

Sarah Lawrence College

The Aesthetic Transubstantiation of Dantean Philosophy
in Hermann Broch's *Der Tod des Vergil*

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Dante's Encyclopedia: The Comedy and Its Intertexts

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In the essay “Broch’s Image of Vergil and Its Context”, the literary critic Theodore Ziolkowski argues that the early twentieth-century Austrian writer Hermann Broch, despite the titular concern of his 1945 novel *Der Tod des Vergil* (*The Death of Virgil*), had little interest in the historical Virgil or Latin literature more broadly: “Broch knew little and cared less about the historical Virgil, using him merely as a figure upon which to impose his own views and concerns.”¹ Ziolkowski emphasizes that Broch’s classical ignorance need not entail a negative assessment of the novel: he argues that the novel’s achievement is its “expression of the exigencies of its own age” rather than its engagement with literary history, and that it is in this expression that the novel earns its status as a classic on par with the works of Virgil himself.² Without wishing to dispute Ziolkowski’s argument regarding Broch’s lack of expertise on Latin literature—which he establishes convincingly—I would like to push back against the implicit conception of literary greatness accompanying his argument, which would suggest that a work becomes a classic by reflecting the exigencies of its own age *as opposed to* engaging with history or literary tradition, or that it is solely in breaking with that tradition that a text expresses the spirit of modernity. As Michèle Lowrie argues in an essay on *Der Tod des Vergil* in relation to the thought of Maurice Blanchot:

The classic gesture of the modern is the break with the past. This gesture always has a past, and the recognition of the inability to make a break, when every break repeats past breaks, allows for the peculiar character of the modern as a locus for negotiation between

¹ Ziolkowski, Theodore. “Broch’s Image of Vergil and Its Context.” *Modern Austrian Literature*, vol. 13, no. 4, 1980, pp. 1-30. *EBSCOhost*, search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=aph&AN=19055007&site=ehost-live: 19.

² *ibid.*: 22.

the new and the exhausted.³

If tradition is constituted by a series of breaks with itself—if even the classics are revolting against the influence of their forebearers—then the break with tradition is paradoxically a traditional gesture. For a text to reflect its own age, then, it must engage with its literary precedents, revealing the old in a new, radical light.

This is not to suggest that Broch, because of his ignorance surrounding the historical Virgil, failed to achieve such an engagement in *Der Tod des Vergil*. On the contrary, the novel's great achievement is its intensive formal confrontation with its precedents, transforming—and, as I will argue, transubstantiating—the literary tradition. Ziolkowski's dual focus on the biographical figure of Broch and what he did or did not know about the biographical figure of Virgil has the effect of reducing the literary tradition to its author's biographies; his essay is a work of literary history that excludes literary texts in favor of their authors' lives. *Der Tod des Vergil*, however, is a text devoted to the historical consciousness attainable through literary texts; it need not be bogged down by the accuracy of biographical factoids in order to engage convincingly with the literary tradition. Broch's representation of Virgil, I will argue, is less concerned with the historical Virgil than with the figure of Virgil as a literary construct, particularly insofar as he is represented as a proto-Christian in Dante Alighieri's *Commedia*. In this essay I will examine how Broch's text reflects a historical consciousness that is neither a mere repetition of convention nor a naïve break from tradition, but an active attempt to *transform* history *through* consciousness—through the modes of perception generated by literary form. I

³ Lowrie, Michèle. "Blanchot and the Death of Virgil." *Materiali i discussioni per l'analisi dei testi classici*, no. 52, 2004, pp. 211-255. *JSTOR*, jstor.org/stable/40236453: 211. See also Blanchot's own remarks on Broch's novel. (Blanchot, Maurice. *The Book to Come*. Translated by Charlotte Mandell, Stanford University, 2003: 117-125.)

will do so by tracing resonances between *Der Tod des Vergil* and Dante's *Commedia*, arguing that both texts are rooted in a shared philosophy of love and a related aesthetic-theological project of transubstantiating literary tradition.

The epigraph to *Der Tod des Vergil* consists of three quotations, each left untranslated from their source material. The first (from the *Aeneid*) is the fragment "...fato profugus...", meaning "fugitive of fate"; the second (also from the *Aeneid*) is the famous passage describing Aeneas's thrice-failed attempt to embrace the shade of his dead father when in the underworld. Together the passages emphasize the melancholy position of Virgil's hero, a fugitive or exile (like Dante's pilgrim) in the midst of life, condemned to piety and the mere enactment of divine-ordained fate. But these quotations are set against a third, which comes not from the *Aeneid* but from Dante's *Inferno*. In Allen Mandelbaum's English translation, the quoted lines are as follows:

My guide and I came on that hidden road
to make our way back into the bright world;
and with no care for any rest, we climbed—
he first, I following—until I saw,
through a round opening, some of those things
of beauty Heaven bears. It was from there
that we emerged, to see—once more—the stars.⁴

The passage is placed at the very end of *Inferno* and narrates the pilgrim's ascent from Hell to Purgatory—an ascent which Dante emphasizes is led by his guide, Virgil. Placed directly after the quotes from the *Aeneid*, the passage from *Inferno* presents an image of Virgil strikingly different from the hero of his most famous work. Whereas Aeneas is condemned to play out the forward-directional movement of a predetermined history, losing his loved ones to the force of

⁴ Alighieri, Dante. *Inferno*. Translated by Allen Mandelbaum, Bantam, 1980: canto XXXIV, lines 133-9.

time even when descending to the underworld, where one would think he might retrieve them for a final embrace, Dante's Virgil leads the ascent from that underworld to redemption through Purgatory. The epigraph of Broch's novel collapses the distinction between the author of the *Aeneid* and the guide of Dante's pilgrim while raising a question about the contradictory figure who emerges from this maneuver: how is it that the poet of ancient Rome, who wrote of a pious hero succumbing to the all-mighty force of history, became a figure of redemption, capable of leading the ascent from Hell, of resisting that force with faith in resurrection? How and when was the Virgil of the Greco-Roman tradition reborn as a Christian?

Der Tod des Vergil is in large part dedicated to the construction of a narrative that could account for that transition. Much of the text, which takes place on the final day of Virgil's life, is dedicated to providing a philosophical basis for the legend according to which the poet, on his deathbed, requested that the manuscript of the *Aeneid* be burned without publication. The musical structure of the novel is divided into four parts; it is in the second part where Virgil, while alone in his room as a guest at the imperial palace of Brindisi, undergoes the metaphysical crisis that results in this decision. The crisis is depicted by Broch in a form that dissolves the barrier between monologue and dialogue, stream-of-consciousness and third-person description, and it seems to repeatedly express the same underlying perspective in a series of evolving philosophical concepts. I will later explore the significance of the text's modernist aesthetic; for now, I would like to examine one of these concepts—beauty, which Broch opposes to love.

Broch's text adopts a consistently negative perspective on beauty, which is described as the "Insichgeschlossenheit des zeitgetragenen, zeiterstarrten Raumes...der sich an keiner Frage mehr erneuert, an keiner Erkenntnis mehr erweitert" ("self-containment of time-bearing, time-

ossified space...which renews itself no more with questions, expands no more with knowledge” [compare JSU 121]).⁵ Beauty, which appears in the form of a symbol producing a state of equilibrium (see *Tod* 114), is connected here to limitation, stasis, and self-containment; it freezes space into a form that is incapable of self-expansion, reduced to a conduit for the unravelling of time and deprived of the ability to affect that unravelling, which would require surpassing the boundaries of self-containment through knowledge. The beautiful symbol may be understood as a fetish or commodity, signifying a divine realm it cannot access, producing a sense of equilibrium and thereby pleasing its onlookers with an “irdische[n] Scheinunendlichkeit” (*Tod* 116; “earthly sham-infinity” [compare JSU 122]) contrasted to the development of human consciousness:

das wahre Wachstum,
das Wissenwachstum des erkennenden Menschen
unbegrenzt von Dauer und frei von Wiederholung sich in der Zeit entfaltet,
entfaltend die Zeit zur Zeitlosigkeit, so daß
sie, die jede Dauer verzehrt, mit wachsender Wirklichkeit
Grenze um Grenze, innerste wie äuserste, aufreißt und überschreitet,
Sinnbild um Sinnbild hinter sich zurücklassend (*Tod* 118).⁶

In surpassing the finite boundaries of the symbol, “true growth” disturbs the stasis of equilibrium and frees itself from mere repetition, from the unfolding of fate in time, by allowing the infinite to infiltrate and warp that unfolding. The predetermined movement of history can only be

⁵ Broch, Hermann. *Der Tod des Vergil*. Suhrkamp, 1976: 115. Hereafter cited parenthetically as “*Tod*”, plus page number(s). All translations from German are my own; for translations from *Der Tod des Vergil* I have consulted Jean Starr Untermeyer’s remarkable translation, which I have adapted to approximate more literally the German text, often at the expense of stylistic fluency. (Broch, Hermann. *The Death of Virgil*. Translated by Jean Starr Untermeyer, North Point, 1983.) The page number(s) from Untermeyer’s translation are cited parenthetically after my own, as above. Where a quotation stands alone as a complete sentence, its translation will appear in a footnote.

⁶ “the true growth, the growing knowledge of perceptive humans, / unlimited by duration and freed from repetition, unfolded itself in time / unfolded time to timelessness, so that / time, which consumed all duration, might with growing reality / tear through and overstep boundary after boundary, the innermost like the outermost, / leaving behind symbol after symbol” (compare JSU 124).

resisted in the destruction of the beautiful, in the disruption of a false equilibrium sustained by fixed images intended to generate comfortable pleasure.

This disruption of beauty, Broch emphasises, emerges in the act of love. As Virgil's metaphysical dialogic monologue continues, he is revisited by the name of Plotia, his former lover, who emerges from the depths of his memory to enrich his self-knowledge. He addresses Plotia thus:

[O]h, verlorenes Sein, vertrauteste Fremdheit, fremdeste Vertrautheit, du fernste Nähe, allernächste aller Fernen, erstes und letztes Lächeln der Seele in ihre Ernsthaftigkeit, du, oh du, die du alles warst und bist, vertraut und fremd und ein nahfernes Lächeln, du schicksalstragende Blume, ich konnte dein Leben nicht in mich eindringen lassen ob seiner überschweren Ferne, ob seiner überschweren Fremdheit, ob seiner überschweren Nähe und Vertrautheit, ob seines überschweren Nachtlächelns, ob des Schicksals, ob deines Schicksals, das du in dir trugst und immer tragen wirst, unerreichbar für dich, unerreichbar für mich, das ich nicht auf mich nehmen durfte, da seine überschwere Unerreichbarkeit mein Herz gesprengt hätte, und ich habe bloß deine Schönheit, nicht dein Leben gesehen! (*Tod* 140)⁷

The paradoxical distant nearness of the loved one emphasizes a radical alterity at the core of intimacy, indeed at the core of one's own being. The substance of selfhood is negativity: each subject is Other to its own self. Thus the experience of intimacy—of nearness—emerges in the form of love, when we are confronted with the alterity, the foreignness and the distance, of another: what is nearest to us is precisely the Other. In this way, love is a movement beyond the static being of selfhood: the identity of self and Other is attained in the form of the radical alterity of the self, and thus depends upon the eradication of a fixed or self-identical self-

⁷ “[O]h, lost being, most intimate foreignness, most foreign intimacy, you furthest nearness, the nearest of all things far, first and last smile of the soul in its earnestness, you, oh you, who you always were and are, intimate and foreign and a near-far smile, you fate-bearing flower, I could not let your life irrupt into me because of its too-heavy distance, because of its too-heavy foreignness, because of its too-heavy nearness and intimacy, because of its too-heavy nocturnal smile, because of the fate, because of your fate, which you carried in yourself and will always carry, unreachable for you, unreachable for me, the fate I could not take unto myself, for its too-heavy unreachableness would have demolished my heart, and I have merely seen your beauty, not your life!” (compare JSU 147).

conceptualization, its irruption by the Other in a loving embrace. And when the finite self is irrupted by the Other, it is irrupted by the *infinite*, by the *absoluteness* of alterity; it is irrupted by that which exists beyond the temporal framework in which our finite lives play out their respective destinies. In love, then, the infinite is unleashed and embodied in the realm of the finite, with the effect that the temporal unfolding of the finite is transformed, that fate—the forward-directional movement of history—is altered. In the passage above, Broch describes this phenomenon as the adoption of the fate of the Other and the corresponding demolition of oneself, of one’s own fate. Virgil, out of fear of this experience of transcendent self-destruction, failed to take on and embody the transformative fate of his lover; he bore witness only to the static image of her beauty—which held things in an illusory equilibrium and condemned them to the enactment of their respective destinies—and was unable to confront the intimate, infinite alterity, the life of the Other, giving rise to that beauty.

This philosophy of love and its relation to the disruption of fate—to the free will—is also found in Dante’s *Purgatorio*. While on the third terrace of Purgatory, the terrace of the wrathful, the pilgrim comes across the shade Marco Lombardo, a nobleman from Lombardy, who gives a discourse on the freedom of the will. Lombardo explains: “On greater power and a better nature / you, who are free, depend; that Force engenders / the mind in you, outside the Heavens’ sway.”⁸ Lombardo paradoxically suggests that freedom from “the Heavens’ sway” is dependent on or attached to the force of God. The apparent contradiction between free will and divine predestination is resolved by the suggestion that, when its potential is most fully realized, free will is an unperverted expression of God’s will. Lombardo goes on to explain:

⁸ Alighieri, Dante. *Purgatorio*. Translated by Allen Mandelbaum, Bantam, 1984: canto VXi, lines 79-81. Hereafter cited parenthetically as “*Purg.*”, plus the canto and line numbers.

Issuing from His hands, the soul—on which
 He thought with love before creating it—
 is like a child who weeps and laughs in sport;
 that soul is simple, unaware; but since
 a joyful Maker gave it motion, it
 turns willingly to things that bring delight.
 At first it savors trivial goods; these would
 beguile the soul, and it runs after them,
 unless there's guide or rein to rule its love (*Purg.*, XVI: 85-90).

The substance of the soul, created by an act of divine love, is unaware of its own origins, of its own divine material. The loving act of creation predetermines the soul's pursuit of pleasure and the fulfillment of its desire, but humans have the freedom to choose where to direct that pursuit—and, because the starting-point for a soul is ignorance regarding its own substance, it does not intuitively know to seek pleasure in the divine love that created it.

In this way free will becomes linked to the metaphysics of Christian love. The connection becomes clearer in the following canto, when Virgil—in a discourse mirroring Lombardo's own—speaks of the difference between natural and mental love:

The natural is always without error,
 but mental love may choose an evil object
 or err through too much or too little vigor.
 As long as it's directed toward the First Good
 and tends toward secondary goods with measure,
 it cannot be the cause of evil pleasure...
 From this you see that—of necessity—
 love is the seed in you of every virtue
 and of all acts deserving punishment (*Purg.*, XVII: 94-105).

Though every act is, at its most fundamental level, an expression of God's love and God's will, humans have freedom regarding the mode of that expression; they may turn their desire to their Maker and his presence in earthly things, or they may turn their desire toward those earthly things *at the expense of* the divine presence within them. The latter, an excessive focus on

secondary goods, is analogous to what Broch terms “beauty”. By focusing too strongly on the earthly appearance of things and trying to derive pleasure from them alone, one neglects the presence of the absolute behind such appearances. Dante’s understanding of a love “directed toward the First Good,” meanwhile, is related to Broch’s use of the word “love”. This is perhaps more apparent in *Paradiso*, when the pilgrim, speaking to St. John, professes:

love must be imprinted in me; for
 the good, once it is understood as such,
 enkindles love; and in accord with more
 goodness comes greater love. And thus the mind
 of anyone who can discern the truth
 on which this proof is founded must be moved
 to love, more than it loves all else, that Essence
 which is preeminent.⁹

The pilgrim emphasizes that the love of God is imprinted on his soul: it is his very internal substance, in a manner similar to Broch’s notion that what lies beyond the self is internal to it as a distant nearness. For this reason, self-knowledge—knowledge that the self is composed of the essence of the absolute—leads naturally to love, to the desire for pleasure derived not from static images of equilibrium but rather from a transcendent leap beyond the boundaries of self-conceptualization into the dark territory of that absolute essence, that intimate alterity.

Dante and Broch do seem to diverge on the question of how precisely free will relates to this love-beauty duality. For Dante, humans have the freedom to direct their desires to the earthly or to the divine, and err in choosing the former; for Broch, freedom is cultivated only when they choose the latter. Indeed, it is perhaps less appropriate to speak of “freedom” in connection with Broch, insofar as that term implies something *possessed* by humans; in *Der Tod des Vergil*,

⁹ Alighieri, Dante. *Paradiso*. Translated by Allen Mandelbaum, Bantam, 1984: canto XXVI, lines 27-34.

destiny is disrupted only in the act of love—which, if it can only be performed by humans, nevertheless demands the sacrifice of the human, the abandonment of one’s self-conceptualization to the Other. But this difference should not hold us back from further pursuing the resonances between the two authors; as I will suggest, the ways in which Broch amends and transforms Dantean material is integral to his method of engaging with the literary tradition. Moreover, Broch’s amendment to Dante’s philosophy of free will is an extension of the logic beneath their shared philosophy of love; indeed, for Dante the fullest or most ethical expression of one’s free will is attained in love for the divine, in aligning one’s will to God’s. Broch’s qualification is that this *fullest* expression of the will is the *only* expression of the will, for without the irruption of the absolute into the finite realm in the radical act of love, we are condemned to unspooling the predetermined force of linear time.

Thus there is a clear connection, even an identity, between the Virgil who, in *Der Tod des Vergil*, undergoes an existential crisis revealing the radicality of human love, and the Virgil who, in *Purgatorio*, lectures the pilgrim on the omnipresence of divine love. As I mentioned, Broch also connects this Virgil to the Virgil who, according to legend, requested that the *Aeneid* be burnt prior to its publication. The existential crisis depicted by Broch does not only make him capable of guiding the pilgrim through Hell and Purgatory and lecturing him on divine love; it also provides the philosophical justification for Virgil’s rejection of the *Aeneid*. It would not be difficult to argue that Broch denigrates art and aesthetics as a form of beauty hindering radical acts of beauty-destroying love, and this would certainly be in line with how Broch himself spoke about the work: he even attributed a since-disproven origin for the idea of the work to a short story he wrote for radio, in which—according to the literary scholar Kathleen Komar—he hoped

to express his “growing conviction that to write literature during a time of such intense moral and political crisis as the 1930s was an act of immorality in itself.”¹⁰

This argument ultimately reduces the novel to a lengthy lament concerning its own political impotence, while the text itself adopts a much more subtle perspective on the relation between art and beauty. There are points in the novel where Broch crucially suggests that artistic creation engages in the boundary-destroying movement that disrupts and overcomes beauty, even using the term “Unkunst” (“non-art”) as synonymous with the beautiful:

Oh, an seinem eigenen Leben, am eigenen Werk hatte er die Verlockung der Unkunst erfahren, die Vertauschungsverlockung, die das Erzeugte an die Stelle der Erzeugenden setzt, das Spiel an die Stelle der Gemeinschaft, das Erstarrte an die Stelle der lebendig fortwirkenden Schöpfung, das Schöne an die Stelle der Erkenntnis (*Tod* 135).¹¹

Beauty is here presented as an ossification of artistic creation, which takes part in an infinite creative life-force that expands the realm of the living and resists the mere enactment of predetermined history, the repetition of finite symbols. It is in aligning itself to beauty, as opposed to the regenerative force of artistic creation, that art becomes non-art. If Virgil has experienced the temptation of non-art, then Broch further seems to (boldly) suggest that he gives into this temptation—that the *Aeneid* is, to some degree, a work of non-art—or, at least, that the historical conditions of the pre-Christian classical era demanded non-art in poetry.

This is perhaps most apparent in a section where Virgil reflects on the significance of Aeneas’s renunciation of love for Dido and his duty-bound subservience to fate:

¹⁰ Komar, Kathleen. “The Politics of Subject Matter: History as Subject in Hermann Broch’s *Der Tod des Vergil*.” *Modern Austrian Literature*, vol. 18, no. 1, pp. 51-61. *EBSCOHost*, search-ebSCOhost-com.remote.sl.c.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=aph&AN=19100984&site=ehost-live: 51.

¹¹ “Oh, in his own life, in his own work he had experienced the temptation of non-art, the temptation of deception which puts the produced in the place of production, the game in the place of communion, the ossified in the place of the living continuous creation, the beautiful in the place of knowledge” (compare JSU 142).

[D]em Heroenpaar war nur ein einziger Augenblick der Glückswirklichkeit beschieden gewesen, nur ein einziger Augenblick, in dem Didos Vergangenheitsschicksal mit dem Zukunftsschicksal des Äneas sich hatte vereinigen dürfen, verblaßt das Vergangenheitsbild des Jugendgeliebten, des frühverblichenen Sychäus, verblaßt das vom Schicksalsspruch der Götter befohlene Zukunftsbild italischer Herrschaft... trotzdem nur diesen einen einzigen Augenblick lang (*Tod* 280).¹²

In Dido's and Aeneas's experience of united love, the unspooling of linear history is disrupted: past and future, self and other become united in a radical encounter that annuls the dictatorial power of the Greco-Roman gods. But pious Aeneas is ultimately more obedient to the latter than he is faithful to the radical experience of his love—and this is where the *Aeneid* falls into the temptation of un-art. Broch's depiction of Virgil's rejection of the poem is not a declaration of the impotence of art and literature altogether, but rather a rejection of the pre-Christian, classical conception of poetry, whose heroic figures renounced the radicality of the loving instant in order to be subservient to the destructive will of the pagan gods, to the linear force of history. Thus, in his conversation with the emperor Augustus, Virgil declares:

je erkenntnisbewußter eine Kunst, vor allem also die Dichtung ist, desto genauer weiß sie, daß sie mit ihrer Gleichniskraft nicht an die neue Erkenntnis heranlangt; sie weiß um deren Kommen, aber sie weiß ebendarum auch, daß sie vor diesem stärkeren Gleichnis abzutreten hat (*Tod* 322).¹³

The *Aeneid* must be burned because Virgil reads in it the symptom of the pre-Christian era of which it is necessarily a part. Broch bestows upon the poet the knowledge of the coming

¹² “[O]nly one single moment of the reality of happiness [*Glückswirklichkeit*] had been bestowed upon the heroic couple, only one single moment in which Dido's past fate had been allowed to unite with the future fate of Aeneas—faded the past image of young loved ones, the early lost Sychaeus, faded the future image of Italian sovereignty ordained by the fate-speech of the gods... yet only this one single moment long” (compare JSU 298). The German compound term “Glückswirklichkeit” can be translated either as “reality of happiness” or “reality of luck,” thus emphasizing that the loving encounter between Dido and Aeneas was itself a contingent product of the predestination that it annuls.

¹³ “The more conscious of perception art—and before all else poetry—is, the more precisely it knows that it does not attain the new perception with its power of allegory; it knows about its [the new perception's] coming, but it knows even so that it must abdicate before this more powerful allegory” (compare JSU 342).

redemption of humankind by Christ and thereby allows him a historical consciousness consisting of the knowledge of his own artwork's limitation by the finite, socio-temporal conditions in which it has been produced.

By thus painting Virgil as a proto-Christian, Broch not only collapses the distinction between the historical Virgil and his representation in Dante's *Commedia*; he also allows multiple temporalities—the era of Augustus's reign, the late medieval period of Dante, and Broch's own early twentieth century¹⁴—to converge in the text. Broch addresses this philosophy of history in an essay on literature in its relation to myth:

[N]ur durch Projizierung des Menscheistes in die Geschehnisse ist historische Erkenntnis erzielbar, nur hierdurch läßt sich der anonyme Geschehenstrom in »Einheiten« zerlegen und gliedern, in jene historischen Einheiten, deren Wiederausammenfassung das Gesamtbild der Geschichte sichtbar macht.¹⁵

In other words, Broch takes separated snippets from the stream of history and reagggregates them within a singular text, bringing them to a point of convergence or an embrace. When he does so, he includes events that are not normally considered strictly historical, such as the time when Virgil lectured Dante on the philosophy of divine love or the time when Christ redeemed humankind; he thus collapses the distinction between history and its literary and theological representations, thereby allowing his own text a place in the very stream of time that it disassembles and reassembles. The effect of this (according to Broch) is that the total image of

¹⁴ It is beyond the scope of this paper to explore how Broch uses the reign of Augustus as a mirror for his own time, suffice it to say that the collapsed distinction between the two eras is philosophically analogous to the manner in which his representation of Virgil is a composite of the historical and Dantean figures of the poet.

¹⁵ Broch, Hermann. *Schriften zur Literatur 2: Theorie*. Edited by Paul Michael Lützeler, Suhrkamp, 1975: 205. "Only through the projection of the human soul into passed occurrences [*Geschehnisse*] is historical perception attainable, only in this way is the anonymous stream of passage [*Geschehenstrom*] disassembled and cut up into 'unities', into those historical unities whose reagggregation makes the total image of history visible."

history becomes visible; in other words, these snippets of historical time are irrupted with eternity, with the absolute, upon their convergence with one another. Broch's philosophy of history is an extension of his interpretation of the Dantean philosophy of love: separated snippets of historical time—distinct finite entities—embrace, and in doing so they recognize their shared essence—the anonymous stream of time's passage, the transience of all finite things—transcending their finitude and allowing for the radical entrance of the infinite onto the stage of history, whose linear-temporal unspooling of fate is thereby disrupted.

Given the emphasis on theological concerns and the coming of Christ throughout *Der Tod des Vergil*, it may be helpful to recast Broch's philosophy of history in Christian theological terms. Specifically, I will argue that the dismemberment and reaggregation of history that Broch practices in the novel—as well as the Dantean philosophy of love with which it is connected—may be described as an aesthetic of transubstantiation. Transubstantiation describes the real presence of Christ's body and blood in the bread and wine of the Eucharist. I will extend the descriptive scope of this philosophy in order to provide a theological framework for discussing literary aesthetics; doing so will allow me to move beyond the question of philosophical content that Broch borrows from Dante into the formal properties of *Der Tod des Vergil*, such as the extraordinarily long sentences, the unconventional use of paragraph and line breaks, and the function of repetition in the text's structural organization.

The text includes a direct reference to the transubstantiation of the wine of the Eucharist directly after Virgil first decides that the *Aeneid* should be burned, which is compared to a Christ-like sacrifice:

es ging um die Wiederherstellung der Opfereinheit, um die Wiederherstellung der

Sinnbildhaftigkeit, in der die Einheit sich spiegelt, es ging um die Wiederüberwindung des Opferrausches, des Blutrausches, des Weinrausches, es ging um das Weltenopfer der eigenen Selbstausslöschung, um die schöpferische Auslöschung des Gewesenen und Geschaffenen, in der er, Opfernder und Opfergabe zugleich, Vater und Kind zugleich, Mensch und Werk zugleich, selber zum Gebet werden soll...auf daß im letzten Aufrauschen der Dunkelheitstiefe, verdoppelt aufsteigend in der tierisch-pflanzlichen Kreatur, das Blut im Weine, der Wein im Blute gespiegelt, das äonenfern Unerahnbare sich echogleich lichtklingend dem Erschaubare entlöse (*Tod* 175).¹⁶

The effect of the self-effacing, sacrificial act is to allow the divine unity to enter into the materiality of finite symbols. Perhaps playing with the Christian typology of the story of Abraham and Isaac, Broch suggests that the unity of the Father and the Son, the identity of the divine and the human in the dual nature of Christ, is attained in the repetition (and consummation) of the sacrifice. Through the kenotic self-effacement undergone by Christ on the Cross—or, in this instance, by Virgil in his request to have the *Aeneid* burned—divergent symbols are united and their shared, intangible essence is revealed. The fullness of God is woven into the materiality of its symbols, the texture of finite things, when those things are reflected against each other: if the wine becomes blood and the blood becomes wine, it is because in their mutual reflection—in their symbolic embrace—their unity in the divine irrupts into the realm of finite materiality. In this manner, Broch’s literary reinterpretation (his transubstantiation) of the Eucharistic philosophy of transubstantiation reflects his transubstantiation of the Dantean

¹⁶ “It had to do with the restoration of the sacrificial unity, with the restoration of the symbol’s materiality [*Sinnbildhaftigkeit*], in which the unity reflects itself, it had to do with the re-overcoming of the sacrificial inebriation, the blood-inebriation, the wine-inebriation, it had to do with the world sacrifice of one’s own self-effacement...in which he, both offerer and offering, both father and child, both human and work, should himself become supplication...so that in the final up-rush of darkness’s depths, doubled ascending in beastlike-plantlike creature, the blood reflected in wine, the wine reflected in blood, the eons-old undividable resolved in the emergence of the perceptible” (compare JSU 182). “Sinnbildhaftigkeit” is a play on the words “Sinnbild” (symbol) and “Bildhaftigkeit” (which loosely translates to “pictorial quality” or “imagistic vividness”). The final clause of the German relies on numerous untranslatable words invented by Broch; in my translation I have tried to convey the full scope of associations these words carry, at the expense of accuracy in conveying the German grammar.

philosophy of love: in both, the uniting embrace of finite entities takes the form of a sacrificial self-effacement that allows the absolute to burst onto the stage of world history. Through the reflection of Christ in Virgil, of Virgil in Dante, and of Dante in Broch, each of these discrete beings, separated by the stream of literary-theological history, is effaced, and the radical alterity of the divine essence that unites them is unleashed.

As I have suggested, the philosophy of transubstantiation is not merely helpful as a description of Broch's engagement with literary or theological traditions (and particularly his engagement with Dante's *Commedia*); it also serves to describe certain formal properties of the text itself. To develop this argument, I will discuss the structure of the novel's fourth and final section, entitled "Äther—Die Heimkehr" ("Air—The Homecoming"¹⁷), in which Broch depicts Virgil's death. After the conversation at the end of the third section descends into indiscernible speech as Virgil's condition worsens, the fourth section opens with the question, "Murmelte noch etwas?" (*Tod* 413; "Did something still murmur?" [compare JSU 439]). This murmuring is then transferred onto the image of rolling waves that comes to Virgil in his semi-conscious state: "weich dahinrollend, Murrewelle um Murrewelle, klein eine jede von ihnen, unermesslich ausgedehnt die Kreise ihrer Gesamtheit" (*ibid.*; "rolling on softly, murmur-wave after murmur-wave, each of them small, the cycle of their totality immeasurably vast" [compare JSU 439]). This image of the sea at the opening of the fourth section reflects the image of Virgil on a ship that opens the novel as a whole; the image repeats itself and is transformed in a new context, the context of Virgil's death. Within this new context, the symbol of the ocean and the rolling waves

¹⁷ "Äther" can, of course, also be translated as "ether," but—given the names of the three previous sections ("Wasser" ["Water"], "Feuer" ["Fire"], and "Erde" ["Earth"])—I find it appropriate, following Untermeyer, to translate it as "air".

takes on a new meaning as a metaphor for language: as speech descends into murmuring, the definite meanings generated by the grammatical interrelation of words descends into the indefinite, expansive rhythms which, like the waves under description, provide language with its movement, unspooling the linguistic chain in time. Already, then, we see the aesthetic of transubstantiation at work: the symbol of the water in the fourth section reflects against its earlier appearance in the novel's opening to reveal the boundless, empty stream of which both symbols consist—the unfathomable infinity upon which the text floats.

Broch goes on to develop the meanings associated with this symbol to the point of their own dissolution. He begins by describing Plotius—whose speech in the room with Virgil provides the murmuring that inaugurated this semi-conscious vision to begin with—as the oarsman of a ship, departing from the shores of familiarity: “Die Ufer blieben zurück, und das war wie ein leichtes Abschiednehmen von dem menschlichen Sein und Hausen, das dort vonstatten ging, Abschied im verwandelt Unwandelbaren, Abschied von der Mannigfaltigkeit alles Vertrauten” (*Tod* 414).¹⁸ In the novel's characteristic style, the play with contradiction in the notion of a “verwandelt Unwandelbaren” (“transformed untransformability”) hints at a realm beyond the capacity of language to represent—which here is nevertheless represented by the symbol of the ocean whose waves set language in motion. The farewell from the diversity of familiar things is a recognition of those things' shared essence in the oceanic depths of that unfathomable realm. The text thus develops further the symbol of its own transubstantiating aesthetic; but the symbol of that aesthetic, according to the philosophy in which it is grounded, is

¹⁸ “The shores were left behind, and that was like a light farewell-taking from the human life [*Sein*] and living that went on there, a farewell in transformed untransformability, a farewell from the diversity of all familiar things” (compare JSU 440).

itself an empty, finite container, whose unity with other symbols may be unleashed only in its self-effacing dissolution. Thus the ship on the ocean multiplies exponentially, until there is a fleet of farewell-takers so large “daß das unendliche Meer sich zur zweiten Unendlichkeit weiten mußte, . . . daß es schien keine Grenze zwischen dem Flüssigen und dem Luftigen mehr gab” (ibid.; “that the infinite ocean had to widen to a second infinity, . . . that it seemed there was no longer a boundary between the liquid and the airy” [compare JSU 440-1]). The novel’s first and final parts—“Wasser” (“Water”) and “Äther” (“Air”)—dissolve into a unity; these symbols of the infinite must efface their symbolic finitude in a loving embrace in order to become symbolic of a greater, second infinity, one that is composed of the communion of all symbols. The now-unified duality of the ocean and the air is then replaced by a new duality of light and shadow, the image of which is developed even further to the point of its own dissolution, culminating in the paragraph’s final sentence: “Sie waren in die zweite Unendlichkeit eingegangen” (*Tod* 418).¹⁹

At this point there is a paragraph break. The next paragraph—the second of eight in the novel’s final section—describes a “Stille innerhalb der Stille” (ibid.; “stillness within stillness” [compare JSU 444]), a new symbol whose textual development and deconstruction mirrors the movement of the first paragraph. The function of the paragraph break is to produce the effect of an almost cinematic cut disrupting the organic unravelling of the novel’s language. These broad structural characteristics—the unravelling of language and its interruption by paragraph breaks—determine the composition of the novel’s fourth section, and indeed the composition of the text as a whole. If they are in some sense the basic two elements that define

¹⁹ “They were shrunk into the second infinity” (compare JSU 444).

the movement of most prose texts, then in *Der Tod des Vergil* they are brought to radical extremes: Broch's sentences span numerous pages, and paragraph breaks are sometimes inserted before those sentences have the chance to end, interrupting the flow of linguistic movement. Thus the composition of the novel is exemplary of Broch's philosophy of history: the sentences unravel the predetermined stream of history and the paragraph breaks irrupt against the stream with the introduction of the new, the disruption of fate. According to Broch's philosophy of love, as I have argued, this irruption of the new is unleashed upon the stream of history in the radical embrace of loving self-effacement; paragraph breaks, if they are truly disruptions of fate, should mark such moments. However, in my analysis of the paragraph on the symbol of the ocean, I aimed to show that these moments—where opposing symbols are reflected against each other and unified in a loving embrace—occur *internal to the paragraph*, without the presence of a break. Moreover, the paragraph breaks sometimes follow so closely upon one another that they become line breaks, and the rhythms of the novel's resulting poetic sections rival the sense of organic unspooling in its long sentences. Thus the two basic structural elements efface their constitutive characteristics and adopt the characteristics of the other, thereby becoming unified: the flow of a single sentence is composed of the interruptions and digressions of clause after clause, while paragraph and line breaks follow so closely after each other that they give rise to the very rhythms they disrupt. If Broch's philosophy of history distinguishes between the linear unravelling of fate and its radical disruption by a unity unleashed in the act of love, then the ultimate unity is the unity between these two divergent temporalities, where we are fated to radical love, and where that love enacts the fate to which we are subjected. The formal properties of *Der Tod des Vergil* approach such a unity.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to analyze the formal properties of the *Commedia* with the same level of inquiry I have applied to *Der Tod des Vergil*. Nevertheless, a brief concluding reference to the opening of *Purgatorio*'s canto XI will show that an aesthetic of transubstantiation can be observed in Dante's own work. The canto begins with an adaptation of the Lord's Prayer, which is fit into the *terza rima* of the *Commedia*; in this manner the substance of the prayer is transubstantiated into the form—the body—of Dante's poetry. The phrase "Give us this day our daily bread" is changed (in Mandelbaum's translation) to "Give unto us this day the daily manna" (*Purg.*, XI: 13); this substitution of "bread" for "manna"—the substance that, according to the Hebrew Bible, sustained the Jews in their forty years of exile—underscores Dante's own exilic perspective. In this manner the familiarity of the Lord's prayer is warped by the unfamiliar (the exilic); and this is by no means Dante's only amendment. A series of digressions elaborating the poet's theology extend the prayer to more than twice its regular length, perhaps reflecting Virgil's later suggestion that love "expands upon" its object (*Purg.*, XVI: 23). The transubstantiation of the Lord's Prayer into a form easily sublated into the context of the *Commedia* can thus be read as a poetic act of love; the encounter between the two texts problematizes the isolable identity of Dante's poetry without merely repeating the familiar prayer, instead giving rise to an irruption of the new.

Of course, Dante's own aesthetic of transubstantiation is markedly different from Broch's modernist formalism, thus marking a break between *Der Tod des Vergil* and the *Commedia*. It is, however, precisely the two texts' alterity that assures the radicality of their own encounter and the intimacy that binds them together. Broch's aesthetic, as I have argued, is rooted in the tradition it disrupts; indeed, it is precisely this disruption of tradition that secures the place of

Der Tod des Vergil within it, for the literary tradition is composed of nothing if not a series of disruptions, unleashed when two texts—separated from one another by the stream of history—make love.