

Art and Criticism: Emergence of the Virgil's Ghost in Hermann Broch's Novel "The Death of Virgil"

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Abstract— Art and criticism are twins that never leave each other. Although criticism was not initially called "criticism", the mechanism of criticism emerged - without a name- along with the emergence of the first works of art. The pleasure each person derives from a common art and/or literary work may differ from one another's. Therefore, it is inevitable to make different interpretations of the same artwork. Criticism is made to reveal the strengths and/or weaknesses of an artwork. Every artist should strive for perfection to make his artworks better. A real artist produces his works for himself first and then for art lovers and the public. After being satisfied with his work, the artist presents his work to the public. In many cases, the artist avoids expressing weaknesses of his work. Therefore, artists who criticize their work are rarely encountered. The criticisms of an artist's work are mostly made by third parties.

Virgil (70–19 B.C.) was the most famous poet of the Augustus period during the Roman Empire. Virgil is regarded as a classic poet for Latin and European literature, and his most important epic poem "The Aeneid" is regarded as a classic artwork for European literature, too. Hermann Broch's novel "The Death of Virgil" focuses on Virgil's order "Burn the Aeneid!" and criticism of art and poetry concerning this order. Virgil goes through a crisis on the triangle of poetry, death and aesthetics in the last hours of his life. Virgil's criticisms of art and poetry through his epic poem "The Aeneid" during the conversation with his friends Lucius Varius, Plotius and Sezar Augustus are important in terms of showing his viewpoint towards his poems. Hermann Broch makes Virgil speak in his book, which is about the last eighteen hours of Virgil's life, and Virgil is ruthlessly criticizing his own work. In this study prominent aspects of Herman Broch's criticism on poetry and art will be discussed by taking the words right out of Virgil's mouth.

Index Terms—Virgil, The Aeneid, The Death of Virgil, Hermann Broch, Art and Criticism.

I. INTRODUCTION

For a poet, refusing his own poetry is as difficult as someone's rejection of his own child. Because real poetry is a fruit of great sorrows that drown people or joys that thrill them with excitement, or a result of other real emotions. The emergence of poetry is important because true poetry is a consequence of such extraordinary experiences. The Turkish national poet Mehmet

Akif Ersoy expresses this situation in his divan called Safahat saying that poetry is a product of feeling:

They say that poetry is made up of tears, I do not know whether it is true or not, only I would say that all my artworks are tears of my weakness! (Ersoy; 39).

According to Amir al-Shuara Ahmad Shawqi, one of Egypt's most famous poets in the last century, poetry cannot be tearless, emotionless or numb:

Poetry is tears, conscience and sense/ did I say what I feel, I wish I could know it! (Shawqi; 431).

Emily Dickinson remarks the following while she explains the difference between good poetry and bad poetry:

If I read a book and it makes my whole body so cold no fire can ever warm me, I know that is poetry. If I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off, I know that is poetry... (Dickinson; 315).

A poet cannot write poetry quickly without suffering; contrary to popular belief, he writes it after a troublesome process under the influence of a strong feeling born into his inner world. With inspiration, the poet's effort makes the poetry perfect. The poet's getting out of his hermitage can only take place when the poem is completed and when he takes it into his own hands. It is difficult to deny easily something that is earned with such effort. For poets, literate fans and people who delight in poetry, having a new poem is like having a new child. Once a lovable child is held in arms and loved and he/she cannot be dropped from hands, so is poetry, and once it is heard and listened to, it ties tongues into knots. In this respect, it is not easy to deny a true poem. When the poet sometimes corrects his religious experience or changes his beliefs, he may deny his old poems that are not appropriate for his new life, and may refuse to write poetry. Necip Fazıl Kısakürek, one of the most important figures of Turkish poetry in the 20th century, expresses his remorse about his past life in his book entitled Çile (Ordeal):

For thirty years my watch has been running and I have been standing idly

And I have been flying kites unaware of the heavens. (Kısakürek; 35).

Necip Fazıl turned his face towards Islam after a period of depression he had in his life (Çoban; 69), and stated in his testament that he disowned his early poems and works that were contrary to teaching of Islam (antoloji.com).

Sometimes a poet may regret the damage he inflicts on people with his poetry. Al-Farazdaq says in his ode, where he

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expresses regret for the satire of people:

Have not you seen me that I promised my Lord while I was standing between Ritaj and Maqam,

That I will never curse a Muslim and will not have bad words come out of my mouth.

....

O Devil, I have obeyed you seventy years, when the end of my life has come to an end,

I have fled to my Lord and realized that I will face my death (Al-Farazdaq; 405-407).

Virgil's order "*Burn the Aeneid!*" and his denial of his most famous work can be considered in this context. It is said that the reason why Virgil gave this order was partly due to incomplete situation of Aeneid and partly due to his dislike of some parts of it (ancient-literature.com). John Dreyden, the Aeneid's translator into English states that Virgil asked in his testament and last will that the Aeneid be burned because he saw it '*as an imperfect poem*' (Virgil, 1909; 19). Hermann Broch is trying to shed some light on it in his novel which is based on some historical facts. In this study, art criticism made by having Virgil talk about it will be handled in different ways.

However, poets - even if it is not a very common phenomenon - may cease to write poetry of their own will. If a poet sees a better artwork than his own poetry and if the quality of his work is not match for the high quality of that artwork, it may prevent him from writing poetry. One example is poet Lebid bin Rebia, a poet of Muallaqa in the Jahiliyyah period, who ceased to write poetry after being honored with Islam. When the second Muslim Caliph Umar ask Lebid bin Rebia about his poetry in Islamic age via one of his governors, he responded to him saying "*Allah gave me the Surahs of Bakara and Al-i Imran instead of poetry*" (Al- Jomahi; 135).

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II. LITERARY REVIEW

Virgil is one of the best-known poets in Western literature. *The Aeneid*, an epic poem written by Virgil is also a milestone in western literature. Many western writers refer to Virgil in their works. T. S. Eliot, when he was asked "*What is a classic?*" he replied that "*A classic can occur only when a civilization is mature, when a language and literature are mature; and it must be the work of mature mind*" (Virgil, 1996; xii). According to him, Virgil and Virgil's epic poem, *The Aeneid* possess these qualities and he stated that "*Our classic, the classic of all Europe, is Virgil*" (Virgil, 1996; xii). In *Divine Comedy*, Dante chose Virgil as a guide in his journey to the Hell (Alighieri; 38), and his choice was a diligent choice. It is no doubt that the person whom the poet wants to accompany himself in his

journey would be one of his admired ones, whose poems had become eternal. Dante describes himself as the sixth of a group of famous poets, along with Homer, Horatius, Ovidius, Lucanus and Virgil above all (Alighieri; 58), and this explains why he chose him as a guide in his journey. In Dante's first Cantus of the *Divine Comedy*, Virgil is described as "the honor and leader of all poets:

"O you who make me pursue what he wrote, / who aroused my effort and my affection/ O who is the honor of all minstrels, and their leader.

You are my master, my pen, the one who gave me honor / The one who gave me that beautiful style..."(Alighieri; 37).

According to philologist commentators following Vergilius, Virgil's three works *Bucolica*, *Georgica* and *Aeneid* are ideal examples of three basic styles - simple, medium and high style (qt. in. Umunç; 7). When Virgil ordered '*Burn the Aeneid!*' he actually wanted to destroy the most stylistic one among his poems. This is an extraordinary situation. In the masterpiece of Miguel de Cervantes, *Don Quixote* said in response to a young poet: "*I do not dislike your modesty, it is a virtue not often found among poets; for almost every one of them thinks himself the greatest in the world.*"(Cervantes; 326), and there is a grain of truth in it. Poets can see themselves as more talented and superior than other people.

When Virgil tells his friends Plotius Tucca and Lucius Varius that he thinks his time for death has come, and "*I will die, perhaps right now, but I will burn Aeneid before I die...*", Plotius says that Aeneid is no longer his work; it has become a common property of the society (Broch; 233). Virgil replies that the world will not change with a few verses, but Plotius argues against Virgil's words and says that Aeneid cannot be described as a few verses (Broch; 233). It is interesting that Virgil describes his own masterpiece, one of the best-known classic epics in Latin literature as a few verses. In another place in the novel, Virgil refers to his work as '*a lot of rash*' (Broch; 238). This novel portrays an image of Virgil that does not fit the profile of most poets.

III. ART CRITICISM

In Herman Broch's novel, Virgil appears to be experiencing a crisis in his deathbed and an inner turmoil shakes him up at the threshold of death. It is also seen that the poet teeters on the fine line between death and reality, but neither reaches the glazed gates beyond death, nor obtains information from that mysterious realm. Because of this depression, the poet examining his life and poetry, criticizing his art seriously. The novel's translator from German into Turkish, Ahmet Cemal, states in his introduction to the novel: "*Death of Vergilius is above all, one of the most basic and at the same time the most brutal questionings directed at art in Western literature with respect to novel*" (Broch; xii). When the book is examined, it is seen that Broch seems to express his criticisms of art in different issues. Broch enabled these criticisms of art to surface by making Virgil talk with his friends. Hence, there must be a reason for Broch to use Virgil in this regard. When he was choosing his hero, his command '*Burn the Aeneid!*' must have had a great influence on him. In his novel, Broch evaluated art from many different points of view in terms of poetry. We will

classify here the most interesting items of these criticisms under different headings:

a) Is Art the Destiny of Man?

One of Virgil's most remarkable discourses is that he likened art to a prison, the artist to a prisoner and the destiny to a judge who passes a verdict of imprisonment by employing a metaphorical method:

"Ah, yes, whoever has been thrown into the dungeon of art by fate, it is almost impossible for him to escape from this prison..." (Broch; 128).

In this respect, Broch is trying to implicitly answer the famous question of 'whether someone is born an artist or he becomes an artist through his own endeavors?', for which an answer has been sought since ancient times. It is also emphasized that the person who is interested in any art will not be able to easily break away from that art until the end of his life. Poetry is also a lifetime occupation, and a poet can even compose a poem in his deathbed. While Plotius Tucca and Lucius Varius are waiting beside his deathbed, a verse comes out of Virgil's mouth, and both Lucius and himself like the verse; Plotius says of it "... you would have done the same, even if you had burned everything; no doubt you would keep on writing poetry..." (Broch; 236, 237). This scene is a proof of Virgil's statement that art is a dungeon. Virgil has not been able to get out of that dungeon even in the final moments of his life.

b) Poet-Ruler Relationship

Regardless of the type of power, the poet has been associated with wealthy individuals and power holders for a long time. In this connection, sometimes holders of power and fortune may want to use poetry as an instrument while they progress along the route they have plotted, and want to reinforce their strength with its power. The poet, who forms the weak side of this bilateral relationship, needs the money to sustain his life. This necessity has brought them together because both sides are in need of the values that the other possesses. The poet praises the king/sultan/rich one so that he gives what he has got in his hand to the other side; and in return, the king/ sultan/ wealthy individuals put the money into the poet's hands for his survival. It does not matter whether the poet enters into this relationship voluntarily or involuntarily. This phenomenon has manifested itself in almost every society, and will continue to do so. In his novel, Broch brings light on this bilateral relationship and reveals its hidden sides. Virgil confessed that Maecenas, Asinus Pollo and Caesar Augustus gave gifts to him and helped him lead a good life, but Virgil thinks that what he wrote in return was just "a lot of rashes" (Broch; 238), so while he says "*No, I will not finish Aeneid*" (Broch; 238) in a literary debate between himself and his friends Plotius and Lucius, and continues his words "*What I wrote, all of them, must be burned in the fire of reality*" (Broch; 238), Plotius states that they will not allow Aeneid to be burn in the fire of reality (Broch; 239).

Lucius supports Plotius's opinion, saying that the glory of Virgil's poem and the greatness of Rome complete each other and they cannot be separated from one another (Broch; 234). Virgil opposes Lucius's belief that Virgil's poetry will remain, and states that neither Rome nor his own epic The Aeneid will be able to stand the test of time, by saying "... *sculptures will be destroyed, and Aeneid will be burned*" (Broch; 235); he adds

that Aeneid is not a respectable work and burning Aeneid is his last wish (Broch; 252, 253). Plotius continues raising his objection to Virgil's desire to burn the Aeneid, saying, "... *You have to finish Aeneid... nobody will burn something unfinished...*" (Broch; 237). It seems that the feelings of Virgil in his deathbed have become very sensitive and that he wants this burning procedure to be fulfilled.

Virgil expresses during a dialogue with Caesar Augustus while he is in his room that art should not be employed either for the state or for anything else; otherwise, art will turn into a false art, and everybody should avoid intervening in art (Broch; 325). Caesar Augustus continues to speak, pointing out that when the state ascends, all arts rise and so does the art of poetry (Broch; 332). When we compare these two views together, we can conclude that if the state does not intervene in art, art can live its golden age during the rise of the state and be saved from falling into the danger of false art.

c) Medicine or Poetry?

The positive effect of literature, especially poetry, on personal development of human beings cannot be denied. In this respect, the book has almost become one of the basic needs of man. While medicine treats the body, the book heals the wounds of the soul. Virgil said in his deathbed in a conversation with a doctor, "*Yes poetry is a vocation deserving to be forgotten; indeed, I should have become a doctor*" (Broch; 267), expressing that he would prefer medicine to poetry. The doctor replied him "*I am gladly prepared to change my position with you, as soon as you recover*" (Broch; 267), showing his readiness to change. Virgil's medical preference was influenced by his illness, because man thinks that what he needs most is what matters most in this life.

d) Poetic Madness: A Controlled Madness

In the long debate in the context of beauty-reality, Virgil takes side with truth and states that "*Beauty cannot live without applause; but truth closes itself to applause*" (Broch; 240). Lucius argues against it and says: "*Beauty and truth, they mean the same thing...*" (Broch; 239), and proceeds to say "*The only important thing here is not the truth; a madman can tell the truth, declare the bare truth ... In order to be effective, the truth must be domesticated and that is what is called harmony of truth. Some people refer to the madness of the poet, whereas the poet is the person who has the gift of being able to restrain and direct his own madness*" (Broch; 252). His poem may seem strange to us because the poet wanders in dangerous areas on the borderline which ordinary people do not attempt. However, the poet presents us with his wild emotions and experiences by putting them into a mold, and dressing a shroud on pure truth. This is a complicated process and Lucius, too, draws attention here to this control mechanism.

In Victor Hugo's masterpiece Notre Dame de Paris, Gringoire, a playwright and poet who is being tried for death penalty at the Miracles Palace, in presence of the king of gypsies and beggars, says the following words to avoid execution: "*I do not understand why writers and poets are not included in the idlers. Aisopos was a punk; Homer was a beggar; Mercirius was a thief*" (Hugo; 91). Should Gringoire's words be perceived as a promise to get rid of the difficult situation he has fallen into or is

Hugo referring to the irregularity of poetry, to the strangeness of the poet's profession?

After fictitious character Esmeralda accepted Gringoire as her husband and saved him from death, Gringoire says in Esmeralda's house;

"... I wanted to get a job at the age of sixteen. I've tried every way one after another. I was a soldier but I was not brave enough, I was a monk but I was not religious enough; besides, I was not good with drink. I got desperate and went to a carpenter to work as an apprentice, but I was not strong enough. I was eager to be a teacher, I did not know how to read, but that was not enough reason to give up teaching. After a while, when I realized that I was inadequate in every profession and was good for nothing, I decided to become a poet and a composer of my own accord. Poetry was a profession that suits to idlers, and some of my friends whose fathers were bandits told me that writing poetry is better than robbing..." (Hugo; 109, 110).

Gringoire says these words not to avoid a danger, so it can be perceived that Victor Hugo is drawing attention to the strangeness of a poet's profession. The fact that Victor Hugo describes poetry as 'punk', and Lucius as 'controlled madness' points to the extraordinary situation of the poet. It is noteworthy that this evaluation has spilled out of the mouth of two famous writers, namely Herman Broch and Victor Hugo.

e) Poet and Fame

Broch also has a discussion on fame, another important subject in his novel. In spite of the fact that fame is a bed of nails, most people are willing to wear it. When Caesar Augustus says "... Only glory and fame on earth last longer than death ..." (Broch; 330), Virgil argues against it and says, "Fame is a gift of the Gods, but it is not the goal of the art of poetry; only bad poets regard it as a goal" (Broch; 320), and states that fame and reputation must not be a target to hit. Poetry could be written for poet's sake, or for poetry's sake or for society's sake, but writing it for fame will not be widely accepted. Undoubtedly the quality of poetry written for the sake of fame will diminish and the value of poems used for the sake of fame will be reduced.

f) Art and Dependence on Tradition in Art

Poetry is a profession of disorder in a state of order. It has always been a matter of controversy whether the poetic inspiration should be cast into a mold or not when poems come out of mouth as voices, syllables and words. Broch also includes Virgil and his friends into this discussion. In this literary debate, Lucius discusses whether the artist is being honest or not if he depends on the literary tradition. He brings a new perspective to the quarrel between the new and the old, emphasizing that beautiful artifacts can be produced without depending on a tradition, while many works of art produced depending on a tradition could be found unappealing:

"There is always a crippling side to talking about honesty in art. For the artist, it can be said that he is honest if he is faithful to the traditional, endless rules of art, but at the same time it can be said that his behavior is incompatible with honesty because of his hiding behind tradition. Are we honest when we adopt Homer's form? A desire on the part of young people to resemble Vergilius, is it against honesty? Or are they being

more honest when, for example, they produce a good deal of tastelessness?" (Broch; 246, 247).

g) Poetry and Ownership

When Virgil was in his deathbed, Caesar Augustus came to visit him and said to him that The Aeneid was a property of everyone, and Gods would not order anyone to destroy anything which belonged to everyone. (Broch; 302) Virgil replied to this saying that he wrote his artwork for himself rather than his readers and he had a right to do whatever he liked to with respect to his artwork (Broch; 302). In this conversation, Virgil has some evaluations about the poet and poetry. According to him, a person who created a work of art cannot quit before it reaches perfection; it is necessary to constantly change and remove parts of it which are not suitable for the desired quality of the artwork, even at the expense of complete destruction of the work (Broch; 303). Caesar, too, states that it is the right of an artist to do whatever he liked to with his art, no one believes that it is valid for Virgil's work (Broch; 303, 304). For, his work of art no more belongs to him as an individual but to the public, and that it has become the artwork of the Roman people and its greatness (Broch; 303, 304). Caesar Augustus points out that suspicion about the success of one's work, which every artist experiences, reaches a level of madness in Virgil, and that his desire to burn his artwork is a manifestation of this madness (Broch; 321). Caesar Augustus finally tells Virgil: "If you find publication of The Aeneid a selfish act, let it be published posthumously. This is my last offer" (Broch; 377). When Virgil replied, "My artwork must not live after me" (Broch; 377), Augustus is thrown into a temper tantrum and cries out to his face that the poet wants to destroy his masterpiece because he is jealous of him and hates him and wants to destroy that masterpiece, which will bring him eternal fame. However, Virgil eventually calms Caesar Augustus by saying that Aeneid belongs to Caesar Augustus (Broch; 377- 386). When these dialogues are examined, it will be seen that the poet gives up the idea of burning the Aeneid upon Caesar's insistence.

Lucius invites the poet to be merciful towards his artwork by saying, "Your work... Love it as much as we love it" and Virgil asks his two friends Lucius and Plotius to publish The Aeneid (Broch; 419). When Virgil informs Lucius that he will see many inappropriate parts of his work to be corrected, Lucius responds negatively by saying, "Surely I cannot dare to try to write a better version of Vergil's verse... No, not one word should be added, not one word should be excluded" (Broch; 421, 422).

IV. CONCLUSION

In Herman Broch's novel 'The Death of Virgil', the famous Latin poet Virgil appears regretful and comes to terms with his past on the thin line between life and death. Of course, among these regrets, what is important in terms of literature is his criticism of his own poetry. It is very rare for a poet to be ruthlessly critical of his own poetry. While he is aware of how important Virgil and his artwork are for European literature, Broch does not refrain from having Virgil make this brutal criticism. In his novel, Broch made important discussions about art through Virgil and revealed his own ideas through him. Under what circumstances and how and why Virgil gave this

command has not become clear, Broch weaves his novel around Virgil's famous order '*Burn The Aeneid!*' and by having Virgil criticize his own artwork and art opens a new perspective in art criticism.

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