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Narrating the End of the World: The Pandemic, the Climate and The Death of Virgil

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Abstract: There is a widespread narrative today that, due to climate change, we are living in the end of times. What does this apocalyptic narrative tell us about our relation to death? A peculiarity with the climate discourse is that “we”, i.e., mankind, are given a position that is both external and internal to the problems described. On the one hand, there is an all-encompassing apocalyptic mood, on the other hand, death appears as a scandal, something we had abolished. In order to capture this peculiarity, the article adopts the narratological concept of the “focalizer”. After comparing the way climate change is addressed by the philosophers Martin Hägglund and Roy Scranton, respectively, the article turns to Hermann Broch’s novel *The Death of Virgil* (1945). Here, another perspective on dying and the end of civilization may be found. In that way, Broch’s novel provides a much needed perspective on today’s apocalyptic narratives. With Broch, one may argue that the end of the world takes place all the time.

Keywords: the Anthropocene; progress; life and death; the apocalypse; focalization; Hermann Broch; Martin Hägglund; Roy Scranton



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1. Crisis? What Crisis? Introduction

What did the Corona pandemic say about our relation to death? On the one hand, there was, in Sweden at least, a readiness to sacrifice old people with little remorse. People whose lives could have been saved received no treatment because resources were scarce, and the risk of contagion high. To some extent the approach came close to a kind of euthanasia—not according to the will of the dying, but of society. “They are going to die soon anyway”.

On the other hand, death appeared to be an unacceptable anomaly that defied all our rights. The healthcare system, believed to be the best in the world, suddenly appeared quite helpless; relatively young people ended up in intensive care; people died without anyone being able to stop it. The mass media reported quite extensively about various fatal scandals. If it was traumatizing to the affected individuals, it was also a bit shocking to the general consciousness. Had not progress taken us beyond that kind of misfortune?

Even though it may be discussed how unique the Corona pandemic was, it thus broke a prevailing moral order, a certain self-image, and exposed a strange, contradictory relation to dying. It exposed the fact that “we have never learned how to die”, as Achille Mbembe phrased it in a short reflection on the pandemic (Mbembe 2021, p. 59). Obviously, this ignorance goes far beyond the pandemic. Is it not the case, for example, that a similar contradiction can be observed in our approach to climate change? On the one hand, there is a heated talk about extinction and apocalypse. On the other hand, there is an optimistic belief that “we” can continue with business as usual, only a bit more oriented on “sustainable” options such as solar power, electric cars, and vegetarian food. The threat is thus total, but at the same time possible to deal with through technological solutions and a more moral conduct within the present system.

My hypothesis, then, is that both the COVID-19 pandemic and global warming have revealed a conflict-ridden relationship to dying, a changed consciousness of death. That

combatting and concealing death is a central feature of modernity is nothing new. As Walter Benjamin states 1936 in his essay "The Storyteller": "It has been evident for a number of centuries how, in the general consciousness, the thought of death has become less omnipresent and less vivid. In its last stages this process is accelerated. And in the course of the nineteenth century, bourgeois society—by means of medical and social, private and public institutions—realized a secondary effect, which may have been its subconscious main purpose: to enable people to avoid the sight of the dying" (Benjamin 2006, p. 151). In modern society, dying is something that should be kept out of sight. Today, it is tempting to amplify Benjamin's observation: death is not only concealed, it is denied, even abolished. Or, put differently: the efforts to avoid the sight of the dying have been so successful that death virtually appears to have disappeared. Not only in the sense that dying has been made invisible, and thus less present in the general consciousness, but also insofar as progress itself seems to have elevated itself beyond transience.

That may sound like a dubious statement. After all, was not the very essence of modernity, enlightenment, and secularization that existence became finite, evanescent? The eternal life of Christianity ceased to be a general condition, and man became a species among others. However, if that was the case, it is also true that progress, on the other hand, appeared to defeat death and somehow perpetuate itself. Evolution made us exceptional, as Pieter Vermeulen demonstrates, these ideas are observable already in Charles Darwin's *The Descent of Man*. To Darwin, Vermeulen writes, "Extinction, it seems, is a problem for other species. Uniquely among the species, human life has improved itself in a way that allows it to contemplate nature's 'entangled bank' from a safe and scientific distance" (Vermeulen 2020, p. 145). In other words, evolution or progress—who can tell them apart, hereafter?—brought us to this exceptional state where death is someone else's problem. "Health has replaced salvation, biological life has taken the place of eternal life" Giorgio Agamben states in the short text "Regarding the Coming Time" (Agamben 2020). Benjamin's description in "Theses on the Philosophy of History" of a social democratic conception of progress as "something boundless, in keeping with the infinite perfectibility of mankind" is also relevant here (Benjamin 1999, p. 260). Our progress is automatic and eternal. Moreover, this belief, or ideology, has, I believe, been strengthened by the financial development, technical progress, and digital inventions we have seen the last decades. The material conditions, the geological cycles, even the history of the universe have become irrelevant. We have conquered life without death.

This image, however, is now challenged. If anyone is still in doubt about the severity of global warming, the latest IPCC-report is hard to argue against. Climate change is real, and it is unprecedented in the last 2000 years, the report says. Human influence is very likely the main driver behind the changes (IPCC 2021, pp. 5–11). The future scenarios that are sketched out are not bright.

Of course, as everyone knows, there are different political responses to this knowledge, though so far it is quite obvious that none of the answers are radical enough. Economic growth continues to have precedence over the rising CO₂-levels. In this way, we are still inside of the illusory idea of eternal progress. This does not necessarily mean that climate change is denied. Intellectually, we may realize that the rising temperatures ultimately will make earth uninhabitable to humans, or that the sun will one day go out, but those are occurrence on a different scale, a scale that is culturally irrelevant. On *our* scale, in *our* perspective, Western civilization may still appear as eternal.

Hence, the anxiety and alarmism caused by climate change are certainly understandable, maybe even reasonable, reactions to the revelation of our own finitude. Moreover, at the same time, one may ask if there is not something dazed or tardy over these responses. Has it not been known for quite some time that the economic growth and technological development of the last century are ecologically unsustainable? That there is a backside to all domination over nature? That agriculture had disastrous ecological effects already in antiquity? In that perspective, it is tempting to conclude that the alarmism and the anxiety

testify to an unconscious belief in the same ideals that they counter. The calls to “save the environment”, “save the climate”, even “save the planet”, are parts of the same mindset.

Mbembe’s short essay is a good example of this. As the title indicates, it makes the point that there is a “universal right to breathe”, indeed “*an originary right to living on Earth, a right that belongs to the universal community of earthly inhabitants, human and other*” (Mbembe 2021, s. 62). Humanity is just one life form among others in the community that is the biosphere. In other words, we have to escape the destructive exceptionalism that brought us here. However, then the question is: if the virus—one of the impediments to our breathing discussed in the essay—is not also part of this community? Why not? And, more importantly, what gives *us*, in contrast to the rest of the universal community, all this responsibility that Mbembe ascribes to us? “*We must start afresh. To survive, we must return to all living things—including the biosphere—the space and energy they need*” (Mbembe 2021, s. 60, emphasis added). We must, they need. Is not this argument just a prolongation of the same old story about Mankind, progress, civilization; about saving, fixing, conquering, and improving nature by extending our rights, that is our notion of morality, to the whole (well, almost) biosphere?

The critical theorist Rolf Wiggershaus raises the question of whether “the prevailing metaphors of conquering and saving” do not, in fact, “get in a way of an adequate perception and understanding” of the domination over nature (Wiggershaus 2021, p. 99). For, is not the very idea of “saving”, no matter how understandable it is, a continuation of the same domination, the same desire to be in control? Does it not primarily prolong the anthropocentrism that, essentially, has caused the problems? It implies a viewpoint from which climate as such is in danger. The assumption is not that humanity is dependent on a certain climate, but that there would be no climate without mankind. It is hard to come up with a better example of the hubris of our time. For, as the historian Dipesh Chakrabarty puts it, if there is a crisis, “it is not a crisis for the inorganic planet in any meaningful sense” (Chakrabarty 2009, p. 217).

Ironically, then, in the midst of the raised awareness of the severity of the situation, the hubris of our civilization remains. Donna Haraway formulates it neatly: “The story of Species Man as the agent of the Anthropocene is an almost laughable rerun of the great phallic humanizing and modernizing Adventure, where man, made in the image of a vanished god, takes on superpowers in his secular-sacred ascent, only to end in tragic detumescence, once again” (Haraway 2016, p. 47). When Chakrabarty identifies two competing interpretations of the Anthropocene—on the one hand, the Anthropocene implies that humanity has acquired “the status of a geologic force”, on the other hand, that humanity has become responsible for its own situation—he captures this irony, only to split it in two (Chakrabarty 2009, p. 214). However, in both cases, death appears as something distant, something incomprehensible, something that is separate from us. It is at a place and time where humanity is not. Is it not exactly this way of thinking—the way of making claim on life and render death as something external, the way of ascribing agency to “us” (humans) and make nature/the climate/the planet dependent on our help—that results in a way of living that destroys its own conditions?

What is in crisis, then, is primarily neither the planet nor mankind, but a certain ideology—maybe *this* is the true content of the term “Anthropocene”. When the Anthropocene begins, or what the concept actually means, has, as is well known, been fiercely debated. Is it a result of the nuclear bombs? Or the steam engine and industrialization? Or did it start with the beginning of agriculture? Would “Capitalocene” be a more adequate term? Or “Eurocene”? “Technocene”? (see Malm 2018, p. 109; Haraway 2016, pp. 30–57; Sloterdijk 2015, p. 328; Haff 2014). The competing answers in themselves indicate that none of them are totally convincing—that may be the case with all attempts to establish historical starting points. Therefore, another answer lies close at hand: the Anthropocene is nothing new objectively, only ideologically. What is new is that we have been taken out of the modern illusion of having abolished death. That revelation *is* the Anthropocene. We have become aware of the finitude of humanity.

Hence, the aim of this article is to discuss what position, what subject, is implied in the current crisis consciousness, especially in relation to life and death. Who is, with a literary term, the *focalizer* of the climate narrative? This literary concept designates not the narrator of a story, but the position from which the things narrated are *seen*, the point from which the narration is given. “Focalization is the relationship between the vision, the agent that sees, and that which is seen”, as Mieke Bal writes in her seminal book *Narratology* (Bal 2017, p. 135). If we are facing the end of something—nature? civilization? humanity? the world?—, today, then the question is what this *narrative of an end* reveals about our understanding of life and death, and above all, about ourselves. To tackle these questions, I first turn to some contemporary thinkers, above all Martin Hägglund and Roy Scranton, and thereafter to a novel that thematizes the same issue, although written during another crisis: Herman Broch’s *The Death of Virgil* (*Der Tod des Vergil*, 1945).

2. My Life vs. Our Dying in the Anthropocene

Martin Hägglund’s influential work *This Life* is an argument against religion and political theology in favor of “Secular Faith and Spiritual Freedom”, as the subtitle reads. In a thorough discussion that leans on St. Augustine, Hegel, Kierkegaard, Marx, Knausgård, and many others, Hägglund lands in an argument for the need of another economical system. To a certain extent, *This Life* is in accordance with my own critique of an illusion of eternity belonging to our civilization. Hägglund emphasizes that life is finite, and that it is death that makes our lives meaningful. “Mortality is not only intrinsic to what makes life meaningful, but also makes life susceptible to lose meaning and become unbearable” (Hägglund 2020, p. 49). Death is a condition of our spiritual freedom—this is arguably the central idea of Hägglund’s rich book (p. 327). Yes, if life were not finite, it would not be life at all, he contends.

Accordingly, it would be unfair to say that death is not present in Hägglund’s argument. However, the way of reasoning tends to be quite binary: life stands against death, freedom against necessity, transcendence against immanence, human against non-human, natural against spiritual, without any dialectic or dynamic in between the categories. The dichotomies are clear and fairly fixed, and this goes, above all, for the crucial relationship between life and death.

Another eye-catching element is the possessive pronouns that often precede the central concepts: life and death are seldom spoken of in indefinite form. Instead, Hägglund repeatedly talks about “my life”, “my death”, “our life”, and so on. This is no coincidence. Ownership is an important factor in Hägglund’s reasoning. It is crucial, he argues, that *I*—not God or any capitalist—own my life. This ownership is, as he writes in a discussion of the Norwegian writer Karl Ove Knausgård, a prerequisite for a meaningful life: “it is only by owning our lives [. . .] that we have a chance at a meaningful existence” (Hägglund 2020, p. 98). Although he explains that life should not be considered “your sovereign property” (p. 94), it is to a high degree that impression that is conveyed. The importance of *owning* your life and your faith is also what is underlined in the conclusion—in the end, it stands out as the moral of the story (Hägglund 2020, pp. 360, 373, 389).

In accordance with this, Hägglund argues that the individual life should be understood as a “project”, something carried out by the self, something whose success is determined by the individual’s degree of commitment (pp. 180–81). The project is about achieving self-identity: to become what you are doing, to identify with your agency, to focus on yourself. Life is your belonging, your responsibility, your project. Even though Hägglund is building quite a lot on Marx, there is, I would argue, in this sense a strong liberal, or neo-liberal, tendency behind the central arguments.

Of course, this is not all there is to Hägglund’s book, but my point is that the view of life and death he conveys is quite typical of our time. The committed individual who owns his life and runs it as a project that aims to keep death at bay—is not this the liberal ideal of today in a nutshell? The climate issue, “and the possible destruction of the Earth” (Hägglund 2020, p. 8), is addressed rather briefly in the introduction and then in the

concluding discussion. Häggglund argues that “our ecological crisis can be taken seriously only from the standpoint of secular faith” (p. 9). Put differently, if we believe in eternal life, climate change is not really an issue. If that is a fair point, Häggglund’s way of addressing the problem (“our ecological crisis”) arguably gives rise to the opposite objection: if life is conceived as an individual “project”, are we then capable at all of grasping something that could somehow be *ecological*? Or is the very notion of ecology incompatible with the individualism that Häggglund leans on? Even though Häggglund does address the ecological crisis, it does not have any implications for how the questions are posed or how the basic categories are understood. The individual and his project *precede*, so to speak, the problem of global warming, which, accordingly, is not really done justice in the book. On the contrary, it is reduced to an aspect of the existence of the modern individual.

Even if Häggglund draws attention to capitalism, his attitude on the climate issue is in that respect similar to the current widespread tendency to play out the individual’s well-being against the planetary crisis. “What did you do this summer of fires and flooding?” as the headline of a column in Sweden’s leading newspaper recently read (Wiman 2021). The moralist edge of that question lies in the contrast between the severity of the fires and floods and the individual’s presumed well-being. Indirectly, the question thus reveals those who are excluded from the interpellation—the answer that is presupposed is not “I cleaned toilets and corridors at the hospital”, but rather “I was enjoying a wonderful vacation on the Maldives”. If there were no suppressed feeling of guilt, the rhetorical question would be quite pointless. However, does not the question also, unconsciously, disclose a fear or sorrow that lurks behind the moralism? A fear of losing the privileges one is enjoying. A sorrow that is accordingly connected to the desire to continue enjoying irresponsible charter trips, unlimited tourism, or just careless, lazy summer vacations.

The idea behind moral interpellations of this kind is of course that climate change demands a changed mindset and an increased commitment from all of us. The CO₂ emissions will not go down as long as the majority of the individual consumers of the Western world do not realize that all of their actions and choices matter, that all of us have to change our way of living. It is about “the uncanny realization that every time I turned my car ignition key I was contributing to global warming and yet was performing actions that were statistically meaningless”, as Timothy Morton neatly formulates it (Morton 2016, p. 19). Hence, the dilemma is that the very conception of the problem, and the indicated solution, reproduces the categories—the individual, the apocalypse, morality—that prevent us from rethinking, and possibly changing, the situation, the system, and the direction of human history. If everything depends on the morality of the individual, and the apocalypse is near, there is no need for *political* measures.

Against that background, Roy Scranton’s book *Learning to Die in the Anthropocene* is an intriguing object of comparison. Scranton’s work is a lot shorter than Häggglund’s, and with a narrower focus on the Anthropocene, but death is a central theme here as well—therefore it is relevant to compare the two books. The difference becomes visible already in the title: Häggglund’s life against Scranton’s death. The predicament is the same, but the focuses differ: is the question today how we should learn to live (Häggglund), or learn to die (Scranton)? Moreover, who is this “we”? A collective consisting of individual human beings with their individual life projects, or something larger—a society, a culture, or even a civilization? According to Scranton, the Anthropocene means that “we have to learn to die not as individuals, but as civilization” (Scranton 2015, p. 21). His book thus provides no recipe for how to solve the problems posed by global warming. Instead, it can be understood as a contemplation of the return of death in the sense I described earlier. “Across the world today, our actions testify to our belief that we can *go on like we are forever*: burning oil, poisoning the seas, killing off other species, pumping carbon into the air, ignoring the ominous silence of our coalmine canaries in favor of the unending robotic tweets of our new digital imaginarium. Yet the reality of global climate change is going to keep intruding on our collective fantasies of *perpetual growth*” (Scranton 2015, p. 22, italics added). Our collective fantasies of eternal life are under attack by the facts of climate

change. The challenge is not even that we are soon facing death, according to Scranton, it is about “understanding that this civilization is already dead” (p. 22).

Scranton gives culture, and especially literature, a crucial role in that challenge: “the only thing that might save us in the Anthropocene [. . .] is the only thing that can save those who are already dead: memory” (Scranton 2015, p. 95). Moreover, memory is what literature provides. Culture and literature are understood as a record of the dead, something that can give us an exclusive access to this heritage. “We must not abandon the memory of the dead,” Scranton also writes (Scranton 2015, p. 109). The idea, then, is that this record or memory contains a wisdom that we have to “keep alive” (Scranton 2015, p. 108).

But again, who is this “we”? Does it not, against the intention, also maintain the boundary between life and death? Does it not imply that death remains at a distance, somewhere else, just as in Hägglund’s discussion? Scranton would probably agree that there is something false in that conception. “Death begins as soon as we are born,” he states. At the same time, however, we are “impelled in our deepest being” to struggle against death (Scranton 2015, p. 89). However, is not this drive to struggle against death in a way also the core of the problem? And does not Scranton speak against his better judgement when he argues that we can “save ourselves” by turning to the past? For, as he writes in the book’s Coda: “Whether we survive or not, however, has already been laid out in the explosion of quantum energy that, more than thirteen billion years ago, began the chain of events and reactions that have led to this moment” (Scranton 2015, p. 116). Already, these quotations illustrate how Scranton sometimes refers to the life of the individual human being, other times to the life of the species or civilization. It is hard to avoid the impression that all of those subjects are not only facing the end, but are also *constituted* by the idea of an end. “What does one life mean in the face of mass death or the collapse of global civilization” Scranton asks. “How do we make meaningful decisions in the shadow of our inevitable end?” (Scranton 2015, p. 20). The objection lies close at hand: people have been suffering and dying from the effects of global warming for a long time. Even “mass death” has been seen before. Or to change the direction of the argument: without trying to diminish today’s problems, one may argue that people died by the Anthropocene already in the beginning of the 19th century, or to be more radical, already in antiquity. So how long is an “end”? Is not the idea of a “we” facing an exclusive, “collapse” or “inevitable end” today, part of an apocalyptic narrative that is more fiction than reality?

Does this mean that the political ambitions to halt global warming should be stopped, that we should focus on other problems? That is neither what Scranton is saying, nor what I am arguing. The point is, maybe, that we are talking about events on different scales when we are picturing “the end”. As Morton says: “In an ecological age, that there is no one scale on which to judge anything becomes ominously clear: Which scale should we use? Microbe? Human? Biosphere? Planetary?” (Morton 2017, p. 290). This is indeed an intriguing question. No matter if we are optimists or pessimists, the question is whether it is “my life” (Hägglund), “civilization” (Scranton), or even “nature” we have in mind when we are worrying about climate change. The scales and perspectives are seldom clear, but always present. Most of the time, the perspective of the human individual is both taken for granted and not really acknowledged. At the same time, there is a widespread tendency to presuppose a “we” that are facing the crisis together, neglecting, for example, the inequality regarding the possibilities to move or change “career” when the living conditions crumble due to climate change.

The problem is that individuality—my own life, and the accompanying life of my family—is the only form in which I can *feel* the crisis and, at the same time, fail to grasp it. Whether life on the planet will perish in a thousand years, a million years, or a billion years is of no relevance to this individual, human perspective. That is both an obstacle to our possibilities to say something critical, and an invitation to say something way too sentimental and self-centered. As Morton puts it: “In the absence of an authoritative scale, all art sinks into the uncanny valley called kitsch” (Morton 2017, p. 290), and that goes, one may add, not only for art, but for thinking as well.

3. Herman Broch and the End of the World

So, how do we learn to die? Where do we turn? Maybe to art, to aesthetics, to literature, as Scranton argues, with the risk of falling into the valley of kitsch pointed out by Morton. Maybe that risk is smaller, however, if we turn to a book written long before global warming became the pressing threat it has become today, namely Herman Broch's novel *The Death of Virgil*, published in German in 1945. What makes this novel productive in this context is not only that it seems to do what Scranton is asking for—keeping the memory of the dead alive—but also that it complicates what Scranton is saying, since it makes it hard to keep death and life apart.

The plot of the novel takes place in just a day or two, less than it takes to read it: Virgil arrives by boat to Brundisium (Brindisi) from Athens. He is ill, lying in bed. Some friends visit him—some of them are real, while some appear as imaginary projections from his own subconscious (Strelka 1975, p. 74). The most important visitor is the emperor Augustus. The conversation with him is over a hundred pages long. As the title says, Virgil finally dies, but “finally” may be the wrong word, since it is hard to tell when death actually occurs. Strangely enough, there is no clearly identifiable moment of death (that dramatic moment we have seen depicted in so many novels and films) in the novel; it is rather the case that the dying takes place throughout the length of *The Death of Virgil*,¹ and this is part of the reason for my interest: death is, so to speak, not a moment mastered by the narration. It is rather the case that dying permeates the book, from the first page to the last. Already in the sixth line of the first page, there is a remark about the “deathly loneliness of the sea” (“todesahnende Einsamkeit der See”) (Broch 1995, p. 11; 1958, p. 9). Moreover, accordingly, only twelve lines from the end, when Virgil is certainly dead, it is not death but birth that is thematized: “end was joined to beginning, being born and giving birth again and again” (“das Ende sich zum Anfang fügte, wiedergeboren, wiedergebärend”) (Broch 1995; 1958, p. 533).²

In a review from 1946, Otto von Simson remarks that “*The Death of Virgil* is beyond doubt one of the most extraordinary and one of the most haunting books this apocalyptic age has produced” (von Simson 1946, p. 258). This “apocalyptic age” does obviously not refer to climate change, but to Nazism, Hitler, the Holocaust, and the Second World War. Broch evidently began writing the book in 1935, in the form of a radio lecture entitled “Literatur am Ende einer Kultur” (Ziolkowski 1980, p. 6). For an Austrian author in the 1930s, to write about the decline of the Roman Empire was a way to address the contemporary political situation. The parallel between the Roman decline and the crisis of European civilization was by no means an original observation; it was rather a cliché, the scholar Theodore Ziolkowski argues (p. 9). In that perspective, it is not a drawback to the book that the problems today are of a different kind. On the contrary, one may argue that the book has acquired a new critical relevance in the era of global warming. Such a reading is in keeping with Joseph Strelka's argument, from 1975, that Broch's novel, “while focusing on the special time of crisis and transition Vergil [sic] experienced [. . .] presents it in such a general and symbolic way that it refers to our time of crisis and transition no less than of the times of Vergil” (Strelka 1975, pp. 71–72). Perhaps one could even argue that the book, in that respect, was ahead of its time. Theodor W. Adorno once remarked that “the truth content of artworks is the unconscious writing of history” (Adorno 1997, p. 192). If *The Death of Virgil* consciously is a literary reflection on the disaster to come in the 1930s, it may also be read as an *unconscious* reflection on a wider motive or change, something that was not visible to Broch, but nonetheless was already arriving, if it was not there already: the Anthropocene. In less pretentious words, the book's apocalyptic tone takes on a different resonance today, when it is not Nazism, but the climate that is the big problem humanity faces.

The novel consists of four parts, and it is the third part, “Earth—The Expectation” (“Erde—Die Erwartung”), that contains the long conversation between Virgil and Augustus. Augustus visits the sick Virgil for the sake of old friendship. They talk about old memories, but it soon becomes clear that Augustus has an errand: he wants to lay hands on the *Aeneid*, Virgil's great epic, because rumors have reached him—rumors that are true—that Virgil

intends to destroy his work before he dies. Moreover, since the epos is seen as a tribute to the Empire, such an act cannot be tolerated.

Their dialogue “leads into the innermost of Hermann Broch’s philosophy of art”, as Strelka writes (Strelka 1975, p. 72). In their long discussion, statesmanship is set against the art of poetry, politics against aesthetics, earthly issues against metaphysics, the individual against society, Greek against Roman, and not least life against death. At one point, Virgil states that there is no longer any task for the poet. Augustus answers, quite irritated: “No longer exists? No longer? You sound as though we were standing at the end of something . . . ” (“Nicht mehr gibt? nicht mehr? du tust als ob wir an einem Ende stünden . . . ”) (Broch 1995, p. 335; 1958, p. 368), and that is exactly what Virgil means. Not only does he stand at the end of his own life, but also, he senses, at a greater end. He does not answer immediately to Augustus’ agitated comment, but a few pages later, there is an indirect answer: “There is no time left and none to talk about art; art can do nothing any more, it is not able to annul time” (“Es ist keine Zeit mehr, und es ist nicht mehr erlaubt, über die Kunst zu reden; die Kunst vermag nichts mehr, sie vermag den Tod nicht aufzuheben”) (Broch 1995, p. 339; 1958, p. 373). This is uttered, not by Virgil, but by a slave in Virgil’s place (“The voice of the slave took over the answer” (“Die Stimme der Sklaven übernahm die Antwort”), as if the discourse is not really dependent on the subjects, as if Virgil and Augustus are just mouthpieces for a memory belonging to no one. Could not the same thing just as well be said today? When reading the latest IPCC-report, *Climate Change 2021: The Physical Science Basis*, one may certainly argue that there is no time left, and that art can do nothing about it. Then again, when was it different? What preceded the condition—the “No longer and not yet”—described by Virgil? Was there ever an art that was “timely” in the sense that it could annul death?

Maybe. What is indirectly depicted by Virgil is a fairy-tale state where art dictates reality, where the gods fight and quarrel, and where the heroes rise above the earthly limits, because the epic to which they belong allows them to do so. That era would thus be over, according to Virgil. Maybe it always was—the “Golden Age” is always something in the past. The poet can no longer cancel death, neither under Augustus’ reign, nor in the 1930s or today.

Or is it, after all, as Scranton claims, what all art is still capable of? That depends on what we mean by “death” and “life”.³ Are they opposites, or is their relation in fact more intricate? At one point in the discussion, when Virgil does not agree that his art is about understanding life, Augustus asks, once again roused by his adversary, what he has strived for in his poetry then. “The understanding of death” (“Die Erkenntnis des Todes”) Virgil quickly replies, and then adds: “Death is a part of life, he who understands life, understands death as well” (“Der Tod gehört zum Leben; wer das Leben erkennt, der erkennt auch den Tod”) (Broch 1995, p. 321; 1958, p. 353). Their discussion about life and death is long and winding, and thus hard to summarize. However, while Virgil refuses to keep life and death separate, Augustus insists on filling in the boundary between them, keeping death at a distance. While Virgil declares that “I am insatiable for life just because of my great hunger for death”, Augustus says that “Death has no meaning; it is futile even to talk of it” (“Der Tod ist nichts; es ist überflüssig, von ihm zu sprechen”) (Broch 1995, p. 322; 1958, p. 353). If Virgil meditates on the proximity to death, almost affirming the process of dying he is a part of, Augustus rather represents the modern decisionmaker, the one responsible for progress, but also for concealing death in the way Benjamin describes. Hence, he is also an incarnation of the dialectic of the Enlightenment, to speak with Horkheimer and Adorno. Augustus had, it is said at one point, “not even once noticed the darkening of the sun and the Poseidonian heaving of the ground, he had no intimation of the calamitous conflagration of the earth which had been in evidence and continued to be, he divined nothing of the coming overthrow of the creation” (“er merkte ja nicht einmal die Verdunklung der Sonne und das poseidonische Schwanken des Bodens, er ahnte nichts von dem Unheilsbrand der Erde, der sich in alldem wahrlich genügend deutlich ankündigte, er ahnte nichts von dem kommenden Einsturz der Schöpfung”)

(Broch 1995, p. 326; 1958, p. 359). Whether it is of ignorance or denial, death and suffering are kept at bay.

However, even if Virgil finally gives in and gives Augustus his epos, it is not Augustus who gets the last word in the book. In the short concluding part—“Air—The Homecoming” (“Äther—Die Heimkehr”)—, it is as if all dichotomies, identities, and boundaries are dissolved. Everything enters, it says, into a new interstate, “einem gemeinsamen Zwischenzustand”⁴ (Broch 1958, p. 488), which is also a form of community—“this was participation, it was partaking in the wholeness of doubly-reflected being” (“es war ein Teilhaftigwerden, es war ein Teilhaben an der Ganzheit des zwiefach verspiegelten Seins”) (Broch 1995, p. 445; 1958, p. 493)—and reconciliation: “there was no more division in the doubled new unity, the parts had closed to a difference-annulling communion” (“keinerlei Zweiteilung gab es mehr in der neuen zweiseitigen Einheit, das Zweigeteilte hatte sich zusammengeschlossen zu nimmermehr scheidbaren Einheitsgeschehen”) (pp. 445, 492). In an article about Broch, Hannah Arendt describes this as a “hope of redemption in which eventually beginning and end, the ‘no thing’ and the ‘universe’ will prove to be identical” (Arendt 1949, p. 482). One may note that this redemption also involves a certain plant-becoming, and a disintegration of the boundaries of the human, reminding quite a lot of post-humanist ideas of our time. The new interstate of life and death transgresses not only the individual, but also the form of the human, and the boundary between animals and plants.

What should be underlined here is that the course of events described in the last part of the novel appears as something objective. It is not Virgil or someone else who believes in redemption; what is depicted is not a subjective impression or opinion. The redemption is rather described as an objective state with an external focalizer. There are, however, some noteworthy exceptions to this narrative mode. On one occasion, in the very meditative flow of the narration, specific persons—Tibullus, Lucretius, and Sallust—are suddenly mentioned. However, as with virtually everything in this last part of the novel, they seem to be in a state of decomposition. It is as if they are being dissolved, their names are becoming unclear, and it is also uncertain if they are who they are said to be. Someone asks: “who were they? was that one there actually Tibullus, the melancholy Tibullus in his blighted youth? was that one Lucretius, great in the relentlessness of his powerful mania? was that one yonder not the manly Sallust, always at his ripe fifty from his first appearance to his last?” (“wer waren sie? war dies dort wirklich der Tibull, der schwermutvoll liebende Albius Tibullus in seiner welken Jugend? war dies dort der Lucrez, groß und hart vor gewaltigem Irresein? war dies dort nicht des Sallust fünfzigjährige Männlichkeit in ungewandelt unwandelbarer Reife”) (Broch 1995, pp. 443, 490). Who is asking this? Who is making those observations?

A narratological distinction may be helpful here: if the *voice* belongs to the narrator, the *gaze* belongs to the focalizer, as the narratologist Patrick O’Neill points out. The focalizer is “the perceived centre of consciousness” (O’Neill 1992, p. 333). What suddenly becomes visible in the names (Tibullus, Lucretius, Sallust), then, is precisely a focalizer that has not been there before. The mentioning of the names presupposes someone who is there in the crowd, someone who sees these persons, someone who has forgotten who these men were and yet vaguely remembers. Someone who once knew Tibullus, Lucretius, and Sallust. The uncertainty about the identity of the persons thus testifies to a focalization that is *internal*, in contrast to how the occurrences have been narrated up to this moment. With Bal, we could describe this as a shift in “focalization level” from an external to an internal focalization (Bal 2017, p. 143). In other words, we are suddenly inside of Virgil’s consciousness—it is *his* dying that is depicted, from inside. The seemingly objective occurrence is suddenly disclosed as utterly subjective.

However, is not that always the case? Is not all dying, all doom or downfall—all *Untergang*—necessarily subjective? This is the question that the depiction of Virgil’s death raises. How could the notion of “the end of the world” make any sense without a subject? Does not even the apocalypse presuppose a subjective gaze, someone from whose perspective everything goes under? Indeed, what would actually be going down, if not a certain

perspective? In that way, one could argue, that Broch's novel, to use Maurice Blanchot's phrase, "demystifies the apocalypse. It shows that the alternative of all or nothing [. . .] is far from being the only truth of our situation" (Blanchot 1997, p. 108). Blanchot is not talking about Broch but Karl Jaspers and the implications of the atomic bomb, though his point is valid in this context as well: the apocalypse is disappointing. It will always be limited. All or nothing is a false picture.

Maybe that is obvious. "Of course, what would the apocalypse be if not the downfall of a certain perspective?" However this is not how the "climate threat" (*klimathotet*)—as it is addressed in Swedish, and where it is always unclear if climate as such is under threat or if the current climate is threatening the rest of existence—and downfall is presented in the contemporary discussion. On the contrary, and as I argued previously, the problems with global warming are generally described as objective problems: the climate is under threat, the planet is in danger, nature is dying. Accordingly, we are urged to "save the climate", as if it was the planet or the atmosphere as such that needed our moral effort. Are we not, in those occasions, more self-absorbed than ever?

That even applies to Elizabeth Kolbert's influential narration of "the sixth extinction" (Kolbert 2014). There is no reason to doubt that she is right, but the extinction of species is neither new—in fact, that point is clear already in the very concept of the *sixth* extinction—nor unique to humanity. Moreover, the fact that species are dying out does not prevent new ones from arising. The biologist Chris D. Thomas argues that global warming actually seems to result in an increasing number of *new* species. As the subtitle (*How Nature is thriving in an Age of Extinction*) of his book *Inheritors of the Earth* indicates, he demonstrates that nature, in a way, also flourishes during the Anthropocene.

In any case, as Thomas emphasizes, there is no "'ought to be' state of the world" (Thomas 2017, p. 218), as many of the climate alarms imply: a temperature that is the right one, a level of carbon dioxide that is appropriate, a number of species that is correct, a time in history that was normal. "Nature just happens, and the distribution of species change—no slice of time has any more or less merit than any other. Like it or not, these biological gains will not go away, and more changes will take place in the future", Thomas writes (p. 218). What is unspoken in the idea of an "ought to be state" is precisely the focalizer: the subject that the story revolves around, the one whose perspective is narrated (see Bal 2017, pp. 132–48). The one which suddenly becomes visible in his absence in Virgil's last moments in the last quote.

That is: when we think of the normal temperature, healthy carbon dioxide level, right number of species or whatever entity that should be corrected, it is implied that it is right, normal or healthy *for humans*. Or, even narrower than that: right from the viewpoint of the subject who is the product and cause of modernity. Or, to paint a more concrete picture: right for, for example, the car-driving liberal academic, who goes skiing in the Alps with his family every winter and swimming on the West-indies every summer, financed by his lucrative investments in high-risk funds in Latin American copper mines, increasingly concerned about climate change.

Even the narrative of the extinction of species implies an external focalizer, a human perspective from which a moral concern may be raised. This point becomes clearer if we imagine earth before mankind. The number of species was either increasing or decreasing then as well, sometimes radically, other times less so—it would be hard to find a moment in the history of the earth when no species were disappearing. However, in contrast to today, it is also hard to make the point that, for example, the second or third extinction, to return to Kolbert, was unjust, or that they should have been avoided. The argument that the sixth extinction should be stopped presupposes a subject that is external to the narration, and yet at the same time internal to the course of events.

When politicians, journalists, or celebrities state that we have to save the climate, the focalizer is external, in narratological terms, and hence contradicting our true position, inevitably inside a climate. The climate becomes something "over there", to paraphrase Timothy Morton (2007, p. 160). This external position is implied in the very idea of a proper

or correct temperature. With the alternative, an internal focalizer, it is hard to see what such a temperature would be—normal to whom? Neither the climate nor life on earth will perish if the atmosphere becomes three or even ten degrees warmer, it is “only” human life that becomes difficult to maintain, not only the kind of “life projects” I described above, but sadly enough also the more vulnerable lives, with the smallest ecological footprints, lived in places such as Eritrea, Haiti, or Bangladesh.

Or, is there another side to this? There is something in this that is reminiscent of Jacques Derrida’s idea, formulated in the seminars on the death penalty, that death, the individual death, always means the end of the world: “Every time it dies [*ça meurt*], it’s the end of the world. Not of a world but of the world, of the whole of the world, of the infinite opening of the world. And this is the case for every living being: from the tree to the protozoa, from the mosquito to the human, death is infinite; it is the end of the infinite [*la fin de l’inifini*]” (Derrida 2017, p. 81). Here, the concept of “world” and the notion of infinity become crucial. For Derrida, the term implies something possible, a future, an opening. When someone dies, it means, as Jeffrey T. Nealon puts it, in Derrida’s view, the end of “the unique ‘world’ that [this] person had opened and inhabited” (Nealon 2017, p. 112). The death of the individual subject would thus bring everything with it.

In Broch, as we have seen, death means—not according to Augustus, but in the novel as a whole—that the distinction between subject and object is dissolved. As it is described in the last part, in a passage already quoted: “there was no more division in the doubled new unity, the parts had closed to a difference-annulling communion, to waiting as such, to listening as such, to breathing as such, to thirsting as such, and the waiting, the listening, the breathing, the thirsting, became the endless flood about him” (“keinerlei Zweiteilung gab es mehr in der neuen zweihafte Einheit, das Zweigeteilte hatte sich zusammengeschlossen zu nimmermehr scheidbaren Einheitsgeschehen, zum Warten selber, zum Lauschen selber, zum Atmen selber, zum Dürsten selber, und die unendliche Flutung, einbezogen in die Einheit, war das Warten, war das Lauschen, das Atmen, das Dürsten”) (Broch 1995, p. 445; 1958, p. 492). The sentence continues for another eighteen lines, as if the syntax—where clause is added to clause in a flow that continues page after page—becomes a picture of the new unit, the endless flood, a state where “Nothing held firm any longer, nothing had to be held onto” (“Nichts war mehr festzuhalten, nichts mehr brauchte festgehalten zu werden”) (pp. 446, 494). As if dying drags everything with it. Not only the division between life and death is annulled in the division that death opens, but also the difference between inside and outside.

This is presented as a reconciled state (even if we are placed within the fading, dying human body), or, as von Simson puts it: “the psycho-somatic phenomena of death, precisely analyzed and beautifully depicted, are here seen as a new kind of beatific vision” (von Simson 1946, p. 259). However, regardless of that, is it not a rather conceivable picture of the doom, downfall, and dying that we are experiencing today, both due to the pandemic and climate change? And is not this what contemporary depictions of doom tend to omit? Are not the images of death and the apocalypse that constantly wash over us—in TV series, newspaper columns, reports, news clips—in fact mostly about preserving the individual and his life project who are understood to be threatened? Protect and preserve him by externalizing the doom, making death something outside of us, something that paradoxically leaves the individual untouched?

Maybe life—or, more precisely, “the idea of a body that goes through time, manages an external world, and then arrives at its own end”, as Claire Colebrook puts it—“has always been figured through some narrative imaginary” that brings us further away from the question of life, a question that “seems to destroy narrative” (Colebrook 2014, p. 192). In other words, our ways of imagining and narrating our lives distance us from that which we tried to get at. A similar quandary is present in relation to the possibility of imagining death, according to Colebrook. In the place of an apocalypse, we should expect, she suggests, “a slow end”: “not an apocalyptic thought of the ‘beyond the human’ as a radical break or

dissolution, but a slow, dim, barely discerned, and yet violently effective destruction”, a destruction we are already part of (Colebrook 2014, p. 40).

Where does this leave us? Maybe with a somewhat changed view on *the end*. To get out of the apocalyptic perspective is not that easy, but perhaps we can open or dismantle it. On the one hand, the apocalypse can only be a constant threat lingering in the future (a “not yet” which somehow also becomes a temptation, a promise)—that is what the word denotes. On the other hand, the apocalypse is something that takes place all the time. A biotope is collapsing. A star goes out a hundred light years away. An animal is run over by a car. A COVID-19-infected demented person is dying alone in a retirement home short of staff. This is what the end of the world is. It has been taking place for a very long time.

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Notes

- ¹ Something similar is accomplished in Ingmar Bergman’s film *Viskningar och rop* (1972) (*Cries and Whispers*), where the central occurrence is the death of Agnes. However, even though Agnes certainly dies halfway through the film, she still appears and plays a role in the rest of the story as well and vice versa: when she is alive, in the first half of the film, dying is already manifest, in everything that happens. Living and dying are thus interwoven in a way that is hard to accept to the people in the film. *Viskningar och rop*. Directed by Ingmar Bergman. Sweden, 1972.
- ² This is of course also an aspect of the circular composition of the novel. “The most important unifying factor in *Der Tod des Vergil* is the detailed and meticulously elaborated circle composition”, the Swedish Broch-scholar Bengt Landgren states (“Den mest väsentliga enhetsskapande faktorn i *Der Tod des Vergil* utgör nämligen den i detalj genomförda och minutiöst utarbetade cirkelkompositionen”) (Landgren 1978, p. 64, my translation).
- ³ Broch himself, Landgren demonstrates, regarded death as an entrance to knowledge about the Absolute. Accordingly, death and life were “integrated parts in the all-encompassing, cosmic unity that liberates man from her death anxiety and simultaneously implies a knowledge of the transcendent reality”, Landgren writes (integrerade delar av den allomfattande, kosmiska enheten [sic] befriar människan ur hennes dödsångest och implicerar på samma gång en kunskap om den transcendentia verkligheten”) (Landgren 1978, p. 162, my translation).
- ⁴ This passage is actually missing in the English translation.

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