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1945: A New Order of Centuries?

Hannah Arendt and Hermann Broch’s “The Death of Virgil”

In *On Revolution* (1963) Hannah Arendt heads one of her chapters with the three Latin words inscribed on the Great Seal of the United States of America: *novus ordo seclorum*, modified from *magnus ab integro saeclorum nascitur ordo* in line 5 of Virgil’s fourth Eclogue.\(^1\) The men of the American revolution, Arendt famously argued, succeeded in founding the political community in a sovereign act of inaugural legislation that instituted a “new order of the centuries” between the “no-longer” of old European political and religious precedent and the “not-yet” of salvation on earth for all. In contrast to the French revolution, which failed to distinguish political power from a pre-political natural violence of the multitude, the American statesmen discerned that a revolution carried its authority neither from belief in an immortal legislator nor from the promises of a future state of reward but rather from a pure act of the founding and constituting of freedom itself. The Founding Fathers in this sense “solved the problem of the beginning, of an unconnected, new event breaking into the continuous sequence of historical time”. In altering Virgil’s “the great cycle of periods is born anew” to the “new order of the ages”, the American revolutionaries felt themselves to be traversing a “legendary hiatus between end and beginning, between a no-longer and a not-yet”, comparable to those moments of hiatus related by legends that speak of “great leaders who appear on the stage of history precisely in these gaps of historical time”:

“[W]hen the Americans decided to vary Virgil’s line from magnus ordo saeclorum to novus ordo saeclorum, they had admitted that it was no longer a matter of founding ‘Rome anew’ but of founding a ‘new Rome’, that the thread of continuity which bound Occidental politics back to the foundation of the eternal city and which tied this foundation once more back to the pre-historical memories of Greece and Troy was broken and could not be renewed. … [T]he men of the American Revolution, whose awareness of the absolute novelty in their enterprise amounted to an obsession, were inesca-

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probably caught in something for which neither the historical nor the legendary truth of their own tradition could offer any help or precedent. And yet, when reading Virgil’s fourth Eclogue, they might have been faintly aware that there exists a solution for the perplexities of beginning which needs no absolute to break the vicious circle in which all first things seem to be caught. What saves the act of beginning from its own arbitrariness is that it carries its own principle within itself, or, to be more precise, that beginning and principle, principium and principle, are not only related to each other, but are coeval. The absolute from which the beginning is to derive its own validity and which must save it, as it were, from its inherent arbitrariness is the principle which, together with it, makes its appearance in the world”.2

Arendt published On Revolution a little over a decade after the death of her close friend, the Austrian writer Hermann Broch. Is it possible that Broch’s last masterpiece The Death of Virgil, about the poet’s final dedication of The Aeneid to Rome in the last twenty-four hours of his life, played some part in Arendt’s thinking about America’s “new order of the centuries”? Is it conceivable that Broch’s novel might have been one major stimulus in Arendt’s thinking about a modern Roman-American moment in world history, in 1945 as much as in 1776 or 1787 – about a modern Roman event of inaugural freedom and foundational world order, following in the train of death, destruction and the disgrace of old Europe?

Arendt first met Broch in New York in May 1946, a little under a year after the appearance of the book in German and simultaneous English translation in June of the previous year.3 The meeting spurned a flurry of correspondence between the two authors over the following five years until the latter’s death in May 1951, amounting to 46 missives from Broch and 17 extant letters from Arendt, the first of which from May ’46 spoke emphatically of her admiration for the novel as “the greatest poetic achievement of the age since Kafka’s death”.4 Arendt also sent Broch a text of hers on

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2 Arendt, op. cit., pp. 205, 212.


human rights, which subsequently entered The Origins of Totalitarianism in revised form, informing him explicitly in September 1946 that she had put pen to paper in response to one of the latter’s own texts on the same theme. It appears unlikely that the long manuscript on which Broch had been working up to the point of his death on crowd psychology and mass psychosis played much part in the genesis of Arendt’s book on totalitarianism (which appeared shortly before Broch’s death in the spring of 1951), but she did read one of Broch’s summaries of the manuscript in 1949 and also later read larger chunks of the manuscript at a time when she worked with Broch’s widow Anne-Marie Meier-Graefe in the preparation of a series of Collected Works of the author, for which she also wrote an Introduction in 1955.

But more striking than any other document of Arendt’s enthusiasm for The Death of Virgil is her review of the novel in The Nation, from September 1946, a text that also appears to be the very first of all Arendt’s writings to thematise an idea of free inaugural moral action in the flow of historical time – one of the most central motifs of her thinking in the post-war years. Titled “No Longer and Not Yet”, in direct citation of one of Broch’s passages, a phrase she repeats in almost every paragraph, Arendt opens with a reference to an image of Hume about silkworms and butterflies appearing and disappearing on the stage of life in discontinuous series of generations. Human generations do not normally succeed one another discontinuously like such insects, she writes. However, at certain exceptional moments, she adds,

“At some turning-points of history, …, at some heights of crisis, a fate similar to that of silkworms and butterflies may befall a generation of men. For the decline of the old, the birth of the new is not necessarily an affair of continuity; between the generations, between those who for some reason or other still belong to the old and those who either feel the catastrophe in their very bones or have already grown up with it, the chain is broken and an ‘empty space’, a kind of historical no man’s land, comes to the surface which can be described only in terms of ‘no longer and not yet’”.

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8 Ibid., p. 300.
Viewed from the perspective of 1914, Proust’s valedictory Récherche stands for a nineteenth century ancien regime that is “no longer”, where Kafka’s parables stand for a nightmarish future that perhaps is “not yet”. Broch’s Roman novel, on the other hand, stands between the modalities of past and future. Virgil’s last hours in the narrative evoke an “ultimate effort to find the truth, the last definitive word of the whole story”, which “makes the last judgment a human affair, to be settled by man himself, though at the limits of his forces and possibilities – as if he wanted to spare God this whole trouble”. The poet passes away like a man returning to peace after a long journey of freedom into the still expectation of a language-less universe, finding the “bridge with which to span the abyss that yawns between the ‘no longer and not yet’ of history, between the ‘no longer’ of the old laws and the ‘not yet’ of the new saving world”.9

All Arendt’s citations in this review stem notably from a dozen pages in the middle of the novel where Broch himself evokes motifs from the fourth Eclogue, including the key line magnus ab integro saeclorum nascitur ordo, rendered in one passage of dialogue between Virgil and Caesar Augustus as “the glory of the ages [that has] been fulfilled by our time”. The poet avers that “we stand between epochs” in a way that must be called “expectancy, not emptiness”, to which the Emperor rejoins:

“What happens between epochs is empty and without chronology, impervious to moulding, impervious to poetry; you yourself have maintained this, and at the same time, almost in the same breath, you have praised this time of ours, this time that I have been at pains to mould, as the culmination of human existence as well as of poetry, as a veritable time of burgeoning. I remind you of your Eclogue in which you declared that the glory of the ages had been fulfilled by our time”.10

A page earlier, the ailing poet, contemplating burning the manuscript of The Aeneid in a fit of despair, broods that a reason for poetic endeavour “no longer exists”; to which Augustus again retorts:

[A] “‘No longer exists? No longer? You sound as though we were standing at the end of something…’
[V] ‘Perhaps it would be better to say, not yet! for we may assume that a time for artistic tasks will dawn again.’
[A] ‘No longer and not yet’, – Caesar, much dismayed, was weighing these words- ‘and between them yawns an empty space.’
Yes, no longer and not yet; that is how it sounded, how it had to sound, lost in nothingness, the lost, passed-away inter-realm of dream…”11

11 Ibid., p. 315 / 335.
The narrative voice tells of perplexity at “empty spaces between the epochs … the empty nothingness that yawns wide, the nothingness for which everything comes too late and too early, the empty abyss of nothingness beneath time and the aeons”. The Emperor, cannot tolerate any “abyss of unformed time … no interruption must occur, time must flow on incessantly, each moment simultaneously enclosing the end and the beginning…”. The poet languishes tensely in a state of “waiting, in expecting the fulfilment … waiting between epochs while yet between the shores of time… on the bridge that is spanned between invisibility and invisibility …”. This again prompts the exchange:

[V] “Behind us, oh, Augustus, lies the drop into amorphousness, the drop into nothingness; you are the bridge-builder, you have lifted this time out of its depths of rottenness.’ …
[A] ‘Yes, it is true, the times had become completely rotten.’
[V] ‘They were marked by loss of perception, loss of the gods, death was their password; for decades the barest, bloodiest, most raw lust for power was in the saddle, it was civil war, and devastation followed upon devastation.’
[A] ‘yes, that it how it was; but I have re-established order.’
[V] ‘And so it follows that this order, which is your work, has become the one commensurate approximation of the Roman spirit … we had to drain the goblet of horror to its dregs before you came and saved us; the times were sunk deeply in wretchedness, more followed with death than ever before, and now that you have silenced the powers of evil, it must not be allowed to have been done in vain, oh, it must not have been in vain, the new truth must arise radiantly from the blackest falsehoods, from the wildest raging of death the redemption will come to pass, the annulment of death…’”.

It seems impossible not to think that Arendt must have felt in these passages something of the calamity of old Europe in the death factories of the world wars, spurring a yearning for redemption from evil and nothingness – from “European nihilism” – in a newly invented juridical world order of the West. It is against this background that it seems right to read the poet’s gradual return to compliance with the Emperor’s imperial ambitions, praising his interlocutor for having “bidden the earthly death and devastation to cease” and setting “peaceful order in its place”, instituting a “new order”, which yet requires some deeper and more transcendent vision, where “along with the new order created by you, a new perception must also come to flower, growing up from the depth of our lost perception, growing as high as our loss was deep, for else the new order would be purposeless, the salvation that we have received at your hands would have been in vain”. At first prepared to destroy The Aeneid, his

13 Ibid., p. 318 / 338–9, 322 / 343.
own mortal achievement seemingly nothing in the face of divine creation, the poet must resist Caesar’s demand for tribute to the eternal empire of the ages, just as the artist must resist fascism’s will to the aestheticization of politics. But in the passing of the night hours, friends finally persuade the poet to surrender the manuscript to Rome and thereby to seal the founding of the empire in mythopoeic epic. Virgil’s pain of unfinished creation thus gives way to an acceptance of completion in secular time, in a sacrificial act of donation and a sacral event of foundation. Though Virgil’s initial recalcitrance signifies that art refuses assimilation to political power qua myth, the antinomy in Broch’s narrative eventually finds resolution, the soul of the poet flowing into the immortal work and the work finally into ownership of history. Thus the poet intones: “Order is latent in the mutability of time, in all things terrestrial…, and whenever one has been successful in creating order on earth, the real order of human existence, there follows also the wish to erect a counterpart of that order in space … there is the Acropolis, there are the Pyramids … as well as the Temple of Jerusalem … bearing witness to the striving for the annulment of death by order within space….”

None of Arendt’s pages in *On Revolution* cite Broch or her own writings on the author. Nor do any of the passages of her other major works in which the same motifs recur, such as the essay collection *Between Past and Future* (1961) and *The Life of the Mind* (1971). Yet the evidence of her meetings and correspondence with Broch in the 1940s suggest that the philosophical contents of the novel in the above-quoted lines must have lodged very firmly in her mind throughout the post-war period. Again and again after 1946 – and at no time before – Arendt wrote fervently of the “abyss of freedom”, of the “gap between past and future”, of the “turning point of history”, of the order and rupture of the ages, of the act of beginning and the founding of principles, of “new generations”, and of the inaugurating and reestablishing of a new-old world order of law. It is true that Arendt looked sceptically on Broch’s more openly theologizing thinking about human rights in the last years of his life, repeatedly cha-
racterising her friend as more a philosophical lyricist of ideas than a politically objective thinker. Yet The Death of Virgil does seem to have influenced some of the motifs, images and symbolic frames of her writing at a crucial moment in her intellectual career. It seems likely that it was Broch’s treatment of the Eclogue and Broch’s narrative tense structure that captured her imagination in the decisive first twelve months after the surrender of the Axis powers.

Read in such a light, it would not seem obtuse to think of at least some passages of Arendt’s post-war writing as marking out yet another chapter in the narratological sacralization of Western world order under American protection after World War Two. A “no longer” of a destroyed European heritage meets in this scheme of perception with a “not yet” of utopian eschatologies or false promises of deliverance evoked by totalitarian regimes of the Eurasian East, along the same kind of lines set down in these years by other émigré figures such as Leo Strauss, Eric Voegelin and Karl Löwith. Broch’s story of the sacrifice and salvation of The Aeneid in this sense suggests a level of symbolism in Arendt’s thinking in which American political modernity from 1776 to 1945 makes itself ready at once to discard and to reappropriate Western antiquity, in a kind of world-historical transfer of the crown of the Occident, analogous to the

→ narrative evokes Virgil’s nova progenies (“new generations”) in line 8 of the Eclogue (in Broch’s words “Now there arises a new line, one of a loftier order”, after a character praises Virgil as “guardian of the new generation” and harbinger of “future generations” (p. 242/258), Arendt writes in On Revolution of the poem’s significance for the men of the American revolution as “the announcement of a new generation, a nova progenies” (p. 211), also directly evoking saeculi novi interpretatio in line 1 of the Eclogue in her opening reference in The Nation to “turning-points of history” (p. 300). Where Broch’s narrative speaks of Caesar as having “re-established order in earthly affairs” (pp. 317/337, 333/355), Arendt in On Revolution writes of “all decisive political changes in the course of Roman history [as] reconstitutions” and of the “first act [as] already a re-establishment, …a regeneration and restoration” (p. 208). In this sense, she adds that “foundation, augmentation, and conservation … might well have been the most important single notion which the men of the Revolution adopted … by virtue …of having gone to school in Roman antiquity” (p. 202); in The Life of the Mind she comments that “the foundation of Rome was the re-birth of Troy, the first, as it were, of the series of re-nascences that have formed the history of European culture and civilisation” (p. 212). In On Revolution she continues that the men of the American Revolution possessed, like the Romans, an “extraordinary capacity to look upon yesterday with the eyes of centuries to come” (p. 198), a capacity to act “as though the beginner had abolished the sequence of temporality itself” (p. 206), where “the problem of beginning is solved through the introduction of a beginner whose own beginnings are no longer subject to question because he is ‘from eternity to eternity’” (p. 206). The order extolled in Virgil’s Eclogue and invoked by the Founding Fathers was in this sense “great by virtue of going back to and being inspired by a beginning which antedates it” (p. 210).

passing of Greek culture and philosophy to Roman political and legal pragmatism. Oswald Spengler’s death elegy in the *Untergang des Abendlandes* finds itself reversed in this picture as the cyclic fable of a passage from infernal living death in the night-chambers of destruction to a Virgilian song of birth in the light of day. Broch’s earlier *The Sleepwalkers* (1931), recounting the final depletion of the medieval European cosmos that once found its theologico-poetic crystallization in *The Divine Comedy*, may well have been felt by Arendt to stage this very experience of *Untergang* into the Inferno, from which an Austrian-Jewish poet then awakens in the night to transcribe a nightmare into a dream – as Virgil once guided the young Christian Renaissance poet to Purgatory and Paradise, in the footsteps Aeneas before him in the company of the sibyls of the Underworld.19 *The Death of Virgil* thus looks back to the future from the hell-fires of 1945. As Europe sleepwalks into catastrophe at the end of the night, America inherits the light of Western political reason in a transcendent daybreak of world-political foundation. It is in these ways that Arendt seems to have thought of a Roman-American modernity redeeming an exhausted European antiquity, as *The Aeneid* reverses and redeems *The Iliad*, and *The Divine Comedy* in turn *The Aeneid*, each turn of the epochs marking the decease and renascence of the other. A Judaeo-Christian inheritance of civilization on the old continent is redeemed by a Roman-American separation of religion and politics that itself finds secular consecration in the universalistic legal conventions and global humanitarian precepts of the early post-war years – as if in a great cycle of the ages that leads from Troy and Athens to Rome, and thence from Paris to Washington as new capital “City of the World”, whose denizens act like the revolutionary French nation as cosmopolitan leaders and protectors of humanity. Perhaps it in this frame of mythology that Arendt thought of the citation of the Eclogue in the US Great Seal, imagining a rejuvenated secular modern transcription of the Judaeo-Christian story of death and rebirth.20 A brave new world of the West is

19 Cf. “The date which made of Broch a poet seems to have coincided with the last stage of darkening in Europe. When the night arrived, Broch woke up. He awoke to a reality which so overwhelmed him that he translated it immediately into a dream, as is fitting for a man roused in night. This dream is “The Death of Virgil” (*The Nation*, p. 301).

20 The child to whose birth the poem is addressed, she writes in *On Revolution*, is not a divine saviour descending from a transcendent region but “a human child born into the continuity of history”, a boy who, in Virgil’s words, must learn “the glories of heroes and the father’s deeds” in order “to rule the world that the ancestors’ virtues have set at peace”. The poem in this sense affirms the divinity of birth as such, proclaiming that “the world’s potential salvation lies in the very fact that the human species regenerates itself constantly and forever”. It is thus a “nativity hymn, a song of praise to the birth of a child and the announcement of a new generation, a nova progenies” (p. 198, 206, 210, 211.). Foundation and constitution thus join with that of birth and nativity, with generation and regeneration. These themes, she also writes later in *The Life of the Mind*, find an echo in the *Georgics*, in praise of husbandry, in “the tending of fields and flocks and trees”, where leisure, otium, is renounced for nec-otium, for the brokering of business and the calling of citizenship, in a continual reproduction of the polity (p. 214).
reborn in the union of the Atlantic coasts like the founding union of the Trojans and the Latins on the land of Italy. In Germany’s “hour zero” (Stunde Null), like Broch’s “fixed zero point” of the “earthly absolute”, like a kind of “ground zero” of time and memory, a new-old world order is re-born in a sacral event of foundation, marking the deliverance of the peoples and religions of the old world from bondage and persecution to freedom. The caesura of the war in Karl Jaspers’s sense marks a new axial principle or axial moment of time (Achsenzeit), like a cut or hinge in time that founds time as new time and new order of time – in a shift from an old to a New World, and to a new world-ness and new worldliness, which grows into “a renewal of perception” that “shapes the further course of time”, as Broch has Virgil say.

Arendt must have been familiar with Hegel’s famous alteration of Virgil’s tantae molis erat Romanam condere gentem to tantae molis erat, se ipsam cognoscere mentem – from “What a great endeavour it was to found the Roman nation” to “What it a great endeavour it was for mind to know itself” – in the concluding lines of the Lectures on the History of Philosophy. She must also have thought at length about the words “World History is a World Tribunal”, quoted by Hegel from Schiller’s poem “Resignation”, which Karl Kraus once invoked against Austro-German nationalism in a tri-

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21 America, Arendt, appears to be suggesting, might inherit Rome’s crafting of “system of alliances” from warring parties who become partners, socii or allies (p. 210) in an “ever-extending group of Roman socii who formed the societas Romana” (p. 188), just as it was “Rome’s mission eventually ‘to lay all the world beneath laws’ – totum sub leges mitteret orbem” (p. 210). This would be an ambition “not to subject the whole world to Roman power and imperium, but to throw the Roman system of alliances over all countries of the earth” (p. 188). The Aeneid in this sense suggests a near-exact reversal of The Iliad, in which “the end of the war is not victory and departure for one side, extermination and slavery and utter destruction for the others, but in which ‘both nations, conquered, join treaty forever under equal laws...’” (p. 209).


bute to Wilson and Kant in 1919.\textsuperscript{25} Yet today it is impossible to read her and other writers’ statements on Western political reconstruction in the post-war era without thinking of the uses to which such rhetoric has been put in subsequent discourse. Six Latin words from the Great Seal, first inscribed on the $1 bill at the height of the Depression in 1935 – \textit{novus ordo seclorum} on one side, \textit{e pluribus unum} on the other – have needed to be invoked, it seems, to bear witness, time and time again, to America’s great century of centuries that wants ever to constitute itself in perpetuity, in a constant redeeming cycle of new presidencies, like a perennial currency that circulates through the ages, as if somehow as self-evidently natural and quotidian as the daily transit of the dollar across the stock markets of the globe.

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