

VIRGIL AND  
THE AUGUSTAN  
RECEPTION

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## *Introduction: the critical landscape*

In fact these writers are on the lookout for any double meanings, even where one of the meanings renders nonsense. And so, when someone else speaks, they annoyingly interrupt, and when someone writes, they carry out their tedious and unintelligible interpretations.

AUCTOR AD HERENNIUM<sup>1</sup>

The time has passed, even in classics, when the assiduous discovery of “ambiguity” and “irony” was tantamount to superior insight and sophistication; these terms should be the scholar’s last resort, not the first, nor does their relentless repetition help make the case.

KARL GALINSKY<sup>2</sup>

From the preceding we take two lessons: (1) the possibility for ambiguous readings, and also the execution of such readings, existed and was acknowledged in Virgil’s time as in ours; (2) the critical response to the subversion of surface-meaning is always characterized by some form of anger, also then as now. Defamiliarization vexes because it makes our worlds less sure.

### *Foundational paradigm*

“Can one be certain about anything in this poem?” asks James O’Hara<sup>3</sup> during a discussion of the ambiguities of Jupiter’s prophecy

<sup>1</sup> 2.16 *omnes enim illi amphibolias aucupantur, eas etiam quae ex altera parte sententiam nullam possunt interpretari. itaque et alieni sermonis molesti interpellatores, et scripti cum odiosi tum obscuri interpretes sunt.* Translation based on H. Caplan (1964), as throughout for references to this work.

<sup>2</sup> Galinsky (1991) 478; *contra*, Perkell (1994).

<sup>3</sup> O’Hara (1990) 150.

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in *Aeneid* 1. With regard to Augustus, and his connection to the promise of a new golden age, the one certainty we have is the prophetic utterance of Anchises:

hic vir, hic est tibi quem promitti saepius audis  
Augustus Caesar, divi genus, aurea condet  
saecula qui rursus Latio regnata per arva  
Saturno quondam, super et Garamantas et Indos,  
proferet imperium. (Aen. 6.791–5)

This is the man, this is he who you are frequently told is promised to you, Augustus Caesar, offspring of a god, who will again found ages of gold in Latium through fields once ruled by Saturn, and will carry his power beyond the lands of the Garamantes and Indians.

So begins “the panegyric of Augustus delivered by Anchises in book six of the *Aeneid* (791–805), analyzed classically by Norden. In the larger context we find both *auxesis* [“amplification”] and *synkrisis* [“comparison”]: First, the achievements of peace, the re-establishment of the *Saturnia regna*. This historical fantasy contains an explicit comparison of the man Augustus to the god Saturn, a type of comparison which is one of the standard devices for creating hyperbole. Secondly, we have the achievements of war . . .”<sup>4</sup> In other words, the passage is Virgil’s (or rather Anchises’) clearest statement of Augustus’ restoration of the golden age, a potent metaphor for *pax Augusta*, and a theme recurring elsewhere in Augustan iconography, for instance on the *Ara Pacis*.

And no other theme was to find a more pervasive afterlife in the reception of Augustus by the subsequent leader cult of Europe, from Nero to Louis XIV to Mussolini. But the “achievements of war” and the furthering of *imperium* through military power sit somewhat uneasily with any traditional notion of *Saturnia regna*, which are usually distinct from and exclusive of warfare.<sup>5</sup> Virgil’s presentations of cultural systems are never as clear-cut as critics need them to be. So, for instance, the only other occurrence of the words *aurea saecula* is in the context of Evander’s characterization of Saturn’s peaceful rule in

<sup>4</sup> So Hardie (1986) 257; referring to Norden (1899). Cf. also Ryberg (1958).

<sup>5</sup> See Smolenaars (1987) for an attempt to reconcile Saturnian and Jovian notions of existence, essentially an Augustan hermeneutical enterprise.

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Latium, whose termination will be coincident with the coming of war:

aurea quae perhibent illo sub rege fuere  
 saecula: sic placida populos in pace regebat,  
 deterior donec paulatim ac decolor aetas  
 et belli rabies et amor successit habendi.

(*Aen.* 8.324–7)

Under that king were the centuries they call golden: so it was  
 he ruled the peoples in calm and peace, until gradually there  
 came in its place a worse age, tarnished, and the fury of war  
 and love of wealth.

And conversely there might seem to be something inconsistent between the restoration of a golden, or Saturnian, age and the subjection of the world to Roman *imperium*: it is Jupiter, after all, who is generally and emphatically responsible for granting that power: 1.278–9 *his ego nec metas rerum nec tempora pono: imperium sine fine dedi* “for the achievements of Rome I set no spatial or temporal limits: I have granted them empire without limit.” Anchises himself, a little later in *Aeneid* 6, will echo these words of Jupiter: *tu regere imperio populos, Romane, memento* (851). But let us move on to another reminiscence: Anchises’ words on his descendant, Augustus, particularly in the phrase *aurea condet | saecula*, recall those of Jupiter on his descendant, Romulus, *Mavortia condet | moenia* (1.276–7) – one will found centuries of gold, the other, martial walls. The golden age of *Eclogue* 4 had excluded war and walls – again the terms of the metaphor seem fluid and in tension if not contradictory.

A further reading subverts even the certainty of Anchises’ prophecy, whose language, as is characteristic of prophecy, communicates a profound ambiguity: *aurea condet | saecula* “he will found ages of gold” (792–3). The sense is based on analogy with phrases such as *moenia/urbem condere*, and it seems a fairly easy one. In fact, however, as the *ThLL* shows, the expression *saecula condere*, involving as it does an expression of time, is virtually unique within the group denoting the founding of cities, states, walls, and the like.<sup>6</sup> And yet this phrase, *saecula condere*, is found elsewhere in the *ThLL*, as it is found elsewhere in Latin literature, once before Virgil, in an author of great

<sup>6</sup> *ThLL* s.v. *condere* 153.36ff.

familiarity to Virgil: at Lucretius 3.1090, its sense is precisely the opposite of that “required” in the sixth *Aeneid*: *proinde licet quot vis vivendo condere saecla*, “therefore by living on you may lay to rest as many generations as you wish.” The *ThLL* lists this under the lemma “to bring a defined time to a close.”<sup>7</sup> The usage seems clearly to be based on the formal phrase *lustrum condere*, “to close out the census period.”<sup>8</sup> Lucretius elsewhere expresses the same idea in similar language (1.202 *multaque vivendo vitalia vincere saecla*; 3.948 *omnia si pergas vivendo vincere saecla*) – language which Virgil also modified and used at *Georgics* 2.295, *multa virum volvens durando saecula vincit*. Can he then have been unaware of Lucretius’ possible coinage of the phrase *saecla condere*, or of the sense it had for Lucretius? How are we to rule out the Lucretian sense at *Aeneid* 6.792–3? Virgil himself has, at *Eclogue* 9.52, *cantando puerum memini me condere soles* (“I remember as a boy closing out the days with song”), where the gerund *cantando*, as well as the sense of *condere*, may be seen as constituting a reference to *vivendo condere (saecla)* at Lucretius 3.1090.<sup>9</sup> Order may be restored by claiming that it is in Virgil’s manner to adopt the language of Lucretius and then effect a semantic shift, but this just confirms the fact that another reading, another meaning, is in play: the most certain Augustan utterance of the *Aeneid* is deeply ambiguous, capable of signifying the termination, not the foundation, of the golden age by Augustus. And Virgil could, with any of us, have excluded that ambiguity by writing *reddet* for *condet*, since this “founding” of Augustus’ is to be a restoration (cf. *quondam*).

There is a post-Virgilian occurrence of *saecula condere*, and it holds a parallel ambiguity which may confirm our suggestion. The bulk of Statius, *Silvae* 4.1 is in *prosopopoeia*, a speech in which Janus is made to deliver a lavish encomium of Domitian, including the following (37–8): *mecum altera saecula condet, | et tibi longaevi renovabitur ara Tarenti* “along with me you will ?found/?close out a second age, and Tarentum’s ancient altar will be reinaugurated.” L. Håkanson is clearly right in arguing that Janus is referring to the next *Ludi Saeculares*, of 198 AD, which Domitian and the god will witness together (having

<sup>7</sup> *ThLL* s.v. *condere* 152.19–27 “certum tempus finire.”

<sup>8</sup> *ThLL* s.v. *condere* 152.27–43; 153.38.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. also Hor. *Odes* 4.5.29 *condit quisque diem*; and see Usener (1875) 206 for further examples.

closed out the last one in 88; hence *altera*).<sup>10</sup> “Bring to a close” is the natural sense in Statius, as in Lucretius and Virgil.

Such a reading of the Virgilian occurrence, even when it is rooted in the only other instances of the phrase in classical Latin, will not be easily tolerated in the dominant, Augustan critical tradition, and the reception of the Lucretian intertext is instructive. The *ThLL* shows one way: separate the two phrases and place them under lemmas with opposite meanings, thus bolstering the act of hermeneutics with lexicographical *auctoritas*. Conington, unengaged ideologically, noted openly and honestly: “‘Condere saecula’ occurs at Lucr. 3.1090, in the sense of living through ages, seeing them to their end, as in E. 9.52. Here it can only mean to establish, like ‘condere urbem’ &c., though the analogy is not very close.” Forbiger likewise observes “Dictio autem *condere saecula* alio tamen sensu legitur ap. Lucr. 1.1103 (1090 Lachm.)” Norden noted: “the formula *condere saecula* (so Lucr. 3.1090 at verse end) is here used in a sense opposite to the original.”<sup>11</sup> The “parallel” seems to have become too disturbing for reflection, for the commentaries of Williams and Austin simply suppress any reference to Lucretius; for them, *condere saecula* in Lucretius ceases to function as intertext for *condere saecula* in Virgil. That is the safest course.

Two Virgilian interpreters some years ago grappled with the ambiguity. R. J. Getty was the first clearly to face the possibility that the phrase in question could mean “Augustus will bring an end to ages of gold.”<sup>12</sup> He argues that it is no great compliment to say that Augustus will restore the age of Saturn, unlike the implication that Augustus will function as a new Jupiter.

I. S. Ryberg also saw the ambiguity, but also saw the pitfalls of Getty’s reinterpretation, which she struggled to avoid: the phrase “hints, with ‘flattering ambiguity,’ that the founder of the new

<sup>10</sup> See Coleman (1988) 77–8, for good discussion of the issues, though we differ somewhat in our translations.

<sup>11</sup> Norden (ad loc.) then tries to avoid having the Lucretian sense subvert the Augustan sense by reference to Deubner’s study of *lustrum condere* “to close out a census period” (i.e. to store it away for future reference). Cf. *ThLL* s.v. *condere* 152.19ff. *certum tempus finire*; and 152.27ff. *lustrum condere*; see Norden ad loc.; and cf. Livy 1.44.2 *ibi instructum exercitum omnem suovetaurilibus lustravit, idque conditum lustrum appellatum, quia is censendo finis factus est*. But whatever the etymological realities of the phrase *lustrum condere* (see Ogilvie, ad loc.), it is clear that Livy, writing at the same time as Virgil, understood it as indicating a termination. Cf. Usener (1875) 204–6.

<sup>12</sup> Getty (1950).



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golden age will be like Jupiter, the son greater than his father who brought to a close the reign of Saturn. This would be a very subtle compliment, precariously poised between the implication of divinity contained in the comparison with Jupiter and the unfortunate linking of Jupiter with the Iron Age.”<sup>13</sup> Precarious indeed, given that in Virgil’s own outlook, in the *Georgics* and the *Aeneid*, Jupiter ends the golden age. Getty and Ryberg are better obliterated, and just as Williams and Austin drop the reference to Lucretius, so, for instance, strongly Augustan hermeneutics such as that of Hardie (1986) or Cairns (1989) discusses the lines but does not show awareness of the Lucretian meaning or the interpretations of Getty (who is in Cairns’ bibliography) or Ryberg.

Once we have recognized the parallel in Lucretius and the meaning of the model, we may claim inversion of Lucretius’ Latin, but we can hardly suppress the *possibility* that a Roman reader, not to mention a Roman poet who had absorbed the poetry of Lucretius, would have thought of the meaning of Lucretius as he read Virgil. C. Martindale has rightly criticized the classicist’s tendency to insist that a currently demonstrable meaning must be that adopted by the “original receivers,”<sup>14</sup> but it is even more implausible to suggest that such current meanings could be excluded from such reception. And so, in the current instance, the Lucretian meaning, troubling in its new Virgilian context, becomes activated by the reader’s recognition of the Lucretian sense of *saecula condere*. When that occurs, we get the following possibility:

This is the man, this is he who you are frequently told is  
promised to you, Augustus Caesar, offspring of a god, who will  
again close out ages of gold in Latium through fields once ruled  
by Saturn, and will carry forth his power beyond the lands of  
the Garamantes and Indians.

Why “again” (*rursus*)? Because such a termination has happened twice previously, once on the universal level at the hands of Jupiter himself in the *Georgics* (1.121–46),<sup>15</sup> but more importantly, from the perspective of Augustan time, it will have occurred in Italy, where the

<sup>13</sup> Ryberg (1958) 129.

<sup>14</sup> Martindale (1993b) 123.

<sup>15</sup> And the relationship between Jupiter and Octavian in the *Georgics* is an intimate one; cf. Thomas (1988) 1.1–42, 562; 4.560–1nn.

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race of Latinus, descendant of Saturn, will be supplanted by Aeneas, grandson and agent of Jupiter. Augustus, descendant of the Olympian Venus, and of Aeneas, will continue the civilizing work of his ancestors.<sup>16</sup> But of course ambiguity allows Virgil the response: “That is not what I meant at all. That is not it, at all.” To a hyperlogical response that Virgil could not have thought of immediate pre-Augustan Rome or Italy as a golden age, one could offer a figure such as Meliboeus at *Eclogue* 1.67–9: in political life one man’s golden age will be another’s age of iron. Nor need we see the text as politically subversive in and of itself. Augustus himself may not have objected to the lines with their Lucretian reading: aphoristic as he seems to have been, he will perhaps have had Virgilian quotes for many occasions; but it is worth mentioning the only quote actually ascribed to him is from a speech of Jupiter (“look, ‘Romans, masters of the world, a race of toga-wearers!’” “en ‘Romanos, rerum dominos, gentemque togatam’”):<sup>17</sup> perhaps Augustus embraced the role Virgil mapped out for him, and not just in the Greek East.

The lines have provided an exemplary range of approaches for Augustan critical control when Virgilian ambivalence is at issue: the reordering of the lexicographer, the denial of Conington and Forbiger, the philological argumentation of Norden, the silence and suppression of Williams and Austin, even the exegetical efforts of Getty and Ryberg, and the corresponding silence of Hardie and Cairns – these are just some of the chains binding the text of Virgil in its Augustan confinement.

#### *Theoretical paradigm*<sup>18</sup>

In the course of a discussion of *emphasis*, “the use of language in such a way as to imply more than is actually said,”<sup>19</sup> Quintilian (9.2.64–99) first gives a notorious example from Virgil, on whose meaning or meanings critics are still at odds,<sup>20</sup> then a second from Ovid (*Met.*

<sup>16</sup> *Aen.* 1.286 ff. (pace Austin ad 6.792) does not deal in terms of a return to a golden or Saturnian age.

<sup>17</sup> Suet. *Aug.* 40, quoting *Aen.* 1.282.

<sup>18</sup> This section is a condensed version of Thomas (2000b), a synchronic treatment of ambiguity in Virgil, and of the terminology used to describe it.

<sup>19</sup> So *OLD* s.v. *emphasis*.

<sup>20</sup> *Aen.* 4.550–1 (*non licuit thalami expertem sine crimine vitam | degere more ferae*), on whose possible meanings see, conveniently, Austin’s commentary.

10.422), and he then focuses his attention on a particular type of this figure, a type

wherein through a certain innuendo we intend something unspoken to be communicated not as an opposite, as in “irony,” but some “other” meaning which lies hidden and is as it were to be found by the reader . . . It is used in three circumstances: first *if speaking openly is unsafe*, second, if doing so is unseemly, and thirdly it is employed for the sake of elegance, and brings more pleasure through its novelty and variety than it would if directly spelled out.<sup>21</sup> [emphasis added]

This type is identified in particular with rhetorical exercises in the schools, but that does not lessen its potential presence in literary contexts, as has been well demonstrated by F. M. Ahl, in the seminal work on *emphasis* in Roman, and particularly Neronian, literature.<sup>22</sup> Quintilian, in the following discussion of this first type of *emphasis* (67–75), talks of the delicacy of the figure, stressing that it will only succeed if the utterance may be understood in a different way (67 *aliter intellegi possit*); if the danger can be avoided by ambiguity of expression (*ambiguitate sententiae*), the hidden sense will be approved. Some will object that this is not a situation appropriate to the relationship between Virgil and Octavian/Augustus. I will address that issue shortly; for now I am concerned to establish it as a principle of composition recognized in the Greek and Roman rhetorical traditions, and therefore fully accessible to Virgil.

Discussion of this figure is in fact found already in Demetrius’ *De elocutione* 282–94, and one example is particularly relevant to our enquiry (291):

Words are often used with equivocal meaning. If anyone wishes to practice this art and to deal in censures which seem unintentional hits, he has an example ready to his hand in the passage of Aeschines about Telauges. Almost the entire account of Telauges will leave one puzzled as to whether it is eulogy or satire. This ambiguous way of speaking, although not irony, yet has a suggestion of irony.

<sup>21</sup> Quint. 9.2.65–6 (*genus*) in quo per quandam suspicionem quod non dicimus accipi volumus, non utique contrarium, ut in εἰρωνεία, sed aliud latens et auditori quasi inveniendum . . . Eius triplex usus est: unus si dicere palam parum tutum est, alter si non decet, tertius qui venustatis modo gratia adhibetur et ipsa novitate ac varietate magis quam si relatio sit recta delectat.

<sup>22</sup> Ahl (1984).

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The topic seems to have interested Virgil's friend Philodemus.<sup>23</sup> More importantly, it had made the transition into the rhetorical Latin handbooks before the birth of Virgil, who would have studied and applied it during his rhetorical training in Milan (or wherever he studied), in a period where the dangers of speaking openly will have been demonstrated frequently enough. For Greek *emphasis* the *Rhetorica ad Herennium* gives Latin *significatio*, a term which shifts the focalization from passive to active, from reader to author or speaker: authorial intention is suggested, with the producer creating the sign, a phenomenon only implied in the figure of *emphasis*:

*Significatio* is the figure which leaves more to be suspected than has been specified in the speech. It is produced by hyperbole, ambiguity, logical consequence, aposiopesis, and analogy.<sup>24</sup>

So far from being a preoccupation of modern scholars, in the view of ancient theoreticians *emphasis*, Latin *significatio*, is a reality of ancient rhetorical theory and practice, a virtue of speech and a figure to be cultivated. As early as Aristotle, deliberate and intended ambiguity is implicitly a feature of the orator's "speaking correct Greek" (ἑλλη-νίζειν).<sup>25</sup> With reference to Virgil, it is difficult to see why "these terms should be the scholar's last resort, not the first."<sup>26</sup>

While it is true that the existence of a rhetorical theory, even if it has been applied to poetic theory, will not prove the existence of a phenomenon in poetry, nevertheless, in a context in which critics resistant to forms of ambiguity forbid us to find it on the grounds that

<sup>23</sup> Philodemus, *Περὶ ποιημάτων* 5.30.6–12 Mangoni ἡ δὲ σύνθεσις λέξεως ἐναργῶς καὶ ἐμφατικῶς τὴν ὑποτεταγμένην διάνοιαν [σημαίνουσα]{ν} κοι[ν]ή [γ' ἔσ]τι καὶ λόγου παντὸς ἀρετή{ς} "the composition of words which signifies the underlying thought vividly and forcefully/allusively is something universal and a virtue of every discourse." On this difficult sentence, and for the possible ways of taking ἐμφατικῶς, see Gaines (1982) 77–8; with scepticism from Rutherford (1988) 128–9. Asmis (1992) 402–3 argues that ἐνάργεια and ἐμφασις are opposite and complementary terms, referring alternately to vividness and allusiveness, particularly characteristic of the metaphorical quality of poetry – a position allowed by Mangoni (1993) 302–3. On the relationship of Virgil and his group with Philodemus, see Gigante (1989), (1990).

<sup>24</sup> *Rhet. ad Her.* 4.67 *significatio est res quae plus in suspicione relinquit quam positum est in oratione. ea fit per exsuperationem, ambiguum, consequentiam, abscisionem, similitudinem.* The parallel with Demetrius *De eloq.* 286 suggests that *ambiguum* more closely resembles *emphasis*, while that with Quintilian approximates *emphasis* to *significatio*.

<sup>25</sup> Aristot., *Rhet.* 1407a19.

<sup>26</sup> Galinsky (1991) 478.

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the “ancients” did not deal in such matters, it is worth noting the presence of those phenomena in the texts that would have been represented in the educational curriculum of the poet in question. Moreover, Virgil and Quintilian are part of the same world, and Virgil’s genius in controlling all the tools of ancient rhetoric needs no argument.<sup>27</sup> It is my assumption throughout that the poetry of Virgil came into being under the first of Quintilian’s three circumstances, when a poet of genius operates in a time of political upheaval and uncertainty, and in the context of political danger – again, in Quintilian’s words, when “speaking openly is unsafe.”

Aulus Gellius preserves an interesting exchange on the subject of intended ambiguity. In discussing the views of Chrysippus and Diodorus, he has the former, an ancient deconstructionist of sorts, claiming that every word is ambiguous, since two or more meanings can be taken away from the same word. Diodorus counters that no word is ambiguous, since no word should be perceived with a meaning different from that intended by the speaker. If that does occur then the issue has to do with obscurity rather than ambiguity. The nature of an ambiguous word ought to be such that the person who uttered it uttered two or more things. But nobody who perceives himself to be saying one thing utters two or more things.<sup>28</sup> That Diodorus can argue thus is clear evidence that Chrysippus and others subscribe to a theory of fully intended ambiguity. This obviously brings up all sorts of issues, but it will be useful throughout to assume a text’s intended ambiguity or *emphasis*. As G. B. Conte has put it:<sup>29</sup>

Certainly it will be difficult, in some cases very difficult, to rediscover the true intention of the texts. But without the tension that drives us to seek an original intention in the literary work, our very relation to these works loses any real interest. I see no other protection from the arbitrary incursions of many modern interpreters, who may be eager readers but whose views are often unconsciously alien to the original historical contexts and cultural codes.

<sup>27</sup> *Vita Donati* claims (50–3) that he even carried out a court case, though his voice was not up to the job. See Horsfall (1995) 9 on Virgil’s oratorical training.

<sup>28</sup> Gellius 11.12.

<sup>29</sup> Conte (1994) 3.

The hidden quality of much of Virgilian ideology is in my view intended (cf. *quod . . . accipi volumus*, in Quintilian's Latin, where the producer of meaning is the subject). At least it is intended on the atomic level of the individual word, phrase and so on. The full global effect of Virgil's poetry, and the force of the accumulation of these utterances, is perhaps a different matter, and may have to do with its acquiring a momentum and dimension that went even beyond those intentions. That full meaning will always be what we construct, but its building blocks are identifiable and susceptible to philological hermeneutics. This global effect is I think what Ralph Johnson, one of Virgil's finest readers, meant when he wrote: "In the *Aeneid* the extreme discrepancy between artistic method and ethical dilemma returns and widens and produces a heartbreaking, disconsolate poem that is too big for poetry, that cannot be constrained by the limits of art and explodes its frame."<sup>30</sup>

### *Roman boys and men reading Virgil*

One refuge of the Augustan reader has always been to invoke "modern sensibility," an impulse, it is claimed, that leads *other* readers to emotions that do not exist in the world before Christ, and to "misread" Virgil under the influence of those emotions. As J. Griffin, standing back from the issue, put it: "Some are tempted to read the *Aeneid* simply as endorsing our modern emotions; others, to dismiss as anachronistic the idea that Virgil expressed any reservations about empire at all."<sup>31</sup>

In Virgilian criticism, "modern" is code for "wrong," generally referring to oppositional readers of Virgil, and of his view of principate, empire and civilization. Such an attitude fails to take into account that all reading is a construction, and we will continuously address the pervasively modern construction that lies at the heart of Augustan readings later on. While we need not think of Dido committing a Christian sin, nor hold Aeneas to the standards of Christ, it is equally a critical shortcoming in terms of the Virgilian genius, and

<sup>30</sup> Johnson (1981) 50.

<sup>31</sup> Griffin (1984) 213. For similar distancing see Harrison (1990) xxi: "Some modern readers, more mindful of the darker side of great achievements, have taken a different view."

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of Greco-Roman social and philosophical realities, to deny to this poet a complex range of emotional responses on such issues.

H. P. Stahl suggests that Virgil's outlook may be closer to that of the twelfth-century Greek heroic code (whatever that looked like).<sup>32</sup> Why is that any more "objective" or likely than suggesting it is closer to possible outlooks in post-Civil War or post-Vietnam America, or between-the-wars Europe, ages afflicted by demonstrably parallel disasters, and, like the late Roman republic, with civil discord, political upheaval and private and public loss in their immediate experiences? And just as Greco-Roman rhetorical theory allows intentional authorial ambiguity, so, *prima facie*, does it imply that diverse readings can coexist. Does the *Iliad* simply depict the hero's fame in killing and disfiguring his enemies or practicing human sacrifice? Even if we argue that it does, is that likely to have much to do with a culture (late Republican Rome) whose ethical systems (Stoicism in particular) resemble much more the Christianity that they helped shape than the Homeric code which the *Aeneid* adapts to a very different culture?<sup>33</sup> Stahl again: "The reader (I am not here thinking of the Homeric or Vergilian scholar of the twentieth century AD, but rather of the Roman boy or man who, in the new national epic, learns to admire his emperor's ancestor . . .)"; as if that reader were any easier to construct, or had one face. Did a "Roman man" such as Ovid really learn such admiration through the *Aeneid*?

A well-known passage from the Suetonian *Life* (*Vit. Verg.* 44) preserves a valuable if disputed piece of information:

M. Vipsanius a Maecenate eum suppositum appellabat novae  
cacozeliae repertorem, non tumidae nec exilis, sed ex  
communibus verbis atque ideo latentis.

Marcus Vipsanius used to call him bastard of Maecenas and  
discoverer of an affected style, not overblown or understated,  
but coming from everyday words and therefore of hidden  
nature.

Although the matter has been much disputed, my own view, like that of others, is that the disgruntled individual is indeed M. Vipsanius

<sup>32</sup> Stahl (1990) 181.

<sup>33</sup> Haarhof (1949) 30ff. (viz. 34) on the relation of Stoicism and Calvinism (and on Christianity in general).

Agrippa, a contemporary reader of Virgil who surely read the “new national epic.” And even if, following H. Jocelyn, we assume the reaction is from an otherwise unknown Vipranus of the MSS, here we have the reader response of a contemporary Roman “boy or man.” We cannot be sure of the precise sense of *cacozelia* here, beyond its vague and broad meaning of “affectation.”<sup>34</sup> But Quintilian’s definition is of interest: “a stylistic corruption consisting of the use of improper diction, redundancies, obscurity of meaning, feeble arrangement, or a childish straining for synonym or ambiguity.”<sup>35</sup> The language is close to that describing *emphasis*, and what Agrippa or Vipranus/Vipsanius seems to object to is the hidden meaning (*latentis*) that occurs through this “defective” use of everyday words (*ex communibus verbis*). Could Augustus’ friend and general have had in mind a phrase such as *aurea condet saecula* – everyday words indeed, but difficult and covert when so combined?

I have chosen not to treat Lactantius and Augustine, whose well-known responses to the *Aeneid* are strong Christian readings, particularly the reaction to Aeneas’ (or Virgil’s) failure of compassion at the end of the poem. At the same time I fully recognize that such Christian readings are embedded in any number of other readings, Augustan or otherwise, that I will be engaging or practicing.<sup>36</sup> In what follows, I have assumed, without, I hope, falling victim to demonstrable and egregious anachronism, that most of the spiritual and emotional responses to the world that are accessible to us were also accessible to Virgil. I take as my justification the closing words of K. W. Gransden’s *Virgil’s Iliad*:

The modern reader may invest Aeneas with a greater range of insight and choice than he could have possessed for his creator, and may also create an implied author with access to value-systems which lie in fact beyond the limits of the poem and of the pagan world. Yet the reader, importing these, is not, save in the narrowest and most scholastic sense, “misinterpreting” the *Aeneid*. Indeed, *he may be uncovering a more significant text*, one

<sup>34</sup> Cf. Görler, *EV*, s.v. *cacozelia*. Also Jocelyn (1979); Horsfall (1995) 225–6; White (1993) 265, n. 55.

<sup>35</sup> Quintilian 8.3.57 *corrupta oratio in verbis maxime impropriis, redundantibus, comprehensione obscura, compositione fracta, vocum similibus aut ambiguarum puerili captatione consistit*.

<sup>36</sup> My reasons here have to do with the fact that these two are ultimately using Virgil for Christian exegesis, rather than aiming at Virgilian exegesis.



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that may be related to a greater range of insights into history and humanity.<sup>37</sup> [emphasis provided]

In the final analysis, modernity may in fact coincide with antiquity, for Gransden seems to be prescribing attention precisely to the *Ad Herennium's significatio*, to finding, along with Quintilian and against the discouragement of modern critics that “other meaning which lies hidden waiting to be discovered by the reader” (9.2.65 *aliud latens et auditori quasi inveniendum*).

#### *Writing or reading ambiguity?*

In an important article that best lays out the theoretical aspects of Virgilian ambiguity, and situates investigation of it not so much in the theory of antiquity, but rather in that of Empson, New Criticism and post-structuralist criticism, C. Martindale poses and explores the central question “Is the uncertainty of a meaning in the author’s control, or in the reader’s?”<sup>38</sup> From the perspective of deconstruction in particular, the question and the distinction may not matter much, though Martindale never quite says that. And he is surely right in saying (120) that “texts may, or may not, be ‘undecidable,’ in a post-structuralist sense, but they are not uninterpretable.” And in interpreting ambiguity, I will, for the sake of being able to conduct critical discourse at all, assume the ambiguity is not a result of linguistic accident, but is, much like the intertextual references, part of the poet’s artistry. Here I find myself most sympathetic with C. Percell, who well applies the reception criticism of Stanley Fish to Virgilian ambiguity.<sup>39</sup> Specific instances of ambiguity attain canonical status, as the shared experience of such ambiguity (are they Dido’s or Aeneas’ tears at *Aeneid* 4.449?)<sup>40</sup> tends to reify it – as does the continual attempt to remove it. At that point the ambiguity is implicitly authorial as much as it is reader-driven.

Finally, as we shall see in the chapters ahead, the number of ambiguities that attach to moments in this poet when the issues of power, loyalty, civilization and the like are at stake forces the reader back to Quintilian’s third category and at least to the likelihood of authorially centered political ambiguity.

<sup>37</sup> Gransden (1984) 217.      <sup>38</sup> Martindale (1993b) 120–1.      <sup>39</sup> Percell (1994).

<sup>40</sup> On this, see Martindale (1993b) 120–1.

*Fighting in the captain's tower:*

(1) What is a Classic?

The assumption of classicism has always been the dominant mode of Virgilian criticism, long before T. S. Eliot's 1944 Presidential Address to the Virgil Society set that assumption in stone. That is what happens when a poet is taught in his own lifetime and when his particular style attains a normative status, and becomes a sort of cultural, linguistic and even religious *koine*. From Servius and before him critics have tended to monumentalize Virgil. He is so well known, in part because his epic so early became the central literary icon of Augustanism. But from many perspectives he is stranger and less classical even in the *Aeneid* than he came to be, just as Shakespeare was stranger than he has come to be through four centuries of performance, reading and teaching.<sup>41</sup> A school text, which is what Virgil has been from the beginning, will of necessity establish its own diachronic classicism, which may well be at odds with the synchronic anti-classicism inherent in the realities of its composition.

The strangeness of Virgil, his *audacia*, as he put it, may be related to his Callimachean and Alexandrian (rather than his classical) essence. It is not coincidental that resistance to accepting the Callimacheanism of Virgil is usually coupled with promotion of its classicism and insistence on its optimistic Augustanism. E. Fantham reveals a romanticist core when she writes: "It is no small paradox that [Thomas] praises Vergil so often as 'elegant' and 'artful' yet reads Vergil's recognition of hardship and sorrow as an almost bitter pessimism not just about nature but about human nature."<sup>42</sup> Why is that a paradox? Of what other great artist do we insist on optimism about human nature? And whence the assumption that elegance and artfulness, stylistic phenomena, must be accompanied by optimism? It is surely the perceived, and required, classicism of Virgil, along with the ultimate impact of Augustus on Europe, that leads to such an insistence. The *Aeneid* can be as odd and as aware of its artifice as a poem like Ca-

<sup>41</sup> See Bloom (1994) 4 "One mark of an originality that can win canonical status for a literary work is a strangeness that we either never altogether assimilate, or that becomes such a given that we are blinded to its idiosyncracies."

<sup>42</sup> Fantham (1991) 167.

tullus 63 or 64; that awareness may be camouflaged by the traditional genre of the poem, but it constantly comes through, and subverts the “sublime” veneer of the poem. For a critic such as G. O. Hutchinson, Virgil in the *Aeneid* is engaged in a “continuous endeavour for extremes of ὑψος, of intensity, elevation, sublimity,” with the result that “the essential nature of the poem forces out the effects which characterize Hellenistic poetry.”<sup>43</sup> And so, in a long chapter on the reception of Hellenistic poetry in Rome, Virgil’s poem receives only one page. I would argue on the contrary that the expectation of sublimity makes its disruption all the more powerful when that occurs. This holds in obvious places, with the foundation poetry of *Aeneid* 3 or the transformation of ships to nymphs (*Aen.* 9.77–122), at which point our classicizing or sublimizing traditions cry out “lapse!” or “unfinished!”, but it seems to me true throughout. Particularly with Virgil’s ideology, the critical effort has been towards stabilizing and classicizing, because the *Aeneid* in particular has had to stand for Rome, and Rome is the cultural anchor of Europe. Bakhtin subscribes to this reception myth when he asserts, as a way of prioritizing the novel as the genre of dialogue and resistance, that epic is a genre in which only the voice of the dominant culture is heard.<sup>44</sup> That is easily refuted by any number of models, but it is the received view of epic and of Virgilian epic in particular, and it needs constantly to be tested. On the levels of style, syntax, words, metrics – and politics – Virgil tends to be viewed as normative, as being at the heart of the “classical” Augustan age, although recent scholarship has contested this status.<sup>45</sup> Normativity is constructed by familiarization, classicism is a notion that works backwards, is diachronic and retrospective, for the subsequent tradition could only deal with Virgil by anchoring him in some fashion, by back-forming classicism onto him.

W. R. Johnson has written of a certain body of poetry in the Western tradition that he calls “counter-classical,” poetry that

has been too frequently misjudged both as to its nature and to its quality by critics whose temperaments and training lead them to require of it things it does not offer. This kind of

<sup>43</sup> Hutchinson (1988) 328–9.

<sup>44</sup> Bakhtin (1981) 3–40; see also Watkins (1995) 5.

<sup>45</sup> See Conte (1993) for good instances of the strangeness of Virgil’s Latinity; also Horsfall (1995) 225–31; and now O’Hara (1997) 241–58.

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poetry is created not to refute the moral experience that classical poetry reveals but to view that moral experience in another way. Counter-classical poetry tends to underline possibilities of disharmony even as classical poetry tends to underline possibilities of harmony; where classical poetry attempts affirmations of man's capacities or his perfectibility or his nearness to God, counter-classical poetry attempts to stress man's weakness and his limitations; baldly, Homer and Pindar tend to show us, in quite different ways, human beings who have regained their health or who are naturally healthy or who are beyond health or sickness; Ovid and Horace tend to show us, in quite different ways, human beings who may yet be saved.<sup>46</sup>

It is telling that Johnson, who has read so well beyond Virgil's classicism, does not adduce Virgil on either side of this divide. His silence implicitly situates Virgil in the gap between classical and counter-classical. Indeed, it could be argued that all poetry contains the seeds for questioning the values that the classical is thought to uphold, and there is, I think, a more fundamental question that needs to be asked, namely whether the notion of "classical" is not one that emerges from a particular set of interpretations, and, like all interpretation, is really a matter of reception more than anything else.

It is worth citing Eliot's assumptions about the conditions of Virgil's writing, assumptions which led him to see the *Aeneid* as the classic *par excellence*: "We expect the language to approach maturity at the moment when men have a critical sense of the past, a confidence in the present, and no conscious doubt of the future."<sup>47</sup> All but the first of these conditions is problematic for Virgil and for the time of Virgil's writing, but Eliot is just expressing a received and entrenched view of anachronistic Augustanism, unsullied by the realities of the years in which Virgil was formed and wrote, an Augustanism created long after the death of Virgil. It is significant that Eliot's essay appealed to the likes of Hans Oppermann, who published a translation of it along with other exclusively German, and ideologically interesting, articles in his 1963 "Wege der Forschung" volume on Virgil – a volume we shall explore in Chapter 7.

<sup>46</sup> Johnson (1970) 126.

<sup>47</sup> Eliot in Kermode (1975) 119. For a recent view of Eliot on Virgil, more sympathetic to the former's engagement than mine, see Kennedy (1995) 73–94.

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Eliot's chief focus on the text of Virgil has to do with a passage whose interpretation is far from closed (123):

But I have always thought the meeting of Aeneas with the shade of Dido, in Book VI, not only one of the most poignant, but one of the most civilized passages in poetry . . . The point, it seems to me, is not that Dido is unforgiving – though it is important that, instead of railing at him, she merely snubs him – perhaps the most telling snub in all poetry; what matters most is that Aeneas does not forgive himself – and this, significantly, in spite of the fact of which he is well aware, that all that he has done has been in compliance with destiny, or in consequence of the machinations of gods who are themselves, we feel, only instruments of a greater inscrutable power . . .

That sounds civilized, as suits a classical, mature poem, but what happens when we look to Virgilian composition in these very lines? Virgil here reworks a mock-epic line of Catullus, a line spoken by a lock of hair and used by Aeneas precisely at the moment when we expect his greatest maturity. Aeneas' famous disclaimer to the shade of Dido "unwillingly, queen, did I quit your shore" (*Aen.* 6.460 *invitus, regina, tuo de litore cessi*) famously invokes the lock's amusing disclaimer to Berenice in Catullus 66.39: "unwillingly, queen, did I quit the top of your head" *invita, o regina, tuo de vertice cessi*. The intertext, once activated, subverts and explodes the maturity and classicism desiderated by Eliot, who was unaware of it. And no amount of hermeneutical activity has been able to remove this powerful subversion. It is indeed in the activation of intertextuality, particularly Hellenistic and neoteric intertextuality, that the *Aeneid's* evasion and subversion of its own potential classicism is most observable.<sup>48</sup> This may help to explain the relationship between the Augustan reading and resistance to the presence of Hellenistic intertexts.

Graves, of course, more troubled by tyranny as he was, threw Virgil out with Augustus, dismissing him as the toady that he would be from the perspective of Syme's Augustus.<sup>49</sup> But between Eliot and

<sup>48</sup> As, for instance, when the Polyphemus of *Aen.* 3.641–83 functions not simply in a Homeric tradition, but is also recognizably informed by the romance Polyphemus of Theocritus, and the adaptation of that figure into *Ecl.* 2's Corydon; cf. Thomas (1996) 239–41.

<sup>49</sup> Graves (1962).

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Graves there is a middle ground, which involves examining the very status of Virgil as an Augustan poet. For constructions of Virgil's classicism and his Augustanism are inextricably involved, and subversion of one disrupts the other. The Augustan element was always there, and to that extent Virgil the poet is no subversive: the Augustan triumphs, and, like Augustus, that is all that is left standing at the end of the day, but subversion comes by recognition of the other possibilities present in that triumph.

#### (2) Virgil as monument

In G. B. Conte's *Latin Literature. A History*, under the subtitle "The overthrow of the epic genre" (443) we find reference to the Roman epic before Lucan as "a monument erected to the glories of the state and its armies." And on the next page, on Lucan and the *Aeneid*:

Lucan seems to propose a systematic refutation of the model by virtually overturning its assertions, a polemical (or "antiphastic," as it has been called) rehandling of Virgilian expressions and situations. This new type of allusiveness is sustained by a tone of resentful *indignatio* towards the model. It is as if Virgil had perpetrated a deception in the *Aeneid*, covering in a veil of mystification the end of Roman liberty and the transformation of the old Republic into a tyranny. Lucan seems to set himself the task of unmasking the deception . . .

Lucan as Robert Graves, it seems. No examples are given, and we shall return to the question of the *nature* or *interpretation* of Lucan's Virgilian intertextuality. The fact is that it becomes necessary for critics to stabilize, monumentalize, and broadly characterize the ideology of the model, in order that the subversion by the later poet may be explored. For the scholar of Ovid or Lucan in particular, having an ideologically ambiguous Virgil would only complicate the task at hand. But the reality is that the seeds of subversion are already inherent in that text, which makes the relationships these poets have to Virgil much less simple and simply confrontational, potentially more collaborative.

The view of Virgil as Classic is for many endemic and unquestioned: Averil Cameron writes in the introduction to an essay by Maria Wyke on Roman elegy: "Reading the Roman elegists . . . lets

us think the Romans are like us, not all serious, grand and noble like Virgil, but prone to romantic passion, liable to make mistakes, even rather absurd.”<sup>50</sup> Let us forget about Virgil, of whom (as of Propertius) we know little or nothing, but let us think of the Virgilian Aeneas: Cameron’s “prone to romantic passion, liable to make mistakes, even rather absurd” fits pretty well, I would say. J. Farrell has observed of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*: “We cannot comfortably situate the poem in the epic canon alongside the *Iliad* and the *Aeneid*. This judgment reflects not on the quality of the *Metamorphoses*, but on its manifold departures from the epic norm which the *Iliad* and the *Aeneid* much more nearly represent.”<sup>51</sup> This is obviously true on the diachronic level, but to imply that the *Aeneid*, from a synchronic perspective, is part of a normative “epic canon” is to miss the possibility of its fundamental departure from, and subversion of the Homeric model, the possibility, again, of its strangeness.<sup>52</sup>

F. M. Ahl is one of the very few scholars to have explored post-Virgilian ambivalence or hostility towards authority without completely implicating the Virgilian text in that authority: “Even if, as I believe, Vergil’s vision of Rome, Aeneas, and Augustus is highly ambivalent, the fact remains that those hostile to the Caesars might well be angered at even the remotest suggestion that Rome and the Caesars could be reconciled.”<sup>53</sup> This is the space, between open hostility and pure propaganda, that has always been the site of the critical struggle for the hearts and minds of the reader.

### (3) The organization of opinion

There has been a curious phenomenon at work in the last decade or so, consisting of generally Augustan readings of Virgil, which, in the same breath that they respond to the non-Augustans, indulge in rhetorical efforts to terminate such inquiries.<sup>54</sup> In a review of J. J. O’Hara, A. Schiesaro notes:

<sup>50</sup> Cameron (1989) 111.

<sup>51</sup> Farrell (1982) 235–68.

<sup>52</sup> The Homerist will reply that the Virgilian critic likewise stabilizes his poems, most notably in assuming a consistent “epic code”, recreated or subverted by the Virgilian text.

<sup>53</sup> Ahl (1976) 64–7.

<sup>54</sup> The chief target has been Lyne (1987), a work that holds up well under the barrage.