace and when his conscience has examined the entire mythical chain of evil. It appears to him in the form of a nocturnal apparition of three drunks, two men and a woman, behaving as beasts. After he has perpetrated the symbolic assassination of one of them followed by his "resurrection" as an immense inebriated scarab

beetle, the terrified Virgil understands a crucial fact: the drunks of the evil trio were not the authors, they were only the witnesses of an original sin, that of perjury, the breaking of the pact, committed by him:

Era uno de ellos, perjuro como ellos y tan culpable como ellos, porque él como ellos nada sabía del juramento que allí había sido quebrantado y seguía siéndolo de antemano, olvidado el juramento y olvidado el deber [...] pues solo del juramento nace el sentido, el sentido de todo ser ligado al deber, y nada tiene sentido donde olvidando el deber se ha roto el juramento, el juramento dado en el arcano origen y que obliga tanto a dioses como a los hombres, aunque nadie lo conoce, nadie fuera del dios desconocido, ya que de él, del más oculto de los celestes, procede toda lengua. (Broch, 2000: 60)

From this moment on, the poet character is forced to experience the emptiness he has created, as his room turns into the chamber of the Furies, the arena of extreme evil. There he confronts dreamlike apparitions that he reproduced in his works, pseudo-monsters that arise out of the emptiness and Nothingness. He experiences, in a state of pure panic, the unfurling of the surreal within his consciousness, the empty beauty of knowledge:

Así se desvela al hombre la ebriedad de la belleza como el juego perdido de antemano [...], el espacio de la belleza, el espacio del símbolo que en cada uno de sus puntos es incierto y sin embargo veda toda pregunta y la petrifica, sosteniéndole en los espacios de la petrificación. (Broch, 2000: 57)

It is what he has created by confusing the producer with what is produced, ethical laws with aesthetics. On the edge, Virgil receives the order from the celestial spheres to burn all his writings. It is not an act of desperation but rather an ethical demand that will re-establish the Law, final Unity, so that all the symbols can acquire meaning and clarity. For Broch, every ethical directive ought to have a negative form, since it is only possible to know the departure pole—the pole of evil, of death—and not the pole of destiny, since the latter is an infinite good that is difficult to solidify in a positive norm of attitude.

The ethical demand made of him supposes the negation of the surreal, of death, in order to thereby affirm once more the pact with the highest God: life. In complying with the law, by means of his conversion, Virgil begins to renew the flow of life, the frozen reality. The poet awakens and the move from panic to ecstasy occurs, the transfiguration of Virgil himself in the space where the revelation will take place. There, an angel delivers him with a name, symbol of the new life that begins for him, “¡entra en la creación que fue una vez y es nuevamente! ¡Y que tu nombre sea Virgilio: ha llegado tu hora!” (Broch, 2000: 106), and of the new law, “abre los ojos al Amor” (Broch, 2000: 102). Love: the only gift that allows the ‘I’ to expand to

another 'I', to sense the other in oneself and to know.

2.2. Burning of the *Aeneid* and manumission of the slaves

Once the first stage of Virgil's voyage has ended—the understanding of death in life—a new phase of waiting begins. His guide and companion Lysanias, symbol of the past and of poetry, makes way for the Syrian slave, who represents the future, Christianity and the new law.

In this part of the novel, a long conversation takes place between Virgil and Augustus that decides the future of the *Aeneid*. Virgil's resolution to destroy Rome's great poem is now firm and, as the Emperor quickly understands (in the time it takes Virgil to explain that which up until then was a metaphysical intuition), what is being decided then is not the verses or the fate of an incomplete work, but rather the very legitimacy of the Roman state, its work, and the purpose of the myth when the value system that it supports and maintains is finished. In order to prevent the sacrifice of the *Aeneid*, Augustus utilises every capacity for reasoning that he possesses as the ultimate representative of power as well as a friend. After the lengthy discussion, Virgil gives in and the *Aeneid* remains intact (and unfinished) for posterity. An act of submission, or a decision based on friendship? What is clear is that the author, just as much as the character, comes up against reality: Broch, because he cannot alter historical fact to that degree, and Virgil because he senses that Augustus will not concede and that the *Aeneid* will be preserved despite all his reasoning to the contrary. He is aware that, like Homer or Aeschylus, he will be condemned to relive temporary death in a thousand ways, "hasta que se borre la última línea de su poesía en el recuerdo de los hombres" (Broch, 2003b: 284).

The only thing Virgil demands of Augustus in return for saving the *Aeneid* is the manumission of the slaves. This final scene is one of the keys of the work and must be untangled from Brochian value theory. Virgil's act cannot, under any circumstances, be considered coincidental: following the logic of the novel, this act is the ethical demand that will substitute the symbolic action of destroying the *Aeneid*. It is a final wound dealt to Caesar, to Rome and to their value system, inflicted by means of an ethical act in opposition to the prior system and a modelling of the values to come. In any event, Broch knows that Art is a traditionalist system in which, more than in historical or scientific systems, inherited norms survive.

From the outset of the novel, we are presented with an analogy between slaves and poetry (myth) as the two pillars that support, through their subjugation, the degraded, avaricious and animal Roman civilisation. The destruction of the work is therefore the

symbolic substitute, at the historic level, of the act of renewal that should be brought about so that events can follow their course and Virgil his progress towards salvation and awareness.

Virgil's consciousness, which at the start of the novel was in a state of supreme evil and unlawfully held the condition of pilgrim, of a guest separated from his land, ends up in what according to Broch is the state of absolute good, the assimilation of all the interior and exterior contents, which equates to the creation of one's appropriate home in the soul, the overcoming of time by means of one's conversion in space and the return to the origin of creation: the Word and beyond, in giving way to the celestial spheres.

One of the fundamental themes of *The Death of Virgil* is that of the end of art, in the double sense of its purpose and its demise, of its possible exhaustion and proliferation. As in his autobiography, Broch here too addresses a problem as old as he is: the disintegration of values which the West is suffering. *The Death of Virgil* reflects the ethical polarisation and tension of his historical period and the hope that this problem could be overcome in the form promised, for Broch, by absolute Good: the total modelling of what is real, the integration of each element of reality in an holistic, ordered, hierarchical and coherent (but not closed) system. And, in this hope, it would be possible to achieve the restoration of the unity that was lost in the work of art, the recovery of the united syntax of the world: the most important task faced by the modern novel, which could not serve merely as a mirror for a decadent civilisation.

Broch and Virgil posed the question: what is the legitimacy of art in a time of decadence and deterioration of values? This question relates to Adorno's now classic indictment: how can one write poetry after Auschwitz? This is followed by another of Broch's questions: in what way can art become knowledge, what is its capacity and what are its limits? Virgil's Rome and European society in the 20th century were civilisations that could each be characterised by their gradual disintegration. In these periods of transition, as Hans Jonas points out, the individual does not feel he forms part of a coherent and organised whole. If, in the context of art, the apex of evil is expressed by *kitsch*, in the field of 20th century philosophy and science, the breakdown is reflected by an atomisation of knowledge into various empirical learnings that do not now aspire to the ultimate connection of reality or to providing responses to the most basic questions of man about his existence.

In this context, Hermann Broch (fervent advocate of empirical knowledge, something we should not forget) concludes, regretfully, that neither affirmative science nor philosophy are able to gain access to the totality of consciousness, since no science can produce its

own foundations, and that after the crisis facing religion, the only wisdom through which man can attempt to achieve our lost unity of meaning is poetry—in its broadest definition. The only way open to complete wholeness is that of the symbol. And this is because for Broch, poetry is the only tool man possesses that can supersede death, the only activity that serves to truly know death. It is capable of resisting the absoluteness of death with its own absoluteness, absolute value, the simultaneous awareness of everything, the most real reality, the discovery of the primary foundation, since this is a symbol and cannot be other than a symbol (God can only be known during human life through an image, not in essence), the final Word to which all the others refer. In this ethical mission of the artist to carry on with the creation of reality, poetry finds its legitimacy. And in his determination to achieve a masterpiece, Broch found his own legitimacy as poet.

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