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 0521782880 - Virgil and the Augustan Reception
 Richard F. Thomas
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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 HERENNIIUM¹

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 GALINSKY²

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’Hara³ during a discussion of the ambiguities of Jupiter’s prophecy

¹ 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.

² Galinsky (1991) 478; *contra*, Perrell (1994).

³ 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 . . .”⁴ 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.⁵ 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

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

⁵ 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.⁶ 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

⁶ *ThLL* s.v. *condere* 153.36ff.

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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.”⁷ The usage seems clearly to be based on the formal phrase *lustrum condere*, “to close out the census period.”⁸ 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 meminisse 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 3.1090.⁹ 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 condes, | 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

⁷ *ThLL* s.v. *condere* 152.19–27 “certum tempus finire.”

⁸ *ThLL* s.v. *condere* 152.27–43; 153.38.

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

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closed out the last one in 88; hence *altera*).¹⁰ “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 *autoritas*. 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.”¹¹ 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.”¹² 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

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

¹¹ 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.

¹² 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.”¹³ 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,”¹⁴ 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),¹⁵ but more importantly, from the perspective of Augustan time, it will have occurred in Italy, where the

¹³ Ryberg (1958) 129.

¹⁴ Martindale (1993b) 123.

¹⁵ 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.¹⁶ 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’”):¹⁷ 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*¹⁸

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

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

¹⁷ Suet. *Aug.* 40, quoting *Aen.* 1.282.

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

¹⁹ So *OLD* s.v. *emphasis*.

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

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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.²¹ [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.²² 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.

²¹ 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.

²² Ahl (1984).

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The topic seems to have interested Virgil's friend Philodemus.²³ 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.²⁴

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" (ἐλλήνιζειν).²⁵ With reference to Virgil, it is difficult to see why "these terms should be the scholar's last resort, not the first."²⁶

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

²³ Philodemus, Περὶ ποιημάτων 5.30.6–12 Mangoni ἡ δὲ σύνθεσις λέξεως ἐναργῶς καὶ ἐμφατικῶς τὴν ὑποτεταγμένην διάνοιαν [σ]ημαίνουσα{ν} κοι[ν]ή [γ'] ἐσ[τ]ι 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).

²⁴ *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*.

²⁵ Aristot., *Rhet.* 1407a19.

²⁶ 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.²⁷ 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.²⁸ 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:²⁹

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.

²⁷ *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.

²⁸ Gellius 11.12.

²⁹ Conte (1994) 3.