Trying Not To Cheat:
Responses to Inconsistencies in Roman Epic

JAMES J. O'HARA

The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

> MAYNARD: It reads, "Here may be found the last words of Joseph of
> Aramathea. He who is valiant and pure of spirit may find the Holy
> Grail in the Castle of uugggggh."
> ARTHUR: What?
> MAYNARD: "... the Castle of uugggggh."
> BEDEVERE: What is that?
> MAYNARD: He must have died while carving it.
> LAUNCELOT: Oh, come on!
> MAYNARD: Well, that's what it says.
> ARTHUR: Look, if he was dying, he wouldn't bother to carve "aaggggh."
> He'd just say it!
> MAYNARD: Well, that's what's carved in the rock!
> GALAHAD: Perhaps he was dictating.
>   Monty Python, *The Search for the Holy Grail*

SUMMARY: This paper discusses some of the arguments and methods of a forth-coming study of inconsistencies in Roman epic. After description of the shape of that book, the paper moves through some passages and problems in Catullus 64, Lucretius' *De rerum natura*, Vergil's *Aeneid*, Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, and Lucan's *Pharsalia*. My central claim is that not all inconsistencies need to be explained or amended away, or faulted, and that some need to be interpreted. Some types of "cheating," or of avoiding reading and interpreting the words in the text in the order in which they appear, are discussed.

THE CONFERENCE "CRITICAL DIVERGENCES: New Directions in the Study of Roman Literature," at which this paper was first delivered, took place during the 2003 baseball World Series, and as I was the first speaker I began with a

couple of jokes about being the "leadoff hitter."[1] A best-selling book about baseball in that year was partly relevant to the conference: *Moneyball: The Art of Winning an Unfair Game*, by Michael Lewis. Lewis' baseball book is partly about money, as his title makes clear, but more about the lack of money, and how teams with less money but smarter management can beat out richer teams: they can do so by being receptive to newer ideas about what makes a good baseball player, newer methods of analysis, new theory—new directions in the study of baseball, one might say. Part of the book describes the challenges of being in an organization full of old pros who scoff at new methods, and young people employing newer methods who scoff at old pros. There are also some old pros who are able quickly to adapt to newer methods, who are able to "retool," to use a term used with some admiration by a reviewer of a book about Horace's Soracte Ode a few years ago (Fowler 1993). And there are also some people who use some newer methods without scoffing at the old pros. That is usually my own goal, as I am interested in both older and newer methods and directions—although I do plan to do a little scoffing later on, and I am considerably less expert at some newer methods than are most of the other speakers.

The first question put to us by the conference organizer is simply: "What are you working on?"

One project worth brief mention here is that I am part of a team working on an *Aeneid* school commentary project for Focus Press under the leadership of Randall Ganiban of Middlebury College. We are revising Page's two-volume commentary on the *Aeneid* with the goal of preserving what is best about Page, but also of providing today's students with what they need as help on the Latin and with comment on interpretive questions.

My major project, however, is a small book, very nearly finished, for the Cambridge University Press series "Roman Literature and Its Contexts." As the title of my paper suggests, the book is on inconsistencies in Roman epic: it aims to explore the possibility of interpreting, rather than explaining away, inconsistencies in ancient texts. My main argument is that comparative study of the literary use of inconsistencies in both Greek and Roman texts can shed light on major problems in five Roman authors: Catullus, Lucretius, Vergil, Ovid, and Lucan. This book flows from earlier work of mine on Vergil, with

---

[1] I thank Lowell Edmunds for his invitation to the Rutgers conference and his hospitality. Thanks also to my student and research assistant John Henkel for shrewd comments on a draft of the paper. As this paper is related to a forthcoming longer work, annotation is in some cases limited to what is necessary to understand my argument, with more to come in the book, although in a couple of instances I give more thorough references here.

my perspective broadened to include the other Roman authors, all of whom I am managing somehow to call writers of epic. There will also be a fairly meaty first chapter on Greek texts—and I mean "meaty" in the good, Atkins diet sense of "meaty," to cite another field taking some "new directions" recently. That the book, like many in the series, involves several Greek and Roman authors is important, I think, because so much work in Classics focuses on individual authors, without seeing them in the context of what other, more or less similar authors are doing. I believe this is strikingly true for the phenomenon at the heart of my book, which several scholars have been noticing in isolation in individual authors, often without realizing or at least mentioning what one another are doing. Part of the value of my study lies in bringing these texts and problems together, and part lies in the analysis I shall be doing of these texts; the book will aim both to synthesize some recent work on Greek and Latin poets and also to confront more explicitly and tenaciously certain intriguing questions this work has raised.

I have not finished describing what I am working on now, but another question we were asked was: "How does your approach differ from what it was ten years ago?"

It is fairly easy for some to see how my approach has changed over the last ten years, because ten years ago I was working on this same project, albeit with only the vaguest notion of what I was doing with it. I actually gave a talk at Rutgers in 1993 on this topic, which was only the second extra-mural talk I gave on it. I also wrote in that year a paper, published in *Colby Quarterly* (O'Hara 1994), that was partly a study of the inconsistent picture of the Italians in the *Aeneid*, and partly a taste of what I was going to say about all five authors in the whole book. I shall be giving you some sense of the book here, but this paper will refer less frequently than I usually do to Latin passages, and will describe a number of aspects of the project in broader terms.

A central argument of my book on prophecy in the *Aeneid* (O'Hara 1990) is that some discrepancies between what is said in prophecies in the poem and what either happens, or is predicted to happen, elsewhere in the poem, are not signs of Vergil's inability to revise the *Aeneid* before his death, but rather indications that characters within the *Aeneid* are being deceived, and that readers may be deceived as well, or at least offered conflicting paths of interpretation. The inconsistencies are products not of the poet's inattention, but of his artistry. They are at least potentially "portals of discovery," to quote a phrase used by James Joyce, who has Stephen Dedalus say of Shakespeare that "his errors are volitional and are the portals of discovery." As I was finishing the Prophecy book, I realized that it was part of a quiet and somewhat under-analyzed movement throughout classical studies, in which poetic inconsis-

tencies were being seen in a new light. Classicists once assumed that all inconsistencies in ancient texts were blemishes to be faulted, or explained away. Either the author had failed at his goal of producing a unified work, or he had failed to revise a work written at different times, or "he" was a "they," an unruly group of authors, or an author into whose work remarkably stupid interpolators had later inserted inappropriate material. The Homeric epics were divided up by analysts confident of their ability to pinpoint each layer of redaction, and similar techniques were applied to many other Greek and Roman authors. Scholars working under these assumptions made valuable contributions to our understanding of these authors, but rarely questioned their own assumptions about unity. More recently, classicists working in isolation on a number of authors have offered attractive reinterpretations of inconsistencies.

My first chapter deals with Greek precedent, and mainly with the work of other scholars. It first sweeps through Homer, Hesiod, lyric, and tragedy, then stops to consider Plato, Aristotle, and (briefly) the history of the concept of "unity," before finishing with the Alexandrian poets. Throughout I look both at the poets on whom the Roman poets schooled themselves and also at examples of modern aversion to inconsistencies, which led scholars to march through the corpus of Greek and Latin authors removing, lamenting, or explaining away inconsistencies. Thus this chapter will both show both the extent to which inconsistency is found, and perhaps used, in authors to whom Roman poets are indebted, and also demonstrate the scholarly behavior pattern under indictment in the book, in which a work is too hastily faulted for lacking the simple and organic unity or univocality that became identified with value and quality in poetry.

After this first chapter, in which my ability to go into detail on any argument is somewhat limited, there are chapters on Catullus 64, Lucretius' *De rerum natura*, Vergil's *Aeneid*, and Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, and then a brief final chapter on Lucan's *Pharsalia*. The following paragraphs will give some idea of the problems treated in the book, before moving to a discussion of what questions I am asking of this material, another of the topics we were asked to consider. Basically, I shall be quickly swooping through these five poems three times under different rubrics.

For Catullus 64, I look at the problem of the first ship, the *Argo,* and the ship that sailed earlier than the first ship, that of Theseus. I look at the introduction to the Theseus and Ariadne panel, which says it will be about the heroic manly deeds of heroes, and at its content, which involves dumping Ariadne on an island and sneaking away at night. And I look at the conflict between the happiness predicted for Peleus and Thetis at their wedding and the notorious unhappiness of their marriage in the whole literary tradition.

In Lucretius' *De rerum natura*, I look at how the initial Hymn to Venus is quickly contradicted by the Epicurean claim that gods do not worry about humans, in lines that many have wanted to cut from the text. And I look at the frequent practice of scholars who jump on inconsistencies as evidence for how Lucretius should have revised or was planning to revise his text, most recently in the learned book by David Sedley.

For Vergil I briefly discuss the *Georgics*, which Monica Gale (2000) and others have shown to be full of inconsistencies despite being fully and finally polished, but I spend most of my time on the *Aeneid*. That poem tells us: that Aeneas will have a son in old age, and that he has only three more years on earth; that Helen both openly helped the Greeks enter Troy, and that (if Vergil wrote that passage) she cowered in hiding in fear of punishment; that Aeneas' Trojan son Ascanius will be the ancestor of the Alban Kings, and that his half-Italian son Silvius will be; that the Italians were peaceful before the arrival of the Trojans and that they were warlike; that Aeneas is fighting on the side of Jupiter, and that he is like a monster fighting against Jupiter; that Palinurus fell from Aeneas' ship the day before Aeneas met him in the underworld, and that he fell three or four days before; that Jupiter both predicted and forbade the war in Italy; that Jupiter both was impartial and gave help to one side; that the golden bough will yield willingly and easily or not at all, but then that it yields only hesitantly to Aeneas. For the *Aeneid* I focus especially on allusions to incompatible mythological variants, and ways in which inconsistencies can make the poem seem ambivalent or polyphonous, or raise questions about authority and power.

For Ovid's *Metamorphoses* I begin with the philosophical creation, by a rational creator god, that then yields to a world run by a particularly disorderly, un-philosophical, emotional, lustful version of the mythological Olympian gods. I also talk about chronological problems, citing recent work by Stephen Wheeler and others, and about Ovid's multiple *aetia* for the same animal or flower, often with unmistakable cross references that call readers' attention to problems (cf. esp. Myers). And I talk about the mixing of genres, and of mythological variants, and again about how this affects questions of authority and power in Ovid as in Vergil.

I end with a brief chapter on Lucan, briefly discussing both the praise of Nero in the proem to the *Pharsalia* and the poem's shifting attitudes towards the republic and principate, as well as the way in which "the poem is at war with itself," to cite a famous formulation of Jamie Masters. This chapter will be brief in part because after the Vergil and Ovid chapters attentive readers should almost be able to write the Lucan chapter themselves, and I do not want to be repetitive.

Another of the questions for the panel was "What questions are you asking?" I shall address this question in part now, and in more detail later, or you could say that I shall be answering it for the rest of my paper, with several digressions. The question at the heart of my book is this: How do or could or should we react as readers and as critics when two passages in a literary work contradict one another?

Should we try to emend the text? Should we blame the inconsistency on someone other than the author, who has ruined a consistent original unity by inserting inappropriate material? Here the extreme argument is that of Zwierlein and his growing phalanx of recent Ph.D. students, who have produced books now on Lucretius, Propertius, Vergil's *Georgics*, Vergil's use of the Homeric scholia, and Ovid's *Heroides*. Zwierlein's claim is that a large percentage of the lines in the current texts of Vergil and Ovid were written by someone else, perhaps even someone we can identify.[2] This whole campaign, I suggest, is insane. But there have always been more moderate ways of fixing up texts by eliminating inconsistencies, a practice that began in antiquity, and is not always wrong.

If we cannot change the text, should we blame the author, and consider him a failure? We cannot overlook this option, but it is not one of my favorites. Should we excuse the author, by reason of biography, saying that his untimely death (in the case of Lucretius, Vergil, and Lucan), or even his exile (in Ovid's own words) prevented him from putting the final polish to his poem? This is the problem of the Death of the Author—the literal death of the author—and worth some discussion here.

Lucretius, the Epicurean poet, naturally says that "Death is nothing to us" (3.830), but is that really true if you die with your poem unfinished? For Lucretius, it must be true either that he died without fully revising his poem or that he had largely or completely finished it, but something about the poem, combined with the doubtless fictional story of his death preserved in Jerome, has allowed scholars room for endlessly elaborate theories, most recently in Sedley, about how Lucretius would have changed the poem had he lived longer.

Vergil's *Aeneid* was clearly not finished when he died, for it is hard to imagine a poet planning to leave a poem with fifty-eight half-lines, but just how many of the celebrated inconsistencies would Vergil have removed had he

[2] On Vergil and Ovid see Zwierlein; on Lucretius, Deufert; on the *Georgics*, Cramer; on the *Aeneid*, Schmit-Neuerburg; on Propertius, Georg; on the *Heroides*, Lingenberg. Reviewers and other scholars have been appropriately skeptical of each volume, but without commenting on how this group of books represents a movement; cf. Thomas 2001: 218–21, Gottschalk, Lamberton 2001, Stahl, Richmond.

lived? Should we imagine Vergil, as he was dying, thinking with sorrow of his "List of Things To Fix after Trip to Greece"?

Ovid, in a passage to which I alluded above, introduces the idea in *Tristia* 1.7.40 that he should be cut some slack because he was exiled and did not get to polish his epic. Is he serious? Kidding? Imitating Vergil? All of the above?

For Lucan, we know exactly when he died, and why. Before he died, had his views of Nero changed, and does this account for some of the varied views present in his poem?

The *locus classicus* for this kind of problem, the problem of distinguishing something an author planned to leave in his text, from what he only left in his text because he died, is the scene in Monty Python's *Holy Grail,* quoted above as an epigraph to this paper, where the knights find an inscription telling them that they will find the Holy Grail at the "Castle of uuuuugh." It is tragically not clear whether the person carving or dictating the inscription actually meant to say Castle of "uuuuugh," or merely said "uuuuugh" as he was dying. This is the problem we face with many classical texts.

My inclination is always to explore the possibility of interpreting the text we have in front of us. I have no objection to emending a text, and in fact, if I were to give a fuller answer to the question "What are you working on now?" I would mention that I have two little pieces in progress on textual problems in Lucretius and Tibullus,[3] and I hope that this skill, which I do not possess in large supply, does not soon vanish from the planet—as it might. But my preference is to consider ways to interpret the text we have, and I would argue that inconsistency is a very poor argument for deletion or textual emendation.

On the other hand, let me mention an interesting if somewhat cranky book by a textual critic of American literature, Herschel Parker. Parker presents some pretty funny examples of elaborate theories worked out to interpret inconsistencies in Twain, Melville, Crane, Fitzgerald, and others, where he can prove, using diaries and other documents, that the inconsistencies were introduced by lazy revisions, poor or puritanical editing, or even typesetting errors. Classicists may well think of Timpanaro's discussion of *The Freudian Slip* and his contention that many of the errors that Freud described as signs of repressed unpleasant memories are instead the kind of simple mistakes of banalization, haplography, or simplification that are familiar to anyone who has worked with either the manuscripts of classical texts or the proofs of journal articles.

After bringing up Parker's work, let me mention, as we were asked to do, other work that has been useful to me. The question is meant to focus on work

---

[3] The Tibullus piece is now forthcoming in *CQ.*

outside of Classics, but I shall mention first three works within Classics, but not in Latin poetry. Years ago John Winkler's Apuleius book helped me see what I had been trying to do in my dissertation on prophecy in the *Aeneid*. More recently Ruth Scodel's excellent book on verisimilitude in Homer and tragedy provides a wealth of information and ideas about Greek authors' use of inconsistencies, which she thinks sometimes we should overlook, and sometimes interpret.[4] A third book I would mention would be Malcolm Heath's book on *Unity in Greek Poetics*, but because I think Heath is wrong as often as he is right, the real citation should be: Heath and his detailed and critical reviewers.[5]

But the real question was: "What authors outside the field of Classics have most affected your way of thinking about the authors and subjects about which you write?" One person who has written a lot and has influenced me has been Bruce Springsteen, who, more than the Vietnam War (which was over by the time I hit puberty), is probably responsible for my semi-dark, semi-hopeful reading of Vergil: *Darkness Visible on the Edge of Town*, you might say, to combine titles of works that came out in 1976 and 1978.[6] Among academic writers, I should mention Stanley Fish (1971 and 1980) and Wolfgang Iser (1978 and 1989), and others who talk about reading one word at a time, and developing expectations based on each word. In fields not far from Classics, I could mention work on inconsistencies in the Old Testament by people like Alter and Sternberg. I have also looked at some work on film and television, where you sometimes have what are called continuity errors; some of these may be insignificant, like a brief glimpse of a wrist-watch in *Ben-Hur*, but others may be significant, whether accidental or not. In the final scene in the John Wayne Vietnam movie *The Green Berets*, Wayne watches the sun set over a beach in

[4] Auditing a Sophocles course taught by Ruth Scodel while I was writing my dissertation on Vergil must also have had some influence on me.

[5] See Ford, Halliwell, Lamberton; few Latinists have discussed Heath; cf. Fowler 2000: 38–39, 70–71, and Sharrock.

[6] Namely, Johnson's in *Darkness Visible* and Springsteen's *Darkness on the Edge of Town*. See the citation by Thomas 2001: 37 n. 24 of the discussion in Kavanaugh 318–19 of 1980s interpretations of Springsteen. My undergraduate years saw the release of *Darkness on the Edge of Town* (1978), with the lyric "In the darkness of your room, / Your mother calls you by your true name," from "Adam Raised a Cain," and *The River* (1980), with the line "Is a dream a lie if it don't come true / Or is it something worse / That sends me down to the river" (like Aeneas to the Numicus?); my graduate school years saw the dark *Nebraska* (1982) and the semi-dark, semi-patriotic *Born in the USA* (1984), discussed by Kavanaugh. It remains to be seen, of course, whether the Red Sox victory in the 2004 World Series will make my Vergil any less "dark."

Vietnam. Of course there are so sunsets at the beach on the East coast of Asia, because the sun sets in the West.[7]

In a sense, William Empson has had a considerable influence on my project, but perhaps not so much from my reading of Empson as through his arguable influence on the last two-thirds of the twentieth century, influence that directly followed from his changing his undergraduate major. What I mean here has been argued by Jonathan Bate in *The Genius of Shakespeare.* Bate has intriguingly suggested that nineteenth- and early twentieth-century critics misunderstood some plays of Shakespeare because they had odd notions of unity that the plays did not fit, and that the key development that made us better able to handle ambiguity, more recently, came when William Empson began as an undergraduate to study English, after first doing serious work in math, science, and the new physics of Heisenberg et al., which suggested that we should look at texts in a both/and way rather than the either/or way that critics had been doing.[8]

A different version of this idea occurs in Jorge Luis Borges' story "The Garden of Forking Paths," which tells us about a remarkable novel in which multiple and conflicting versions of events are all contained within the same text.[9] Borges' narrator thinks that such a story never existed before, but there

---

[7] See, e.g., Farrand, Givens, and websites such as www.slipups.com. For possibly interpretable inconsistencies see Traube 37–38 on *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom*, and on *The Green Berets* see, e.g., Taylor.

[8] Cf. Everdell.

[9] Borges: "The book is a contradictory jumble of irresolute drafts. I once examined it myself; in the third chapter the hero dies, yet in the fourth he is alive again" (124); "... it occurred to no one that book and labyrinth were one and the same ... . Ts'ui Pen died; no one in all the wide lands that had been his could find the labyrinth. The novel's confusion—confusedness, I mean of course—suggested to me that it was the labyrinth" (124); "Almost instantly, I saw it—the garden of forking paths was the chaotic novel; the phrase 'several futures (not all)' suggested to me the image of a forking in *time*, rather than in space. A full rereading of the book confirmed my theory. In all fictions, each time a man meets diverse alternatives, he chooses one and eliminates the others; in the work of the virtually impossible-to-disentangle Ts'ui Pen, the character chooses—simultaneously— all of them. *He creates*, thereby, 'several futures,' several *times*, which themselves proliferate and fork. That is the explanation for the novel's contradictions. Fang, let us say, has a secret; a stranger knocks at his door; Fang decides to kill him. Naturally, there are various possible outcomes—Fang can kill the intruder, the intruder can kill Fang, they can both live, they can both be killed, and so on. In Ts'ui Pen's novel, *all* the outcomes in fact occur; each is the starting point for further bifurcations ... " (125); *"The Garden of Forking Paths* is an incomplete, but not false, image of the universe as conceived by Ts'ui Pen ..." (127). Miller 74–76 cites Borges' story in discussing Catullus' lyric collection.

is an extent to which the "impossible fictions" of much post-modern narrative are anticipated by aspects of ancient narrative that have only recently begun to be appreciated. In this context some work by Umberto Eco and others on "possible worlds" theory and its relationship to post-modern fiction has been helpful, but it would be misleading for me to claim that my book is going to provide much discussion of this material.[10]

These paragraphs on people who have influenced me have been a digression within my discussion of possible ways to respond to inconsistencies, to which I now return (and in defense of my use of digressions here, I point to the fact that my second chapter is on Catullus 64).

My preferred way to respond to inconsistencies is to see whether we can interpret them, and whether they are being used with some skill to make certain suggestions. This will not always work, and should not be forced, but should always be considered. The next few paragraphs will offer more suggestions about how some inconsistencies can be interpreted; discussion will have to be much more limited than in the book.

A text may be inconsistent, for example, because a character is lying. This was an argument I made in my book on prophecy in the *Aeneid* (O'Hara 1990; cf. Lyne), where I suggest that even Jupiter may at times be lying. I cited ancient precedent for this method: the λύσις ἐκ τοῦ προσώπου, or "solution from character speaking," which de Jong (xiv) says is basically the ancient term for focalization.

If characters are not lying, the poet may be presenting inconsistent material, and different views, either deliberately or as a natural result of working with certain ideas in certain genres. Long ago Plato complained, in *Republic* 382c6–398b8, about poetry's tendency to do this, and yet in the latter half of the twentieth century many critics said it was only the Vietnam War or some bizarre American fondness for ambiguity that made us see multiple voices in Vergil and other poets. But the problem is right there in the *Republic*.[11]

At times, especially in the start of a work, a poet may be temporarily adopting or assuming or presenting one attitude, before attempting to move you to another. This option is worth more detail here, and a second stroll through my five poems.

Lucretius is one of the more noteworthy examples, since he starts with his famous Hymn to Venus, and then tells us that the gods do not care about us. Many recent critics have productively argued that Lucretius is looking for

---

[10] Cf. Eco 233–36, Ashline, May, and Dolezel (with classical comments on Dolezel by Edmunds 97–107), McHale esp. 33–40, 106–9, Sutherland 1996 and 1997.

[11] Cf. Ferrari 114–19, Murray 1–24, 168–84, Halperin, Laird 44–78, Edmunds 74–75.

effective ways to move us from our traditional Roman beliefs toward his newer Greek Epicurean ideas, and that this accounts for a lot of the apparent inconsistency in the poem, and for the apparent anti-Lucretius in Lucretius.[12]

Catullus 64, written around the same time as Lucretius' poem, starts off with almost prostrate admiration of the heroic age, then gets much more complicated, presenting a dark or ambivalent view of heroism. I like sometimes to imagine Cicero and Caesar having Catullus 64 read to them, and being pleased at first that this troublesome poet, who had in the past insulted both of them and their values, had now switched to heroic epic, and was going to praise the *virtutes* of heroes.[13] Then I imagine them growing more and more displeased as the poem proceeds, and possibly even stomping out in a huff (Cicero at least).

The *Aeneid* presents a simpler view of things in Book 1, especially in Jupiter's great speech to Venus, than will be presented later in the poem; I have argued this in print already (O'Hara 1990). In the *Georgics*, as again Monica Gale has shown, Vergil "tends to open each book with a relatively optimistic and unproblematic view of the relationship between human beings and the gods, which is gradually complicated as the poem proceeds and a range of different perspectives is offered to the reader" (2000: 58).

Ovid, as I have mentioned, starts off with a philosophical creation, then moves to describe a mythological world. Stephen Wheeler sensibly asks: "How does one know on a first reading that Ovid is not committed to the orthodox view that he is presenting? Part of his strategy, I suggest, is to win the reader's assent to a comforting picture of the work and then to reform it" (33).

Lucan starts off with his notorious and possibly ironic praise of Nero, then presents a much more complex view, at least in part a dark view, of the principate, later in the poem. One of the virtues of my short final Lucan chapter, I think, will be to point out that what Lucan is doing is not actually quite as weird and unique as it has been thought to be, and not so much a product merely of the Neronian age (as Stephen Hinds 86–88 and others have suggested) as it is of the Roman or Greco-Roman epic or just poetic tradition.

---

[12] Cf. Clay, Minyard, Gale 1994.

[13] Cicero stresses poetry's role in propagating the *virtutes* of the best men, and inspiring the pursuit of *virtus*; citing for comparison the statues and images that played a major role in Roman veneration of their ancestors in funeral processions, he argues that poetry can provide "an image of our counsels and *virtutes*" (*Arch.* 30 *consiliorum … ac virtutum nostrarum effigiem*); cf. *Arch.* 15 *illi ipsi summi viri quorum virtutes litteris proditae sunt*, and 16 *si nihil ad percipiendam [colendam] virtutem litteris adiuvarentur, numquam se ad earum studium contulissent.*

To me, although I am not very skilled at using literary texts to do history, and am skeptical about the quality of historical arguments people like me can draw from literary texts, all of these texts say something about how ancient readers and writers and thinkers looked at texts and perhaps at the world, and that they found multiple viewpoints and polyphonic texts fairly natural. Many modern critics have argued that texts tend to fly apart despite the desires of their authors for them to hold together. I think we are dealing with a group of writers who know that texts tend to fly apart, and that they therefore work with inconsistencies, instead of vainly trying to produce the kind of single-voiced unified work demanded by early modern critics.

Another way of re-framing what I am doing, and of answering the question "What kinds of questions are you asking?" is to put the issue this way: How can we avoid cheating when we read Latin poetry? How can we avoid what I see are the numerous pitfalls and illegitimate critical moves that have been exposed by recent scholarship and theory?

By cheating, I mainly mean taking the easy way out, trying to twist the task of the critic into something other than reading the text in front of us, one word at a time. Now in criticizing this type of move I do not mean to rule out the legitimate goal of using texts to do history or social history; if I had any talent for that sort of work I would be glad to do it. I mean something else, which will emerge through some examples, as I run through my five poems one last time.

I begin again with Lucretius. The main way of cheating with Lucretius (and a method common with all of my poets) is to decide ahead of time what he is supposed to be saying, and then to make the text conform to that picture. This, I suggest, is like our students reading a translation and then trying to force the Latin to say what the translation says, which just does not work very well. For example, for Book 5's picture of early man, Joseph Farrell nicely shows both that the text is ambivalent about whether early man lived a soft or a hard existence, and that scholars have made some really bad supposedly philological arguments to make the picture consistent and un-ambivalent. My observation will be that the ambivalent picture here is similar to the ambivalent views of Italy in the *Georgics*, and of early Italy in the second half of the *Aeneid*. For *DRN* 3–6, David Sedley (134–65) wants each book to follow what is in its proem more closely, and so posits numerous changes that Lucretius was planning, before he keeled over and said "uuuuugh." These changes, for example, would leave no room for the discussion of love and sex at the end of Book 4. The very end of Lucretius' poem certainly looks unfinished, but among theories of how to deal with the end of the poem, some manage to deal with the challenging and difficult ending that we have, and others would impose a more palatable ending, drawing, of course, on the parallel of all those other multi-thousand-word passionate Epicurean epics we have.

For Catullus' complex and difficult Poem 64, we sometimes yearn for a way to make the poem simpler. I have mentioned that one of my topics is how the predictions for the future of Peleus and Thetis clash with what the whole tradition says about them. It is true that the narrator does claim that the Parcae's prediction of future happiness for Peleus and Thetis is one "that no future age will accuse of perfidy" (322 *perfidiae quod post nulla arguet aetas*); he stresses this point also in calling them "truth-speaking songs" (306 *veridicos ... cantus*), and the Parcae themselves call their song a "truth-speaking oracle" (326 *veridicum oraclum*). One way to simplify the reader's task is to follow Courtney, who insists that "Catullus went out of his way to make these authorial statements, and ... we must simply accept them at face value" (114). We must indeed certainly give them full consideration, but I think it is a good thing that most Latinists today would agree that not all statements made in the first person in a poem are necessarily authorial statements.

For Catullus 64 we should look more closely at one passage, and at a different and more insidious kind of cheating. Numerous readers have commented on the oddity of a wedding song that talks about the early death of the couple's only son, Achilles. In context, however, and if we look closely at the Latin, the Parcae's song makes better sense to its internal audience if we realize there is no clear reference to Achilles' death for them. After describing him cutting down the Trojans and clogging the Scamander with corpses, the Parcae say, in line 362, *denique testis erit morti quoque reddita praeda*, which I would like to begin by translating literally as "another witness will be the booty given to death." Readers know (or soon figure out) that this is a reference to the virgin Polyxena being sacrificed on the tomb of the dead Achilles, and the word *morti* here is usually translated as "to him after his death," as though it were the equivalent of *ei mortuo*. But we should stop and think how much we need to supplement the Latin to get that meaning. There is no word to specify whose death, as J. K. Newman (1990: 223) notes in some crucial observations on this passage. There is in fact no clear indication that the Parcae are talking about anyone's death (except for the virgin's): the word *mors* is occasionally used to mean "corpse" and to us who know the myth *morti* must mean "to him when dead," but without that knowledge the line would more naturally suggest "booty offered to death" or even "to Death" with a capital D, or M in Latin. Moreover, the dative *morti* need not imply reference to a person, for the "dative of goal" often occurs with nouns meaning "death."[14] What we usu-

---

[14] See Hofmann-Szantyr 100 and Görler 266; cf. *Aen.* 2.85 *demisere neci*, 5.691–92 *infesto fulmine morti, / si mereor, demitte*, 11.197 *multa boum circa mactantur corpora Morti* (where some see an archaic abl., but cf. now especially Horsfall ad loc., whom I thank for discussion of this point), and the phrase *ollus leto datus est* quoted by Varro *L.* 7.42 (cited by

ally do with this line is to look ahead to the next few lines about Polyxena, supply the full story from our knowledge of the myth, and then use the full myth as a kind of "translation trot," which allows us to force *morti* to mean *ei mortuo*. In some sense we are thus "cheating" as readers, just as our poorer Latin students do when they try to make a Latin sentence fit what they have read in a translation. Readers are being reminded of the death of Achilles, but his parents at their wedding are not. This way of imposing meaning of the Latin, I suggest, has been extremely common, and we must work hard to avoid it.

For the complex and polyphonic epics of Vergil and Ovid, readers like to tame the polyphony by focusing on a few details, and proclaiming them to be the "key" to solving a problem. For example, some critics want to use Jupiter's prophetic speech in *Aeneid* 1 as a "control." Murgia's discussion of Dido's curse of Aeneas uses this word of Jupiter's prophecy: "Such a trustworthy prediction is needed as a control on more ambiguous prophecies later in the poem" (51). So too Jupiter's prophecy to Venus has been called by Karl Büchner, in my translation of his German, "a summary of the whole plot [of the *Aeneid*], which makes possible a correct understanding of the poem from the beginning."[15] But Jupiter is a character in Vergil's poem, related both to the Jupiter of Roman religion and to the Zeus and Jupiter of the literary tradition, and he can lie or deceive as much as any character, as I have suggested. How convenient it would be, if we could get the "correct understanding" of every poem from the beginning—especially with these pesky enormous long epics. No one would actually have to read through to the end of Silius. But to those looking for convenience, I do not recommend Roman epic.

Another kind of "cheating" can be seen in Austin's comment on a passage in the underworld, where Aeneas is shown the soul of the son he will have in old age (*Aen.* 6.763–65), even though Jupiter has said he only has three more years of life left (1.263–66). Austin's commentary on the passage in *Aeneid* 6 says, "old age sets in early at poetic need." I do not think we will be making this claim in the new Focus commentary (cf. O'Hara 1990: 92).

Whether or not old age sets in early at poetic need, a careful reader of this paper might notice that I have just criticized or scoffed at Austin and Murgia and Courtney and Sedley. Possibly this section of my paper could be subtitled "Don't Trust Anyone over Sixty," in keeping with the attitude of those youngish baseball sabermetricians, mentioned at the start of my paper, who scoff at the

---

Ellis on the Catullan line). Weber provides a handy survey of expressions for "kill" in Latin hexameter, among them *demittere morti/leto/neci/Orco, dare leto/neci, praebere leto.*

[15] Büchner 1343: "eine Abbreviatur des Gesamtgeschehens, die ein echtes Verständis von Anfang an ermöglicht."

crusty tobacco-spitting old pros. I could mention in mitigation that all of these people have done some very valuable work, and that I have earlier praised our "retooled" conference organizer, and that in talking about Catullus just now I have cited J. K. Newman with approval. I do however, want to cite one more person from the "Don't Trust Anyone over Sixty" category; this will be partly about Ovid and partly about Latin poetry in general.

Karl Galinsky, in his Ovid book from several years ago, says that near the end of the *Metamorphoses*, when Ovid associates Augustus with Jupiter (15.858–70) and then says his poem could survive even the anger of Jove (15.871–72), there is to be no connection made between the two passages (1975: 254). In general terms, I would like to suggest that we not believe in elaborate and fanciful notions of how an author can control an audience's response to his or her work—and that giving up this fantasy has been one of the more important things to happen in Latin poetry in the last several years.

Since how Latin has changed in the last ten years is one of our topics, let me mention that a little over a decade ago Karl Galinsky and Christine Perkell organized a seminar on ambiguity in Latin poetry for the 1992 meeting of the American Philological Association. Professor Galinsky never formally published his whole paper, but he recently posted a "pdf" of it on his always entertaining web page ("by popular demand" the website says). I mention this in part because that paper cited, and now as a pdf cites, me as a prime example of what was wrong with the youth of America at that time. I shall not rehash any of that argument, but since Professor Galinsky did "publish" the pdf online, one point seems worth mentioning. As part of his argument about how *ambiguitas* in Latin is different from how many Americans understand it, Galinsky points to a section of Cicero's *De inventione*, Book 2 chapters 116–22, discussing how what we would call a lawyer can deal with ambiguity in a last will and testament: "highlights are (a) *primum … demonstrandum est non esse ambigue scriptum*."

Curious scholars might want to know what is in the ellipsis between *primum* and *demonstrandum*. The words omitted are *si fieri poterit*. If it can be done, you must show that the passage is not ambiguously written: *primum, si fieri poterit, demonstrandum est non esse ambigue scriptum*. The words that were omitted show that Cicero thinks that sometimes ambiguity can be explained away, and sometimes it can not.[16] Sometimes a last will and testament is ambiguous—to address the situation Cicero was talking about—and sometimes it is not. One might argue that the words Galinsky omitted undercut

---

[16] The Cicero passage is quoted in the same fashion in the published abstract of the paper: Galinsky 1992.

his whole decades-long attempt to control, limit, and circumscribe ambiguity in classical texts.[17]

My penultimate paragraph will be on Lucan, and like my Lucan chapter will be limited in scope. For Lucan, some scholars have tried to react to the work of Henderson, Masters, and others, which suggests that the poem is "at war with itself," by finding a way to make Lucan comfortably Republican again, through what might be (and perhaps somewhere already has been) called "The Republic Strikes Back" approach. Matthew Leigh's 1997 book is an interesting and admirable attempt to do this. Part of Leigh's method is to examine a passage where scholars have said the surface commitment to Republicanism is undercut by features of the text that make Caesar's side seem sympathetic to or attractive to the poet. Leigh finds in these passages "traces" of another view, one that undercuts the pro-Caesarian aspects that had allegedly undercut the pro-Republican surface of the text. Thus the subversive readings of Henderson and Masters are themselves subverted, and Leigh reestablishes the stability of primary meaning. This is a brilliant argument, in some ways, because it takes the tools of deconstruction or post-structuralist readings, finds the "traces" of another meaning, and uses them against a deconstructive or indeterminate reading. This is brilliant, but I think ultimately unsuccessful, in part because you cannot use the enemy's tools without becoming like the enemy, and without admitting that the enemy's way of looking at the world is partly right. When an attractive argument has been made that a surface or primary meaning of a text is challenged or undercut by a subversive subtext, the counterargument that the subversive subtext itself contains "traces" of the primary or surface meaning is interesting, but it does not serve to re-establish the stable reliability of the surface meaning—it does not put Humpty together again. This "judo-style" counterargument does show the weaknesses of both smug insistence on the subtext and comfortable reliance on the surface meaning. It may also destabilize notions of primary and secondary meaning. But it cannot be used to bring us back to a pristine view of the surface meaning as the only legitimate meaning.

I conclude with a few comments on what I have done here. This has been a fairly circuitous ramble through material and problems from the several chapters of my book, in which I have answered some but not all of the questions we were assigned. The questions I have largely passed over have to do with things like "theoretical orientation," "empirical research," "philology," "historical meaning," and the possibility of doing a "history of Roman literature." If I had to combine an answer to most of these in one sentence, I would

---

[17] See also Perkell, Thomas 2000.

say that my "theoretical orientation" involves an open-minded approach to problems and methods and a willingness to use rigorous and cautious philology to do "empirical" testing of ideas against the evidence. For me, both philology and theory (which for me means mainly literary theory and not so much cultural theory, for which I have respect but no talent) are what I use to help me read better, to minimize (without of course eliminating) the assumptions and baggage I bring to the text, which otherwise might lead me to cheat, and not see things that are actually in the text.

WORKS CITED

Alter, R. 1981. *The Art of Biblical Narrative*. New York.

Ashline, W. L. 1995. "The Problem of Impossible Fictions." *Style* (DeKalb, Ill.) 29: 215–34.

Bate, J. 1998. *The Genius of Shakespeare*. New York.

Borges, Jorge Luis. 1988 (Spanish original 1941). "The Garden of Forking Paths." In *Collected Fictions*. Trans. Andrew Hurley. New York.

Büchner, K. 1955. "P. Vergilius Maro." *RE* 8A: 1021–86.

Clay, D. 1983. *Lucretius and Epicurus*. Ithaca.

Courtney, E. 1990. "Moral Judgements in Catullus 64." *GB* 17: 113–22.

Cramer, R. 1998. *Vergils Weltsicht: Optimismus und Pessimismus in Vergils Georgica*. Berlin.

Deufert, M. 1996. *Pseudo-lukrezisches im Lukrez: Die unechten Verse in Lukrezens De rerum natura*. Berlin.

Dolezel, L. 1998. *Heterocosmica: Fiction and Possible Worlds*. Baltimore.

Eco, U. 1984. *The Role of the Reader: Explorations in the Semiotics of Texts*. Bloomington.

Edmunds, L. 2001. *Intertextuality and the Reading of Roman Poetry*. Baltimore.

Empson, William. 1947 (original publication 1930). *Seven Types of Ambiguity*. Rev. ed. New York.

Everdell, W. R. 1997. *The First Moderns: Profiles in the Origins of Twentieth-Century Thought*. Chicago.

Farrand, P. 1995. *The Nitpicker's Guide for Next Generation Trekkers, Vol. II*. New York.

Farrell, J. 1994. "The Structure of Lucretius' 'Anthropology': *DRN* 5.771–1457." *MD* 33: 81–95.

Ferrari, G. R. F. 1992. "Plato and Poetry." In G. Kennedy, ed., *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism. Vol. 1: Classical Criticism*. Cambridge. 92–148.

Fish, S. 1971. *Surprised by Sin: The Reader in Paradise Lost*. Berkeley.

———. 1980. *Is There a Text in This Class?* Cambridge, Mass.

Ford, A. 1991. "Unity in Greek Criticism and Poetry." *Arion* 1.3: 125–54.

Fowler, D. P. 1993. "Subject Reviews (Roman Literature)." *G&R* 40: 87–89.

———. 2000. *Roman Constructions: Readings in Postmodern Latin*. Oxford.

Gale, M. R. 1994. *Myth and Poetry in Lucretius*. Cambridge.

———. 2000. *Virgil on the Nature of Things: The Georgics, Lucretius and the Didactic Tradition*. Cambridge.

Galinsky, G. K. 1975. *Ovid's Metamorphoses: An Introduction to the Basic Aspects*. Berkeley.

———.1992. "Ambiguity or Polysemy." In *One Hundred Twenty-Fourth Annual Meeting of the American Philological Association: Abstracts*. Atlanta. 30.

———. n.d. "Ambiguity or Polysemy." http://ccwf.cc.utexas.edu/~galinsky/Home/homelinks/Popular/619.PDF. (20 Jan. 2005)

Georg, Bernhard. 2001. *Exegetische und schmückende Eindichtungen im ersten Properzbuch*. Paderborn.

Givens, B. 1996. *Roman Soldiers Don't Wear Watches: 501 Film Flubs—Memorable Movie Mistakes*. Secaucus, N. J.

Görler, W. 1985. "Eneide: La Lingua." *Enciclopedia virgiliana* 2: 262–78.

Gottschalk, H. B. 1999. Rev. of Deufert. *Mnemosyne* ser. 4, 52: 748–55.

Halliwell, S. 1991. Rev. of Heath. *JHS* 111: 230–31.

Halperin, D. 1992. "Plato and the Erotics of Narrativity." In R. Hexter and D. Selden, eds., *Innovations of Antiquity*. New York. 95–126.

Heath, M. 1989. *Unity in Greek Poetics*. Oxford.

Henderson, J. 1988. "Lucan/The Word at War." In A. J. Boyle, ed., *The Imperial Muse: Ramus Essays on Roman Literature of the Empire, to Juvenal through Ovid*. Berwick. 122–64.

Hinds, S. E. 1998. *Allusion and Intertext: Dynamics of Appropriation in Roman Poetry*. Cambridge.

Hofmann, J. B. 1965. *Lateinische Syntax und Stilistik*. Rev. by A. Szantyr. 3rd ed. Munich.

Horsfall, N. M. 2003. *Virgil, Aeneid 11: A Commentary*. Leiden.

Iser, W. 1978. *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response*. Baltimore.

———. 1989. *Prospecting: From Reader Response to Literary Anthropology*. Baltimore.

Johnson, W. R. 1976. *Darkness Visible: A Study of Vergil's Aeneid*. Berkeley.

de Jong, Irene J. F. 2001. *A Narratological Commentary on the Odyssey*. Cambridge.

Kavanaugh, J. 1990. "Ideology." In F. Lentricchia and T. McLaughlin, eds., *Critical Terms for Literary Study*. Chicago. 306–20.

Laird, A. 1999. *Powers of Expression, Expressions of Power: Speech Presentation and Latin Literature*. Oxford.

Lamberton, R. 1991. Rev. of Heath. *Ancient Philosophy* 11: 465–73.

———. 2001. Rev. of Schmit-Neuerburg. *BMCR* 2001.08.37.

Leigh, M. 1997. *Lucan: Spectacle and Engagement*. Oxford.

Lewis, Michael. 2003. *Moneyball: The Art of Winning an Unfair Game*. Norton, N. Y.

Lingenberg, Wilfried. 2003. *Das erste Buch der Heroidenbriefe: Echtheitskritische Untersuchungen*. Paderborn.

Lyne, R. O. A. M. 1987. *Further Voices in Vergil's Aeneid*. Oxford.

Masters, J. M. 1992. *Poetry and Civil War in Lucan's Bellum Civile*. Cambridge.

May, C. 1995. "A Postmodern Challenge to Reference-World Construction: Gilbert Sorrentino's *Mulligan Stew*." *Style* (Dekalb, Ill.) 29: 235–61.

McHale, Brian. 1987. *Postmodernist Fiction*. London.

Miller, P. A. 1994. *Lyric Texts and Lyric Consciousness: The Birth of a Genre from Archaic Greece to Augustan Rome*. London.

Minyard, J. D. 1985. *Lucretius and the Late Republic. Mnemosyne Supp.* 90. Leiden.

Murgia, C. 1987. "Dido's Puns." *CP* 82: 50–59.

Murray, P. 1997. *Plato on Poetry*. Cambridge.

Myers, K. S. 1994. *Ovid's Causes: Cosmogony and Aetiology in the Metamorphoses*. Ann Arbor.

Newman, J. K. 1990. *Roman Catullus and the Modification of the Alexandrian Sensibility*. Hildesheim.

O'Hara, J. 1990. *Death and the Optimistic Prophecy in Vergil's "Aeneid."* Princeton.

———. 1994. "They Might Be Giants: Inconsistency and Indeterminacy in Vergil's War in Italy." In H. Roisman and J. Roisman, eds., *Studies in Roman Epic. Colby Quarterly* 30: 206–26.

———. Forthcoming. "War and The Sweet Life: The Gallus Fragment and the Text of Tibullus 1.10.11." *CQ* 55.1.

Parker, H. 1984. *Flawed Texts and Verbal Icons: Literary Authority in American Fiction*. Evanston, Ill.

Perkell, C. 1994. "Ambiguity and Irony: The Last Resort?" *Helios* 21: 63–74.

Richmond, J. A. 2003. Rev. of Lingenberg. *BMCR* 2003.08.17.

Schmit-Neuerburg, Tilman. 1999. *Vergils Aeneis und die antike Homerexegese: Untersuchungen zum Einfluss ethischer und kritischer Homerrezeption auf imitatio und aemulatio Vergils*. Berlin.

Scodel, R. 1999. *Credible Impossibilities: Conventions and Strategies of Verisimilitude in Homer and Greek Tragedy*. Stuttgart.

Sedley, D. N. 1998. *Lucretius and the Transformation of Greek Wisdom*. Cambridge.

Sharrock, Alison. 2000. "Intratextuality: Texts, Parts, and (W)holes in Theory." In A. Sharrock and H. Morales, eds., *Intratextuality: Greek and Roman Textual Relations*. Oxford. 1–39.

Stahl, H.-P. 2002. Rev. of Georg. *BMCR* 2002.08.34.

Sternberg, M. 1985. *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading*. Bloomington.

Sutherland, J. 1996. *Is Heathcliff a Murderer? Great Puzzles in Nineteenth-Century Literature*. Oxford.

———. 1997. *Can Jane Eyre Be Happy? More Puzzles in Classic Fiction*. Oxford.

Taylor, Philip. 1995. "*The Green Berets*: Film in Context." *History Today* 45.3: 21–25.

Thomas, R. F. 2000. "A Trope by Any Other Name: 'Polysemy,' Ambiguity, and *significatio* in Virgil." *HSCP* 100: 381–408.

———. 2001. *Virgil and the Augustan Reception*. Cambridge.

Timpanaro, Sebastiano. 1976. *The Freudian Slip: Psychoanalysis and Textual Criticism*. London.

Traube, E. G. 1992. *Dreaming Identities: Class, Gender, and Generation in 1980s Hollywood Movies*. Boulder, Colo.

Weber, C. 1969. "The Diction of Death in Latin Epic." *Agon* 3: 45–68.

Wheeler, S. M. 1999. *A Discourse of Wonders: Audience and Performance in Ovid's Metamorphoses*. Philadelphia.

Winkler, J. 1985. *Auctor & Actor: A Narratological Reading of Apuleius's The Golden Ass*. Berkeley.

Zwierlein, O. 1999. *Die Vergil- und Ovid-Revision in tiberischer Zeit. Bd. 1: Prolegomena*. Berlin.