Past, present, and future in Virgil's Georgics'

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I have met them at close of day
Coming with vivid faces
From counter or desk among grey
Eighteenth-century houses.
I have passed with a nod of the head
Or polite meaningless words,
Or have lingered awhile and said
Polite meaningless words,
And thought before I had done
Of a mocking tale or a gibe
To please a companion
Around the fire at the club,
Being certain that they and I
But lived where motley is worn:
All changed, changed utterly:
A terrible beauty is born.

W. B. Yeats’s brilliant lines stand as an unforgettable poetic statement of historical periodization. This deeply political poem was composed in the months immediately following the Easter revolution of 1916, an event which Yeats immediately perceived to mark a major turning point in Irish history. He was initially very cautious about releasing it and circulated it in private circles only. It was eventually published in the New Statesman in October 1920. At heart, the poem is deeply ambiguous. On the one hand it expresses fears about the dangers of fanatical self-sacrifice and the powerful forces released by martyrdom, but there can be little doubt that ‘in 1916 it would have read principally as a passionate

1 See Foster 2003: 64–6.
endorsement of the rebels’ cause. But whatever its precise political message, one important aspect of the poem lies in the ways in which it makes the theme of time itself central to its interpretation. The ending of the first line, ‘at close of day’, brings the focus of attention onto both a single day as a period of time and the repetition of a particular event (‘I have met them’) over an undefined number of days. Yeats goes on to locate this repeated daily encounter amidst ‘Eighteenth century houses’, thus immediately widening the temporal perspective and providing a broader historical setting. These houses conjure up English rule in Georgian Dublin. It is, therefore, in relation to both the ‘day’ and the ‘Eighteenth century’ that ‘motley’ has given way to ‘beauty’ and that all is ‘changed utterly’. And with evocation of the ‘terrible’ beauty born from change, Yeats invites his readers to turn from consideration of the past to fearful contemplation of the future.

Many of the themes in Yeats’s famous poem resonate strongly in relation to recent work on Virgil’s Georgics, particularly the importance of time and history, violence and sacrifice, the intensely political nature of the text, and the presence of carefully handled ambiguities. In this chapter I would like to focus in particular on some aspects of Virgil’s handling of time as a central theme, careful study of which leads to a fuller appreciation of the poem’s presentation of ideas about change and periodization. Attention will focus first on some of the ways in which the actual process of the composition of the poem is thematized throughout, before going on to argue that in following Virgil’s ongoing presentation of the work’s unfolding structure the reader is inevitably caught up in the process of periodizing Roman history. Finally, a brief attempt will be made to relate this act of periodization to the question of the political viewpoint of the text. It will become clear that the Georgics are inextricably related to the historical processes which modern scholars conceptualize in terms of the familiar categories of Republic and Empire or Principate, whether privileging narratives of revolution and transformation or of continuity and restoration. To read Virgil’s poem is to trace through

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2 Foster 2003: 64.
3 Parallels with the Irish situation in 1915–16 are indeed made explicit by L. Morgan in his important study of the Georgics; see Morgan 1999: 103. Note also Thomas 2001: 140–7 for fine readings of the importance of the Georgics and the georgic tradition for two later Irish poets, Patrick Kavanagh and Seamus Heaney. There is much of interest also in Kerrigan 1998. Heaney’s Field Work (1979) represents his most systematic interaction with the georgic tradition; this is a subject I will treat elsewhere. I do not wish to argue here that Yeats was in any way directly influenced by Virgil in the composition of Easter 1916.
4 See, for example, the titles of such recent works as Osgood 2006; Lange 2009; Hurlet and Mineo 2009; and Flower 2010.
historical time some of the events which led to the concentration of power in the hands of one man, whom Virgil calls ‘Caesar’ and who is right from the outset said to be on his way to becoming a god. The poem as a whole is underpinned by this narrative of apotheosis, which is represented as marking a crucial turning point in Roman history and being of central importance to the future of the Roman state.

Any attempt to study the ways in which literary texts relate to, comment on, or create precise historical settings demands in one way or another recourse to acts of periodization. In a volume entitled The Cambridge Companion to the Augustan Age, which admits the ‘brittleness of periodization’ and works with a very broad chronological conception of the period, A. Barchiesi points out the essential paradox:

Periodizations are tools that very few trust but everybody uses.

At the same time, he offers an insightful explanation of the power and utility of periodization from a specifically Augustan perspective:

…the Augustan age has consolidated under the influence of many factors, most of them political, but I would say that the crucial factor for modern scholars (and readers) has been the possibility of making multiple connections between political change, material culture, ideology, literature, and the visual arts.

The enormous influence exercised by P. Zanker’s study of The Power of Images in the Age of Augustus easily demonstrates the veracity of this proposition. It is noteworthy in this context that the third chapter of Zanker’s study, entitled ‘The Great Turning Point: Intimations of a New Imperial Style’, begins by identifying the Battle of Actium in September 31 bc as a defining moment in the process of political change which saw Roman power centred in the hands of one man. It is precisely this kind of periodization which lies at the heart of the Georgics, and appreciation

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5 See Galinsky 2005: 8 on the dangers of using facile dichotomies such as Republic and Empire, the importance of strong elements of continuity, and the fact that much that can fairly and usefully be described as ‘Augustan’ took place before 16 January 27 bc, the date on which Octavian officially became ‘Augustus’. See also the introduction to this volume for further discussion.


8 Zanker 1988.

9 On Actium much has been written; Gurval 1995 offers a detailed survey of the surviving evidence, but he consistently plays down the importance attached to the victory by the new regime in Rome. It will argued here that the Georgics tell a very different story. For Actium as marking the beginning of a new age see Reinhold 1988: 225–6 and Lange 2009: 11.
of this aspect of the poem thus becomes a vitally important element in any attempt to understand its structure and meaning.

One of the most influential studies of the *Georgics* is J. Griffin’s paper ‘The Fourth Georgic, Virgil and Rome’.\(^\text{10}\) Building on work which had established connections between the society of the bees and the Roman world, Griffin sees the fourth book, both the section devoted to bee-keeping and the story of Aristaeus, as a reflection on the relationship between the poet and the state; between poetry and politics; between the realms of art and realities of empire. This whole approach to the text brings to the fore the idea that the beehive must at some level be read as a symbol of the Roman *res publica*.\(^\text{11}\) The bees enjoy many qualities identified as typically Roman and they are explicitly referred to as *Quirites* (‘Romans’, 4.201). In many ways they can be seen to resemble the idealized image of the hardy Roman farmer depicted elsewhere in the poem. But opinions differ widely on what to make of these connections. It is also the case that the bees have a king whom they adore and that they get involved in battles with other hives, aspects which no reader of the poem in the early 20s BC could have failed to link to the civil conflicts of recent memory. Interpretation is complicated even further by the fact that the connection between the two halves of the fourth book, i.e. between the section on bee-keeping and the story of Aristaeus, lies in the fact that hives suffer disease and destruction and are in need of renewal. If the society of bees embodies certain highly desirable aspects of the Roman character and even the Roman Republic as a whole, it must also be accepted that the way in which Virgil describes it makes it all but impossible not to see it also as reflecting a human society caught up in the trauma of civil war.\(^\text{12}\) It is the central argument of this chapter that progress cannot be made on trying to make sense of Virgil’s republic of bees without awareness of the ways in which he makes the actual process of Roman history central to the experience of reading the poem, an experience which invites the Roman reader to confront recent history and to make sense of profound historical change taking place around a crucial turning point, thus inevitably creating a time before and a time after, images of a world left behind, and visions of a new world gradually taking shape even as the poem was being written.

One of the most recent studies of Virgil’s poem is entitled *Reading after Actium*, with the subtitle *Virgil’s Georgics, Octavian, and Rome*. Its author, C. Nappa, in an impressive and richly useful study of the poem as a whole, begins with the story that Virgil read the *Georgics* to Octavian

\(^{10}\) Griffin 1979 = 1985: ch. 8.

\(^{11}\) See for example Griffin 1979: 63 = 1985: 165.

\(^{12}\) See Morley 2007: 467.
over four days at Atella, when he was on his way back to Rome after his victory at Actium, *reverso post Actiacam victoriam Augusto*. This may be factually true of course, but if one takes a more cautious view and assumes that the biographical details are simply constructed on the basis of details present in the text itself,\(^\text{13}\) then we have here evidence for an insightful reader of Virgil who saw with absolute clarity the connections between Actium, Octavian’s triple triumph, and the *Georgics*, and appreciated that the poem’s vision of Roman history must be interpreted in light of the events of the years 31–29 BC.\(^\text{14}\) As many readers have appreciated, the atmosphere of both danger and hope, pessimism and optimism created by the text, arises from the fact that Virgil’s poem evokes the uncertainties of the period which saw the growing inevitability of a war between Octavian and Antony, the tragic battle at Actium, the arrival in Rome and Italy of first news of Octavian’s victory, and his eventual triumphant return to Rome on 13 August 29 BC.\(^\text{15}\) While aware of the importance of historical process in the poem as a whole, C. Nappa prefers to give priority to a post-Actium perspective, writing as follows:\(^\text{16}\)

It is my contention that the *Georgics* can be profitably understood as a post-Actium ‘reading’ of the situation in which Octavian found himself in the early 20s BCE, after the battle of Actium and before the assumption of the title Augustus.

He goes on to say:\(^\text{17}\)

...I would like to reinsert the poem into discussion of the Augustan principate in general.

What’s at stake in this approach to the poem may be brought out by a quotation from a book published just a year later in 2006:\(^\text{18}\)

since ancient poets generally took so long to compose their works, we do, as Thomas (1988), 1.1, rightly argues, need to see the *Georgics* largely as a product of the 30s.

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\(^\text{13}\) See Horsfall 2001: ch. 1.

\(^\text{14}\) This point is well made by Miles 1980: 67.

\(^\text{15}\) Syme 1939: 304 catches perfectly the sense of both hope and fear in this period and in doing so aptly quotes *Georgics* 1.500–1, which will be discussed below.

\(^\text{16}\) 2005: 1. Unfortunately, Nappa was not able to use Hardie 2004, a paper entitled ‘Political Education in Virgil’s *Georgics*’, which shows how the *Georgics* present Octavian as both pupil and teacher, but argues that while he may learn from the poem, more realistically, he is the new educator required by Rome.

\(^\text{17}\) 2005: 2.

\(^\text{18}\) Osgood 2006: 311 n.54.
Broadly, therefore, we seem to be faced with a choice between one view which sees the poem from a post-Actium perspective and another which would rather see it as an essentially pre-Actium, Triumviral text. In fact, the experience of reading the poem through from start to finish, taking into account Virgil’s construction of narrative trajectories and temporal patterns, offers the possibility of a different approach. In the Georgics, Virgil is clearly interested in history as ongoing process; in making the experience of reconstructing the linear progression of historical time a vital part of the experience of reading the text. This he does in several ways. On different levels, the poem contains a history of the world from its creation out of primeval Chaos and a history of culture and the processes of civilization.\(^{19}\) In addition, by describing the farmer’s working year as an apparently unchanging series of tasks and duties performed with all due attention to ancient religious custom, it permits the reader to perceive both historical depth and contemporary relevance in the visions it provides of the rural world of Italy. As part of this complex process, the poem also very deliberately provides us with images of recent history taken from different temporal perspectives. Quite specifically, it offers readers both pre-Actium and post-Actium visions of the Roman world.

The traditional dates for the composition of the Georgics are 36–29 BC, and scholars have often pointed out that the poem is replete with references to both recent and contemporary historical events and circumstances.\(^{20}\) It is generally accepted that a reliable terminus ante quem is provided by the prologue to book 3, which seems to assume knowledge of the triple triumph of 13–15 October 29 BC.\(^{21}\) The same passage is also generally agreed to reflect knowledge of the Palatine temple of Apollo, which was dedicated on 9 October 28 BC and so by late 29 would have been almost complete. More generally, the very choice of the poem’s subject matter is inherently political, inasmuch as its treatment inevitably involves dealing with such intensely political subjects as land and the economy, the relationship between the image of the farmer and constructions of national identity, and the place of Italy and Rome in the wider Mediterranean world.\(^{22}\) Consistently, the agricultural

\(^{19}\) See for example Gale 2000: 27–9; Hardie 2005: 23–32; and 2009a: 41–52.

\(^{20}\) For a very useful list see Horsfall 2001: 93.

\(^{21}\) See Drew 1924. I do not believe Servius’ story about the Laudes Galli and a second edition; see Thomas 1998a: i. 13–16 for discussion.

\(^{22}\) See for example the classic paper of Brunt 1962; for the wider historical context, focusing on the period before the reforms of the Gracchi, see Hermon 2001. Nicolet 1988 provides an essential background picture of the geopolitical contexts within which the Georgics were written.
world of the poem as a whole can easily be taken to symbolize or represent in some way the contemporary Roman world.\footnote{See for example Nelson 1998: 88–9 and Morgan 2000b: 86.} It seems worth investigating, therefore, the complex relationships the poem establishes between the actual process of its composition, the contemporary historical setting, and the act of reading the text.

As is well known, the poem’s didactic message is revealed amidst a complex series of interrelated prologues, epilogues, and digressions. Interpretation of the poem was long vitiated by the relative neglect of the former (i.e. technical didactic exposition about ploughing; fertilizing; pruning; grafting; breeding; and so on) and exclusive concentration on the latter (i.e. the ‘purple’ passages, such as the theodicy of book 1; the \textit{Laudes Italiae}; the story of Aristaeus; Eurydice and Orpheus). But it is a fact of the experience of a linear reading of the poem from start to finish that the reader is obliged to move from one to the other, always remaining aware of highly subtle and complex transitions which demand close attention in order to permit appreciation of the connective patterns and thematic unities which underpin the unity of the poem as a whole. In his articulation of the structural development of the poem Virgil draws particular attention to its division into books. As many have pointed out, the subject matter treated in the four books is very carefully summarized in the first four lines:\footnote{See for example Thomas 1998a: on 1.1–4. Unless stated otherwise, all translations are taken from the very fine poetic version of Fallon 2009.}

\begin{verbatim}
Quid faciat laetas segetes, quo sidere terram 
vertere, Maecenas, ulmisque adiungere vitis 
convenient, quae cura boum, qui cultus habendo 
sit pecori, apibus quanta experientia parcis, 
\textit{hinc} \begin{it}canere\end{it} incipiam.
\end{verbatim}

What tickles the corn to laugh in rows, and by what star to steer the plow, and how to train the vine to elms, good management of flocks and herds, the expertise bees need to thrive—my lord, Maecenas, such are the makings of the song I take upon myself to sing.

The poem’s first sentence ends at the main caesura of the fifth line, with the word \textit{hinc} fixing a particular starting point, while the first-person verb (\begin{it}incipiam\end{it}) underlines the poet’s control over the choice of the precise point from which he will sing (\begin{it}canere\end{it}).\footnote{For more detailed discussion see Nelis 2010a. For studies of the voice of the poet in the poem as a whole see Buchheit 1972 and Perkell 1989.} Subsequently, at the
start of the second book, the poet summarizes the contents of book 1, before announcing what he is going to go on to ‘sing’ (canam):

Hactenus arvorum cultus et sidera caeli;  
nunc te, Bacche, canam, nec non silvestria tecum  
virgulta et prolem tarde crescentis olivae.

Thus far I have been singing of working the land, and stars in heaven.  
So now I turn to you, Bacchus, you and the thick thickets people think of when they think of you,  
and, while I’m at it, to what the slow growing olive gives.

The use of the adverbs hactenus (first occurring here in surviving Latin poetry, it looks back directly to the hinc of 1.5 in order to chart the precise distance covered thus far in the poem) and nunc binds author and reader closely together. By stopping the didactic discourse for a brief moment in order to look back at what has been treated and forward to what is going to be discussed next, the poet connects the poem’s ongoing composition to the actual process of reading. From this point on, the reader will at important points be informed and guided by the poet concerning the poem’s progress and structural development. In addition, the use of future canam looks back to the use of the same verb, canere, at 1.5, ensuring a sense of verbal coherence which helps to reinforce the reader’s sense of movement through a carefully structured text.

This sense of cohesion is reinforced when, at the close of book 2, Virgil once again marks another key moment in the work’s ongoing progress, this time by emphasizing the way in which the end of a book brings another momentary pause (2.541–2):

Sed nos immensus spatiis confecimus aequor,  
et iam tempus equum fumantia solvere colla.

But we have covered vast tracts of matter and, besides,  
it’s high time that we released the sweating horses from the halters.

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26 On the different uses of nunc in the Georgics see Erren 2003: 44 n. 29.  
27 The connection thus forged between the creation of the text and its reception at the moment of reading (whether viewed as performance in a recitatio or in the act of an individual private reading) is exactly the phenomenon described by K. Volk as ‘poetic simultaneity’, by which she means ‘the illusion that the poem is only coming into being as it evolves before the reader’s eyes, that the poet/persona is composing it “as we watch”’ (Volk 2002: 13; see also 39–40 on didactic simultaneity and 124–5 on the Georgics as ‘a textbook case of poetic simultaneity’).
And then immediately afterwards, the third book opens with the use of the verb \textit{canere} (cf. 1.5, 12, and 2.2), here again in the future tense as at the start of the second book (\textit{canam}), announcing what is about to be discussed (3.1–2):

\begin{quote}
Te quoque, magna Pales, et te memorande canemus
pastor ab Amphryso, vos, silvae amnesque Lycaeii.
You too, Pales, great goddess of the folds, and you, Apollo,
who tended flocks,
and all of you, woods and waters of Arcadia, we'll mind forever in our songs.
\end{quote}

The poet then famously goes on in the next section of the prologue to the third book to look forward to a new poem he intends to write (\textit{temptanda via est}, 3.8), before abruptly putting an end to the delineation of this ambitious project (3.10–39) and returning to the task in hand; the continuation of the \textit{Georgics} (3.40–1):

\begin{quote}
\textit{interea} Dryadum silvas saltusque sequamur intactos,
Meanwhile we'll trace the Dryads' woods and virgin glades
\end{quote}

Once again, a temporal adverb (\textit{interea}) draws the reader closely into the actual process of the poem's unfolding, as she or he becomes inextricably involved in the creative process of the poem's ongoing composition.\footnote{The use of \textit{silvas} here picks up directly \textit{silvae} at 3.1, while \textit{sequamur} looks forward to \textit{exsequamur} at 4.2, ensuring a sense of continuity and cohesion.} Precisely the same technique is in evidence at the beginning of the fourth book where, as in books 2 and 3, Virgil once again begins with a temporal adverb allied to a verb in the future tense announcing what he is going to go on to say (4.1–2):

\begin{quote}
Protinus aerii mellis caelestia dona
exsequar: hanc etiam, Maecenas, adspice partem.
Which brings me to heaven's gift of honey, or manna, if you will.
Lend kind ears to this part, my lord, Maecenas . . .
\end{quote}

And before long, the poet lets his readers know that he is approaching the end of 'this part', i.e. book (4.116–17):

\begin{quote}
atque equidem, extremo ni iam sub fine laborum
vebra traham et terris festinem advertere proram
\end{quote}
Indeed, if I were not already near the limit of my undertaking, furling my sails and hurrying my prow to shore,

Finally, the poem ends with a strongly closural use of, the by now key verb, canere, this time in the imperfect tense, looking back and summarizing the whole poem in a line and a half (up to the main caesura; 4.559–60):

haec super arvorum cultu pecorumque canebam et super arboribus . . .

Such was the song that I took on to sing, about the care of the crops and stock, and trees with fruit . . .

Having thus demonstrated how Virgil at key moments repeatedly draws the reader’s attention to the progress of his poem and to the relationship between its didactic content, its unfolding book structure, and the reader’s experience of that ongoing process, we are now in a position to go on to look at the ways in which he inscribes this process into historic time. As we shall see, articulation of the poem’s architecture and evolution goes hand in hand with its evocation of contemporary historical circumstances. It will not be possible to discuss every relevant passage in detail. But perusal of only a selection of key moments will easily illustrate Virgil’s technique.

After the opening sentence, which has already been analysed, the poem immediately positions itself temporally in relation to a precise historical context by predicting the apotheosis of a person named as ‘Caesar’, by which name Virgil here refers to Octavian (1.24–8):

tuque adeo, quem mox quae sint habitura deorum conçilla incertum est, urbisne invisere, Caesar, terrarumque velis curam, et te maximus orbis auctorem frugum tempestatumque potentem accipiat cingens materna tempora myrto;

and I address you too, O Caesar, although none knows the gathering of the gods in which you soon will be accommodated, or whether you would choose to oversee the city or be in charge of countryside, nor knows if the wide world

29 Most precisely, arvorum cultu picks up arvorum cultus at 2.1, both echoing the initial use of cultus at 1.3; pecorum here picks up pecori at 1.4.
will come to honour you as begetter of the harvest or as master of the seasons
(around your brow already a garland of your mother’s myrtle).

A key word here is mox (‘soon’, 24). Right from the outset, the didactic voice sets its enunciation at a particular moment in time: a moment when Caesar seems to have recorded achievements which announce and ensure his apotheosis, but when the actual moment of deification is still in the future.30 This point is reinforced at the end of the prologue, when Caesar is requested to ‘grow accustomed even now to be called upon in prayer’ (votis iam nunc adsuesce vocari, 1.42, personal translation). Picking up on the mox of line 24, the words iam nunc of line 42, in effect mean ‘even before your deification’.31 The lavish intensity of the panegyric and its confidence in divine honours fits perfectly with the period following the victories at Actium and Alexandria.

In an obvious ring structure, at the end of the first book Virgil returns to the subject of ‘Caesar’, on this occasion in fact to two Caesars (Julius Caesar, 1.466, and Octavian 1.503). This closing section offers a sweeping vision of recent Roman history, referring to the death of Julius Caesar and the Battle of Philippi, before going on to offer a grim vision of a world at war in the brilliant simile which brings the book to a close (1.509–14):32

hinc movet Euphrates, illinc Germania bellum;
vicinae ruptis inter se legibus urbes
arma ferunt; saevit toto Mars impius orbe,
ut cum carceribus sese effudere quadrigae,
addunt in spatia, et frustra retinacula tendens
fertur equis auriga neque audit currus habenas.

Look here, the east is up in arms; look there, hostilities in Germany. Neighbouring cities renege on what they pledged and launch attacks—

the whole world’s at loggerheads, a blasphemous battle, as when, right from the ready, steady, go, chariots quicken on a track

30 For the emphasis on the future see Putnam 1979: 23–6; Miles 1980: 65–70; Boyle 1986: 40–1; and Perkell 1989: 50.
until the driver hasn’t a hope of holding the reins and he’s carried away
by a team that pays heed to nothing wildly away and no control.

There is widespread agreement among scholars that this runaway chariot and its auriga must be seen as reflecting the vicissitudes of the Roman state and Octavian’s role as potential saviour. In light of the preceding references to the death of Caesar and Philippi, we are surely entitled to imagine that Virgil is depicting a historical continuum and so assume a dramatic date at some point in the 30s BC, while noting that he remains deliberately vague and avoids a precise dating. Line 509 has been read as referring to 39/8 BC, but that period could hardly suit the idea of an almost universal conflict as evoked by line 511, where Mars rages throughout the world, toto…orbe. It seems much more likely that Virgil is thinking of a time in the late 30s, when it was becoming ever more obvious that a clash between Octavian and Antony was inevitable, with the passage as a whole offering a brilliant survey of Roman history from the Ides of March 44 down to the eve of Actium.

If we press the point of the simile a little farther, it is hard to resist the idea that the increasing speed of the chariot, which goes faster with every lap (this is the usually accepted sense of the unusual expression addunt in spatia), must inevitably bring to mind the image of the metae, the dangerous turning point in a race. Indeed, the use of the technical Latin term for a lap in a chariot race, spatium, of itself inevitably calls to mind the fact that the chariot must safely round the metae. A crucial additional effect of the simile, therefore, is the evocation of a crucial turning point in Roman history. Virgil seems to help the readers towards this interpretation by the fact that the simile is surely intended to recall lines 498–501:

34 On the dating see Bayet 1930 and Klingner 1963: 63–9. Mynors 1990: on 1.509 must be right when he states that Virgil ‘is really thinking of the mounting tension between Octavian and Antony’.
35 This connection seems confirmed by a later passage in book 3 (201–3):

ille volat simul arva fuga simul aequora verrens.
hinc vel ad Elei metae et maxima campi
sudabit spatia et spumas aget ore cruentas,

that’s the wave the wind advances as it spends itself above the land and sea. A horse the like of that either will work up a lather of sweat around the laps of Elis, blood foaming from the bit,

On the fact that the simile is placed right at the end of the book, a position which is described as a meta elsewhere in Latin didactic poetry, see Nelis 2008: 511–12.
di patrii Indigetes et Romule Vestaque mater,
quae Tuscum Tiberim et Romana Palatia servas,
hunc saltem everso iuvenem succurrere saeclo
ne prohibete.

O Romulus, god of our fathers, strength of our homes, our mother Vesta,
who watches over the Etruscan Tiber and the palaces of Rome,
stand back, don’t block the way of this young one who comes to save
a world in ruins.

By expressing the hope that the young Caesar will come to the aid of an age that is literally upturned (everso . . . saeclo) these lines provide the broader context in which to contextualize and interpret the simile, making it natural to parallel the iuvenis and the auriga, who thus becomes the symbol of the hoped-for, but as yet far from certain, saviour of the age.\(^{36}\) In context, this age can only refer to the period leading up to the Battle of Actium.

Having arrived at the grim close of book 1, the reader now turns to the second book. Its opening lines having already been discussed, we will pass rapidly to look at two passages only. First, at 2.171, near the end of the so-called Laudes Italiae, following his celebration of the tough virtues of Italian peoples such as the Marsi, Sabelli, Ligures, and Volsci, followed by the martial power of famous families—the Decii, Marii, Camilli, and Scipios—Virgil brings his short catalogue to a close by presenting Caesar as the climax of a long tradition of Roman virtue (2.167–72):

haec genus acre virum, Marsos pubemque Sabellam
adsuetumque malo Ligurem Volscosque verutos
extulit, haec Decios Marios magnosque Camillos,
Scipiadas duros bello et te, maxime Caesar,
qui nunc extremis Asiae iam victor in oris
imbellm avertis Romanis arcibus Indum.

Hers are the most intrepid men—fiere Marsians, and Samnite stock;
Ligurians, misfortune’s friends; Volscian lancers

\(^{36}\) The verb succurrere of line 500 is picked up by currus in line 514 (it is the man in the chariot who can help the state), while the use of everso must retain something of its earlier usage of ploughing (e.g. quo sidere terram | vertere, 1.1–2); see Lyne 1974: 63 = 2007: 55, as the normal cycles of the agricultural life have been ruined by civil war and the farmer has become a soldier. It is not by chance, therefore, that Virgil’s plough is described as a currus at 1.174. On the symbolism of the plough-chariot in the poem see Wilhelm 1982.
and the Decii she produced; tribes of Marius and great Camillus; the battle-hardened Scipios, and you yourself, Caesar, first of all mankind, you who, already champion of Asia’s furthest bounds rebuffs the craven Indian from the arched portals of the capital.

As Caesar is here seamlessly inscribed into a broad historical continuum stretching back to the distant origins of Rome, a striking word is the *nunc* of 171. Once more, the composition of the text is very precisely synchronized with contemporary historical events. Virgil here presents himself as composing the *Georgics* at exactly the same time Caesar is winning victories in Asia. As in the prologue of book 1, this present time can only imply a post-Actium setting, which means that this highly optimistic and celebratory passage offers at least a temporary antidote to the gloom of the close of book 1.

Subsequently, with the closing section of book 2 the dialogue with the closing section of the first book continues. In bringing the second book to a close, as noted above, Virgil employs chariot imagery once more: (2.541–2):

> Sed nos immensum spatiis confecimus aequor,
> et iam tempus equum fumantia solvere colla.

*But we have covered vast tracts of matter and, besides, it’s high time that we released the sweating horses from the halters.*

On this occasion, the image seems to imply the end of a journey, or perhaps the end of a race, but certainly not the turning point in a race. There can be little doubt, however, that these two lines are intended to establish a direct link back to the closing lines of book 1. But there is also an important difference between the two closing sequences. At the end of book 1, the chariot’s course illustrates events in Roman history, as the point of the simile is to illustrate the madness of war (*saevit toto Mars impius orbe, ut cum . . .*, 1.511–12). At the close of book 2, however, the *laps* (*spatiis*) refer to the progress of the poem itself and the huge distance already covered (*immensum . . . confecimus aequor*), with the unyoking of the horses corresponding to the close of the book. Given the parallels thus established by the poet between, on one level, the chariot race and Roman history, and, on another, the chariot and the progress of the poem, it is interesting to look at the wider context in which the close of book 2 is set. When we do so, it becomes immediately obvious that, once

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37 *spatiis* and *equum* here clearly pick up *spatia* and *equis* at 1.513–14.
again, the historical setting assumes vital importance. The lines which lead up to the coda are as follows (2.532–40:)

hanc olim veteres vitam coluere Sabini,
hanc Remus et frater; sic fortis Etruria crevit
scilicet et rerum facta est pulcherrima Roma,
septemque una sibi muro circumdedit arces.
ante etiam sceptrum Dictaei regis et ante
impia quam caesis gens est epulata iuvencis,
aureus hanc vitam in terris Saturnus agebat;
nectum etiam audierant inflari classica, necdum
impositos duris crepitare incidibus ensis.

That was the life, and those the way the Sabines cultivated in the days of old,
they, and Remus and his brother, so there could be no doubt
that Tuscany would go from strength to strength and Rome become
gem of the world, embracing seven hills inside a single wall.
In days before a Cretan king held sway, times
when sacrilegious races fed on sacrificial oxen,
that was the life enjoyed on earth by splendid Saturn,
when they were yet to hear the flare of battle trumpets
and the battering out of swords upon an anvil.

Virgil looks back to the rustic golden age of rural simplicity, but the
image with which he ends is that of war, exactly as at the end of the first
book. The fact that the present is a time of war is emphasized by the
embracing word-order of the repeated *nectum* in line 539, a repetition
which picks up on the formally identical placing of *ante*, in line 536. The
Saturnian golden age is a thing of the past, as it is viewed from a time in
which mankind knows the sound of war trumpets and of swords being
hammered on the anvils.\[38\]

When readers turn to the start of book 3, the poet once again looks
forward to the immediate content of the book, as we have already seen.
Almost immediately, however, he strikes out in a new direction, by
expressing his ambition to compose a poem about Caesar and his
victories. Suddenly, the continuation of the *Georgics* is aligned with
another poetic project. This famous prologue has of course been the
subject of an immense amount of debate, and much has been written
about the relationship between the poem Virgil seems to imagine here;

\[38\] The use of *ensis* at the end 2.540 recalls specifically *ensem* at 1.508, in the same metrical locus. This reality of the presence of civil war has in fact been emphasized just before, when in line 2.496 we hear of *discordia*. 
an epic poem of strongly historical and encomiastic cast imagined in terms which evoke Pindar, Callimachus, and Ennius in particular, and the *Aeneid*. Here, I would like to focus only on one simple aspect of this remarkably complex passage, and that is to emphasize that whatever the precise historical references implied by the various victories the poet wishes to celebrate, it is obvious that, as at the end of the *Laudes Italiæ*, we are now in a post-Actium world. The actual victories have already been won and the poet is in a position to look forward to triumphal celebrations. The imagined triumph of the poet described in lines 10–25 parallels the triumphal return of Octavian to Rome after his victories in the East. More precisely, the prologue to book 3 can only be understood in relation to the historical period between the victory at Actium in 31 and Octavian’s triumphant return from the East in 29. When Virgil mentions the Ganges, the Nile, Asia, Niphates, and Parthians in lines 26–33 and imagines them as images on the doors of his temple, he is referring to Octavian’s successes in the East following Actium, i.e. the Alexandrian war and further eastern campaigning in its wake. Virgil does indeed cast the triumph in the future tense (*deducam... referam...*, 3.11–12), but the victories have surely already happened (*victorisque arma Quirini*, 3.27). What he does here is to inscribe both the *Georgics* and his future poetic career into contemporary history. More precisely, he is linking his text inextricably to the situation which prevailed in Rome from 31 September to 29 October, i.e. in effect the period between the arrival in Rome of news of the victory at Actium and the awaited triumphal arrival of Octavian from the East two whole years later. This period has recently been studied in some detail by C. Lange, who entitles his fifth chapter ‘Waiting for Caesar’. In particular, he looks at the honours which were lavished on Octavian in anticipation of his return. It is precisely this time which fits perfectly with the tone of the parallel prologues with which Virgil opens books 1 and 3. It also squares perfectly with the tone of the final lines of the poem, where Virgil once again explicitly synchronizes the composition of the *Georgics* and Octavian’s victories in the East after Actium (4.559–66):

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Haec super arvorum cultu pecorumque canebam
et super arboribus, Caesar dum magnus ad altum
fulminat Euphraten bello victorque volentes
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39 For discussion and bibliography see Nelis 2004; see also Meban 2008.
40 In general on the parallelism between the poet and Octavian see Buchheit 1972: 17–26.
42 Lange 2009: ch. 5.
per populos dat iura viamque adfectat Olympo.
illo Vergilium me tempore dulcis alebat
Parthenope studiis florentem ignobilis oti,
carmina qui lusi pastorum audaxque iuventa,
Tityre, te patulae cecini sub tegmine fagi.

Such was the song that I took on to sing, about the care of crops and stock, and trees with fruit, while he, our mighty Caesar, was going hell for leather along the great Euphrates adding victory to triumph, winning war for people who appreciate his deeds, and laying down the law—enough to earn his place in heaven.

And I, Virgil, was lying in the lap of Naples, quite at home in studies of the arts of peace, I, who once amused myself with rustic rhymes, and, still a callow youth, sang of you, Tityrus, as I lounged beneath the reach of one great beech.

Again, key words relate to precise delineation of time, *dum* and, reinforcing the point, *illo...tempore.* Virgil sings (*haec...canebam*) while Caesar thunders (*Caesar dum...fulminat*). And the use of the word *victor* cannot but recall its earlier appearances at 2.171 and 3.27, also of Octavian and his post-Actium victories in the Orient. Furthermore, in an overarching look back to the very beginning, these closing lines bring the poem to a close by repeating the idea which began it; the apotheosis of ‘Caesar’, the story of which may be seen as a narrative which underpins the whole work.43

As the poem comes to a close, with Octavian on his way to Olympus, the reader who takes the time to look back to the opening prayer may catch a curious glimpse of the new title Octavian was soon going to assume. His first mention in the poem, already quoted above, is as follows (1.24–7):

    tuque adeo...
    ...Caesar
    ...te...
    auctorem frugum tempestatumque potentem

The commentary of R. Thomas on line 27 reads thus:

*auctorem frugum*: a curious coincidence (but probably no more), in that *auctor* and Augustus (the title was not conferred until early in 27 B.C.) are both from *augeo*.

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43 See Trépanier 2007 for apotheosis as a basic didactic narrative in Empedocles and Lucretius; for the possible link with the *Georgics* see Nelis 2010a: 181–2.
But perhaps it is possible to read line 27 thus:

AUctorem fruGUm tempeSTatUMque potentem

If we are prepared to accept the presence of this kind of word play, Virgil’s Georgics, just as strikingly as Yeats’s Easter 1916, may justifiably be taken, both in terms of numerous points of detail and as an organic whole, as a quite remarkable poetic statement of historical periodization. Octavian, of course, officially took the title ‘Augustus’ on 16 January 27 BC. Whether we wish to decide to down-date the poem or prefer to allow Virgil knowledge of debates concerning the new title Octavian wished to assume as part of the new dispensation (as best reflected at Suetonius, Aug. 7), the fact remains that the Georgics offer us an extraordinarily powerful meditation on Roman history in the crucial years just before and after 31 BC.

Whatever the narratives and periodizations adopted to plot the events of this age, from the standard accounts involving the fall of the Republic and the foundation of an Empire to more nuanced versions preferring to highlight important continuities and more subtle transitions over longer periods of time, Virgil’s Georgics surely stand out as an important contemporary reflection on the state of Rome at a crucial moment in its history. As such, they merit detailed study from anyone interested in exploring the ways in which Romans, in the late 30s and early 20s BC, tried to come to terms with the course of history and the position of Rome and Italy in the contemporary Mediterranean world in relation to their past, present, and future. The precise nature of the poem’s political message has of course provoked immense discussion and profound disagreement. For some it offers a deeply pessimistic vision, for others an

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44 For use of the first two letters of three hexameters to encode a name in the Georgics see Brown 1963: 102–4 and on the MA-VE-PU acrostic (i.e. Publius Vergilius Maro) at 1.429–33, with Feeney and Nelis 2005 for further discussion. Note also that the name Au-gu-st-um appears in line 27, which exactly balances another name used to refer to Octavian at 3.27: Quirinus. The same precision is famously applied to the placing of the name of Maecenas in the poem at 1.2, 2.41, 3.41 and 4.2. Further support for the highly topical nature of 1.27 and hence for the presence of the anagram comes from Res gestae 34, where, in relation to 28–7 BC, we are informed that Octavian took the name Augustus (senatus consulto Augustus appellatus sum), followed by an explanation of his position:

Post id tempus auctoritate omnibus praestiti, potestatis autem nihilo amplius habui quam ceteri qui mihi quoque in magistratu conlegae fuerunt.

After this time I excelled everyone in influence, but I had no more power than the others who were my colleagues in each magistracy (trans. Cooley)

Professor J. Katz has informed me that the presence of the anagram was noticed by F. de Saussure in his unpublished notes and papers held in the Bibliothèque de Genève (MS fr. 3964/15, pp. 3–4).
optimistic view, for yet others it is deliberately ambiguous. In light of the arguments put forward in this chapter, it is possible to see how the text in fact offers both a sense of pre-Actium despair and post-Actium hope. Once it is securely grounded in contemporary historical time viewed as an ongoing process which the reader is inevitably involved in constructing and following through as she or he reads the text, it becomes much easier to appreciate the ways in which the poem is much more than a political tract with a single viewpoint or message. It rather engages in an intensely dynamic analysis of the age during which it was written, while also probing Roman discourses developed over time in relation to questions of origins and identity. And at the same time, the _Georgics_ also look unblinkingly into the future, grimly aware of both the sacrifices already made and those perhaps still lying ahead, as Caesar flies off towards Olympus, taking Rome with him into the unknown. Like the society of the bees, so obviously to be seen as an allegory of Roman society in the context of the civil war involving Octavian, Antony, and Cleopatra, whatever disagreements there may be concerning the precise fit of all the details and correspondences, Virgil’s Rome experiences both loss and hope of renewal.\(^{45}\) And while readers of the text are forced to face up to the destructive realities of war and encouraged to imagine a glimmer of a hope for peace, they inevitably indulge in an act of periodization. As they do so, having been offered a vision of Actium as a great turning point in Roman history, perhaps some of them came to realize, as they worked their way through the poem and found themselves in the position of waiting for Caesar’s triumphant return and the inevitable concentration of Roman power in the hands of a single man, that the victories over Antony and Cleopatra had indeed changed everything. And perhaps one of them even had thoughts similar to those of W. B. Yeats:

\[
\text{All changed, changed utterly:  \\
A terrible beauty is born.}
\]

\(^{45}\) See especially Nadeau 1984 for the political allegory of the story about Aristaeus and his hives. More generally on bees and their contemporary political symbolism see Morley 2007.