

KV Tirumalesh (India)

The Death of Virgil: by Hermann Broch

It is impossible for me to think of *the* best book I have ever read. I live in the world of *books* (plural) and they in turn inhabit me. I am a polytheist, multilingual, multicultural and happy that way. In a singular world I will be as unhappy as that trapeze artist in Kafka's short story "First Sorrow." You know that in that story, the trapeze artist realizes that he has been given only one trapeze and then longs for another. That is the first sorrow. I have been made by many great books from many languages; so it will be unfair and untrue on my part to select any one of them as the best.

For the purpose of this talk today, I will talk about one of the best books that I ever read and that is a 1940s novel *The Death of Virgil* by Hermann Broch (translated into English by Jean Starr Untermyer from the original German *Der Tod des Vergil* with great care and devotion). Both the original and the translation were published in 1945, a date that coincided with the end of the Second World War.

Started in his native country Austria, continued in exile in England and finished in the United States, it is needless to say that Broch composed this masterpiece under most trying conditions. The origin of this novel is said to be a few elegies that he had written in anticipation of his own death when he had been detained in prison soon after the annexation of Austria by the Nazis. He was, however, released from prison with the intervention of James Joyce and allowed to emigrate to England. Broch later moved to the USA and settled in Princeton, writing and helping people to escape from Nazi Germany. The elegies he wrote in prison were later incorporated into *The Death of Virgil*.

I do not remember exactly when I first came across this great novel. But I do remember that it was in the library of the Central Institute of English and Foreign Languages, Hyderabad, India, some years ago. What attracted me to the novel at first sight was the title carrying the name of Virgil. I had with me for some years my own copy of Dryden's translation of the *Aeneid* and sometimes used to dip into it. Its majestic opening lines:

Arms, and the man I sing, who, forc'd by fate,
And haughty Juno's unrelenting hate,
Expell'd and exil'd, left the Trojan shore.

are unforgettable; and so too the episode concerning Dido. So, I thought I would see how the novel *The Death of Virgil* read and checked it out of the library and started reading it. The experience was stunning. It took a long time for me to finish reading it—mainly for two reasons: if I find the writing interesting, my pace of reading becomes slow, for I start ruminating over it; and secondly, and more importantly in this context, the style was forbiddingly difficult.

When you read a book for yourself and find it great, you don't ask yourself why you find it great. But on an occasion such as this, the reader is expected to say something about the quality of the work. So, if I ask myself why I like *The Death of Virgil*, how far can I take this

why-question? To begin with, let me say that I find it very different from most other novels I have read. What do I mean by different?

Let us take the conceptualization of the novel itself, which I think is brilliant. We may remember that Virgil (70 BC – 19 BC) died just nineteen years before the birth of Jesus. Legend has it that Virgil was ill and died before actually finishing his great epic poem the *Aeneid* and that he had expressed a desire to destroy the work. Why was he unsatisfied with it? Nobody knows the real reason. Broch takes up the last day of Virgil as the temporal scope of his novel. So, just like James Joyce's *Ulysses*, the story of *The Death of Virgil* too happens within a span of twenty-four hours. When the novel opens, we see Virgil in a ship coming close to Brundisium; it is one of a fleet of ships returning to Italy from Athens after a campaign. And in the very front ship is Caesar Octavianus Augustus, Emperor and friend of Virgil. Virgil is very ill and has to be carried on a stretcher. Beside him is a chest that contains the manuscript of the *Aeneid*. The entire novel—descriptions, thoughts, memories, fears and premonitions—are mostly narrated from the point of view of Virgil. Caesar, whom Virgil affectionately calls Octavian, comes to visit the poet. There is a great conversation between the emperor and the poet wherein all kinds of things are discussed, especially the matter pertaining to the epic poem. Why does Virgil want to destroy his own life-time work? We don't get a clear answer, but if we may guess from his monologues and dialogues, he seems to think that what he has written has no relevance for the new era that he can see emerging on the horizon.

The interview with the king is friendly but is not without tension, for it is partly philosophical, partly personal, but partly also political. For example, here is an excerpt:

"The organization into a whole would never have taken place had not the individual soul found its immediate connection to the supernatural; only the work intended for direct service to the supernatural serves all earth-bound humanity as well."

"These are extremely dangerous and novel ideas, Virgil: they are derogatory to the state."

"Through them the state will perfect itself into a kingdom; from a state of citizens it will become a kingdom of men."

"You are shattering the structure of the state, you shatter it to a shapeless uniformity, you split up its ordinances, you destroy the firm texture of the people." (377)

Throughout the *Aeneid*, Virgil has identified Caesar with Aeneas; in the exploits of Octavius, he has seen the glory of the founding of Rome and the resurgence of the Roman nation. Thus the poem and the nation have become one. Knowing this—the poem as nation—Octavius will not let it be destroyed, but claims it on behalf of the Roman citizens for preservation. It is as though the poet has lost the right to his own creation to a superior power, namely the power of the nation enshrined in the corpus of the Caesar. It now becomes more and more clear that the dying Virgil wants to discard the poem for the very

reasons for which Octavius wants to preserve it—the identification of race and nationhood on the one hand and glory and military victory on the other.

At the very beginning of the novel, Virgil is disturbed by the mass frenzy of people waiting to receive the king and his royal entourage, including the poet himself; he thinks that in all his poetry he did nothing to address the violence of the mob. And in our side glance at modern history, we know that Broch is implying here the mass frenzy of all sorts—whipped up by race, religion, nationality and such other ideologies. In an argument with Lucius, Virgil says: "Beauty cannot live without approval, truth locks itself off from applause" (p.247).

Virgil asks two favours of the King: the freeing of his slave boy and show of mercy to the vanquished—"be lenient to the conquered and temper your arrogance to that end" (p.396). Both these point to the future—abolition of slavery and abandonment of a tooth for a tooth policy. We may remember how the *Aeneid* ends: Turnus has fallen on the ground and Aeneas doesn't know if he should kill him or not; and then he notices how Turnus had not only killed his friend Pallas but appropriated his trophy. In an aroused rage, Aeneas then sends his sword down into Turnus's chest. Virgil would like Octavian to represent the "changing of the times."

This, however, raises a question: does the novel endorse Virgil's view of the *Aeneid*? Does it approve of his desire that the epic be burnt since it belongs to the old world? We know that the world would have been poorer without the *Aeneid*. But then when Virgil himself did not like it for the reasons specified—and we tend to honour those reasons without argument—what makes us want it? I think the novel takes a larger historical view of the past according to which a change of time doesn't mean destruction of the past but redeeming its truth.

The Death of Virgil is very dense in its descriptions—the very opening paragraphs are an example of that, wherein is described the homecoming of the Roman fleet to the port of Brundisium. The emerging landscape is described from the point of view of Virgil and the description runs into several lengthy paragraphs each with periodic sentences. Here is an example: "Oh, unbridled became the desire to stretch the hand toward those still so distant shores, to reach into the darkness of the shrubbery, to feel the earth-born leaf between his fingers, to hold it tightly there forevermore—, the wish quivered in his hands, quivered in his fingers with uncontrollable desire toward the leafy branches, toward the flexible leaf-stems, toward the sharp-soft leaf edges, toward the firm living leaf-flesh, yearningly he felt it when he closed his eyes, and it was almost a sensual desire, sensually simple and grasping like his masculine, raw-boned peasant's fist, sensually savoring and sensitive like the slender-wristed nervousness of this same hand..." and so on and on (p.18). And then comes a page-length paragraph on this strange pulsation of the hand.

One can't read such a book continuously for a long time, one can only read a few pages of it at a time. Although there is a story, you very soon discover that it is not the story that keeps you going. There is some other sheer narrative power that sweeps over the reader—something beyond the story. It becomes orchestra and also painting across an immensely large canvas. The novel has been divided into four parts: Water—the Arrival, Fire—the Descent, Earth—the Expectation, and Air—the Homecoming. This gives a quartet-like structure to the novel, describing Virgil's arrival in Italy, his dark thoughts about hell, his ruminations about the world, especially his conversation with the Caesar and his vision of

the future, and finally, his withdrawal into "no thing," that is, his death. But the reading experience takes the whole narrative as an undulating ocean, oceanic.

Since the novel has been conceived in this style, one can read it over and over again. Of course, it is exhausting, but never boring; in fact, the novel seems to demand repeated reading. Since there is some deep thought in each page, part of the whole but also autonomous in a sense, one can return to it wherever one wants. In this, it is comparable to such massive works as Pound's *Cantos*, and Joyce's *Ulysses* and *Finnegan's Wake*. There is always some new discovery to be made in such returns, some new flash of insight to be gained. Their very difficulty is enticing.

All page references are to *The Death of Virgil*, trans. Jean Starr Untermyer. New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1965.