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PART I

Prolegomena

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CHAPTER I

Introduction: noua progenies

It may seem a contradiction, but stereotypes and commonplaces have a history. The words may be repeated *ad nauseam*, but their meaning and their associations change as they are employed in different contexts.¹

Few poems of sixty-three lines can have enjoyed as extensive or as enduring an afterlife as Virgil's fourth Eclogue. From the poet's own reformulation of his earlier vision of the returning Golden Age in the later parts of his *oeuvre* to the imperial acclamations of late antiquity, the treatises of the Church Fathers, classicising homage to popes, emperors, kings, queens and other dignitaries of subsequent centuries, meditations on the Nativity and other episodes in the Christian story, justification of constitutional systems of various shades, and reflections on the meaning, value and progress of art itself, this mysterious yet remarkably persistent poem forms an almost continuous thread in the history of Western civilisation.² Whenever writers have sought to ingratiate themselves with a ruler or advertise his or her achievements, to ponder the compatibility or dissonance between Christian revelation and the spiritual wisdom of antiquity, or to express a hope or conviction that some greater state of things is on the point or in the process of coming to pass, they have reached for the enigmatic symbolism and portentous phrasing of the fourth Eclogue. The study of the later fortunes of this constantly revisited text therefore offers a window on to the social, political, intellectual and aesthetic activities and aspirations of centuries of literary and artistic endeavour: a comparative investigation of the uses made of Virgil's poem over a range of times and places could do much to illuminate continuities and divergences between different eras and

¹ Burke 1995a: 160.

² In general see Binder 2010; also (mostly on religious manifestations) Kallendorf 2015: 48–58; Ziolkowski and Putnam 2008: 487–503; Benko 1980; Courcelle 1957; Bourne 1916; Conway 1907: 22–8.

societies, at least among individuals with a degree of literary education. The present survey concentrates on interactions with the fourth Eclogue in one particular period and location, the Italian Renaissance, although it will also touch upon treatments of the poem in other times and settings, since engagement with the poetry of Virgil (like any other historical activity) never takes place in a vacuum, and Renaissance authors and their readers were well acquainted with earlier responses to the messianic pronouncements of *Eclogue* 4. This slice of Virgilian reception history, however, represents just one chapter – albeit an especially rich and important one (see below, pp. 13–14) – in a vaster and still more varied story, much of which remains to be traced in its full intricacy and profusion.

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The widespread diffusion and consistent celebrity of the fourth Eclogue, together with the kinds of context in which allusion to these Virgilian verses is regularly found, mean that consideration of the changes rung on this endlessly evoked and repeatedly reconfigured source serves to bring into focus some of the most fundamental questions surrounding the appropriation of ancient texts and artefacts in later ages: the relationship between literature and power, between Christianity and classical culture, between tradition and innovation. The trail passes through a multitude of media, including original writing in prose and verse, in Latin and vernacular languages; scholarly and pedagogical commentaries and annotations, on printed pages and in the margins of manuscripts;³ translations of the Roman poet's hexameters into a range of new and alien forms;⁴ and a broad spectrum of visual venues. But what was it about Virgil's poem that encouraged its adoption as a recurring point of literary and pictorial reference? A fuller answer to this question will emerge over the course of the following chapters, and we shall return to it in the epilogue. Here it will suffice to outline a few general characteristics which may have recommended this particular text for quotation, adaptation and discussion among authors, artists, advisers and commissioners of subsequent eras. It might reasonably be argued that a large part of the popularity of the

³ For discussion of the commentary tradition on *Eclogue* 4 (not explored comprehensively here: see below), see e.g. Kennedy 1983: 154–6 and 1985: 82–5; Patterson 1987: 76, 82, 239; Irvine 1994: 120, 150–4; Kallendorf 1995 and 1999: 105–19; Ziolkowski and Putnam 2008: 674–98; Regini 2014–15.

⁴ See e.g. Fisher 1982: 177–82, 212–15 and Floyd 2001 on Eusebius; Lessig 1962: 51–6, Bayo 1970: 44–55 and 214–17, and Baldissera 2003 on Spanish translations. For a bibliography of translations from the Italian Renaissance, see Kallendorf 1994.

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messianic eclogue stems from its having been in the right place (on, or in the vicinity of, the educational curriculum) at the right time (the centuries leading up to and encompassing the rise of Christianity, with the tenets of which its imagery was thought – at least by some – to cohere so closely). Recognition of this factor is fully compatible, however, with the view that there are also certain intrinsic qualities in Virgil's piece that served to prolong and multiply its continued reuse in an array of different environments.

Probably the most famous feature of the fourth Eclogue, and certainly the issue which has most exercised scholarship on the poem over the centuries since its composition, is the notorious difficulty of determining with any certainty the meaning or contemporary connotations of the exuberant prophecies which make up the body of the work. The author of the treatise *Observations in Illustration of Virgil's Celebrated Fourth Eclogue*, published anonymously in London in 1810, declares that '[t]here is, perhaps, no question in literature upon which so great a diversity and discordancy of opinions have been entertained, as with respect to the genuine object and design of this poem'.⁵ Even in antiquity there seems to have been no agreement over the identity of the miraculous boy whose arrival on earth will set in motion the marvels of the restored Golden Age: as early as the generation after Virgil, claims were apparently being made by Pollio's son, C. Asinius Gallus, that he himself was the child in question – a contention that would scarcely have been necessary or tenable had the identification of Virgil's *puer* with any one historical individual been universally accepted.⁶

In part it is precisely this obscurity, this oracular lack of precision and circumstantial detail, that has enabled the fourth Eclogue to be redeployed so widely and for so many different, sometimes even contradictory, purposes. The anonymity of Virgil's *puer* allows, and has been used to license, multiple conjectures regarding the identity of this wondrous but unnamed figure, thereby bestowing on the lines themselves a posterity far more varied and lasting than if the poet had spelled out an explicit association with the offspring of any specific Roman dynast (if indeed he ever meant

⁵ [Anon.] 1810: 11. The author has been variously identified as Dr Samuel Henley, Granville Penn and John Penn; ten years later the work was praised by John Ring, who likewise maintains that '[n]othing, in the whole circle of literature, ever occasioned more controversy, or conjecture, than this Eclogue' (Ring 1820: 1.41).

⁶ See the late antique commentator Servius (in Daniel's text) on *Ecl.* 4.11: *Asconius Pedianus a Gallo audisse se refert hanc eclogam in honorem eius factam* ('Asconius Pedianus [the commentator on Cicero] reports that he heard from Gallus that this eclogue was composed in his honour').

the child to represent a particular individual, born or unborn, which is itself far from certain).⁷ So the newborn child of *Eclogue* 4 has been variously interpreted as the putative issue of the marriage between Mark Antony and Octavia which ratified the pact of Brundisium in 40 BC, the year of Pollio's consulship celebrated as the moment of renewal in *Ecl.* 4.11–12; as an anticipation of a child to be born from the union of Octavian (later the emperor Augustus) and Scribonia in the same year; as Octavian himself; as Augustus' ill-fated heir and nephew Marcellus, whose untimely death Virgil laments at *Aeneid* 6.860–86; or as a son of Pollio himself, Asinius Gallus or his brother Saloninus.⁸ More figuratively, the *noua progenies* has been seen as a general personification of a new era in Roman history and politics; as a figure for Virgil's own poetry; or as a more esoteric saviour-figure characteristic of Eastern mystery cults, such as that of the twice-born Dionysus-Zagreus.⁹ With the rise of Christianity, the juxtaposition of a divine child with the appearance of a 'Virgin' (*Virgo*, *Ecl.* 4.6) and the messianic portents of a new age led to an enduring perception of the poem as a conscious or unconscious prophecy of Christ (see Part III below). Any more explicit indication of the child's identity would have rendered such a plurality of proposals impossible, and would thus perhaps have consigned this learned and abstruse poetic novelty to the backwaters of literary history – or at least to a position of no special distinction among the *Eclogues* as a collection.

As it is, '[w]ho could possibly have foretold the extraordinary influence upon the history of the world with which this wise and gentle silence was destined to endue the poet?'¹⁰ Not Virgil, certainly – unless of course he really was blessed with divine foreknowledge of future events. But such reticence may nonetheless have been a deliberate strategy on the part of the poet, aware of the mutability of temporal affairs and of the eternal possibility that immediate hopes, however fervently cherished, might end in

⁷ Having said that, *Aen.* 6.791–5 (as we shall see) have also generated a long and copious tradition of adaptations, even though – indeed largely because – they refer specifically to Augustus.

⁸ For summaries of the various identifications assigned to Virgil's *puer*, see e.g. Cucchiarelli 2012: 237–42; Perutelli 2001: 60–1; Coleiro 1979: 219–54; Coleman 1977: 150–2; Mattingly 1947: 14–16; Peeters 1933: 27–9; Tarn 1932: 153–5.

⁹ New era: e.g. Coleman 1977: 152; Perutelli 2001: 61. Literary figure: Berg 1974: 167–72 ('Virgil's literary hero of the future', 170) and 172–7 (prediction of a Golden Age of Roman poetry); Northrup 1983; Arnold 1994–5 (the *puer* 'embodies a developed literary consciousness', 159). Renewal in nature, Aion: Norden 1924 (*contra*, Jachmann 1952). Orphism and Dionysus-Zagreus: Reinach 1900 (*contra*, Warde Fowler 1907: 50–3, 59–68). Eleusinian Mysteries: Whittaker 2007.

¹⁰ Conway 1907: 30.

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disappointment.¹¹ In the event of the ascendancy of Octavian, of Antony, of both or of neither, the nebulous prophecy of the restored Golden Age might still stand; is it too cynical to see in Virgil's extravagant but unspecific predictions a canny avoidance of contemporary political specifics (with the exception of Pollio's consulship, which could have emerged in hindsight as a turning point for either party), designed to prolong the life of both poem and author whatever the outcome? Maybe so, in view of the seemingly clear suggestion of Octavian in the divine *iuuenis* ('young man') of *Ecl.* 1.42 – and some will no doubt balk at the suggestion that Virgil's ringing proclamation of the new era might carry all the conviction of the slick (or at least prudent) political operator. But such an expedient would not have been unthinkable in the dangerous and unpredictable world of the late Roman Republic, particularly for an author familiar with Cicero's scathing assessment of the Sibylline Oracles, the very source claimed by Virgil for the *Cumaeum carmen* of *Eclogue* 4, in his *De diuinatione* (2.110–11):

Callide enim, qui illa composuit, perfecit ut, quodcumque accidisset, praedictum uideretur, hominum et temporum definitione sublata. Adhibuit etiam latebram obscuritatis, ut iidem uersus alias in aliam rem posse accommodari uiderentur.

It was a cunning contrivance on the part of the man who composed those things that whatever had occurred should appear to have been foretold, thanks to the removal of any specification of people and times. He added too the cover of obscurity, so that the very same verses would seem to be able to be fitted to different subjects in different contexts.

A self-preserving polysemy may thus have already been regarded as the defining characteristic of Sibylline prognostication in the intellectual milieu of Virgil's youth. It is perhaps telling that one scholarly attempt to defend a definite historical identification for the *puer* of the fourth *Eclogue* has fallen back on the otherwise unsupported supposition that the text of the poem was at some point subjected to revision, in order to give the poet's originally opaque composition a discernible political

¹¹ Cf. Osgood 2006: 196, 'A good prophet remains vague, lest what is foretold never comes to pass. Yet in a prophet's vagueness also lies the opportunity, often readily welcomed, for the listener to match up what is said to some contemporary event . . . Still, the poet (with great foresight) left posterity free to make other identifications . . .'; also Courtney 2010: 38 ('Virgil . . . had carefully avoided anything to tie down his meaning'); Miller 2009: 255 with n. 4; Versnel 1993: 192 ('deliberate vagueness'); Warde Fowler 1907: 84 ('I believe that he intentionally left it wrapped in obscurity and surrounded by appropriate mystery'); and Mayor 1907: 117–20, on Virgil and Isaiah.

reference.¹² Conversely, one late nineteenth-century critic, convinced that the importance of Pollio was insufficient to justify the fulsome prophecies of supernatural renewal later in the poem, was driven to excise the consul's name from the text altogether.¹³ The aim of this study, however, is not to discover the 'true' identity of Virgil's *puer*, or to propose a new interpretation of what Jérôme Carcopino called 'the mystery of the fourth Eclogue' in the light of its historical situation,¹⁴ but rather to examine the ways in which the poem was used in the literature and art of the Italian Renaissance. Although it is not the least of the attractions and benefits of the study of the reception of classical authors in later periods that it may serve to enhance current readings of ancient literature, our concern here is less with how the fourth Eclogue should be read now, than with what it has meant to past readers, irrespective of what we take to be the merits or defects of their approaches to the poem. Such objectivity, though loudly trumpeted by previous chroniclers of Virgil's *Nachleben*,¹⁵ may never be wholly possible in practice (Comparetti's comments on Fulgentius, for example, leave us in no doubt of how the former believed Virgil should *not* be read),¹⁶ and of course any reading of the adapting text is an instance of mediated reception as much as that text's own adaptation of the source text;¹⁷ but while future interpreters of *Eclogue* 4 may perhaps find here material congenial to their purposes, I am not concerned in the chapters that follow (at least until the final pages) to advocate any particular reading of the poem itself.

Having said that, the sheer multiplicity of interpretations applied to the fourth Eclogue can be taken, I think, to imply something about the nature of the poem itself. In 1907, W. Warde Fowler observed that '[t]here are some literary works about which the *dira cupido* of scholars will always continue to exercise itself, and this little poem is one of them';¹⁸ and more than a century later, this latter-day prophecy shows no sign of losing its force. Again, the fourth item in Virgil's collection of bucolics is the only

¹² So (tentatively) Tarn 1932: 155, 156 n. 4, 159–60; for arguments for a proposed alteration tending in the opposite direction (removal of material specific to a particular occasion or individual), see Mattingly 1934: 164 and 1947: 17–18; della Corte 1982; Syme 2016: 226.

¹³ Ladewig and Schaper 1876: 36–7, 200–1 (*orbis* for *Pollio*, 4.12; the proposal is Schaper's – see Schaper 1864: 770–1); see *contra* Conway 1907: 13 n. 1; Ramsay 1907: 60–1; Mattingly 1947: 17.

¹⁴ Carcopino 1930. ¹⁵ Cf. Comparetti 1895: 2; Wilson-Okamura 2010: 6, 7–8.

¹⁶ Comparetti 1895: 107–16; Wilson-Okamura too, despite his similar claim (see previous note), is by no means averse to indicating his own preferred explanations of Virgil's texts – see e.g. Wilson-Okamura 2010: 5–6, 147.

¹⁷ Martindale 1993; Kallendorf 1999: 205–12.

¹⁸ Warde Fowler 1907: 50 (for *dira cupido*, 'terrible desire', see *Aen.* 6.373, 721).

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one to receive a separate section in Felix Peeters' bibliography of scholarship up to 1930 – and even then it could fairly have been said, as Michael Winterbottom was to remark nearly fifty years later, that 'the doxography of the *Eclogues* is too vast to be entertaining'.¹⁹ Nor has critical opinion proved unanimous even on the artistic quality of this fertile quarry for later literary productions: for one, 'its poetry is not of the very highest order', while another finds in it 'some of the finest verses ever written in Latin'.²⁰ Clearly, however, there is something about this mysterious compendium of fantastic prophecies that has made (and continues to make) it an irresistible object of attention not merely for classical scholars, but for a seemingly endless succession of creative artists in an astonishingly wide range of media. Not only that, but it appears to be a part of the character of the eclogue itself that it can both engender and accommodate such a diversity of evaluations, appropriations and imitations.

One factor in this, as we have already seen, has to do with the inscrutability of Virgil's poem, its insouciant refusal to yield any unambiguous reference to contemporary historical events; but beyond this sublime imprecision, which did much to make the eclogue an immediate point of reference for later authors seeking to lend their work a recognisably 'oracular' flavour, the tone of the poem as a whole has proved remarkably difficult to pin down. Are we to take the lofty proclamations of the 'Cumaean song' at face value, as a glowing anticipation of the glories of the coming age, a radiant fulfilment of the hopes of a people exhausted by decades of bitter internecine struggle?²¹ Or is the attitude of inspired rapture undermined by the absurdity of details such as the spontaneously multicoloured sheep of *Ecl.* 4.42–5?²² More than one commentator has detected elements of humour in the poem,²³ and R. G. M. Nisbet, whose exegeses of Latin poetry no one would lightly dismiss as flippant or salacious, has even pointed to the possibility of a sexual *double entendre*

¹⁹ Peeters 1933: 27–9 (on the afterlife of *Ecl.* 4 see also 50, 51, 52–3, 53–4); quotation from Winterbottom 1976: 55 (cf. Norden 1924: 2, 'Aus den Schriften über das virgilische Gedicht ließe sich fast eine kleine Bibliothek zusammenstellen . . .'; Versnel 1993: 192, 'an awe-inspiring quantity of studies'). For a conspectus of more recent bibliography, see esp. Briggs 1981: 1311–25; Cucchiarelli 2012: 242–4.

²⁰ Warde Fowler 1907: 50 (more extreme is the verdict of W. S. Landor, quoted by Ramsay 1907: 64–5, on '[t]he worst, but most admired, of Virgil's *Eclogues*'); Rose 1942: 162.

²¹ For a challenge to the traditional view, see Wallace-Hadrill 1982: 21 (below, p. 325).

²² See generally Irwin 1989. Conway 1907: 20 n. 1 observes that the phenomenon of purple rams and scarlet lambs is '[f]ar less strange to an Italian eye than to ours, as every traveller knows'. My own travels in Italy suggest that this luxurious strain has been bred out since 1907.

²³ For humorous readings of the fourth Eclogue, see esp. Robson 1928; Gotoff 1967; Thummer 1983; Thornton 1988 ('satirically undercutting the Golden Age', 228); Hardie 2009: 37–40; Stroppini de Focara 2010: 214–16 ('le sourire malicieux de Virgile', 215).

in the 'hard oaks' sweating 'dewy honey' of *Ecl.* 4.30 (*et durae quercus sudabunt roscida mella*).²⁴ That the colourful, hyperbolic imagery of the Golden Age applied here to Pollio's consulship may represent a light-hearted squib on (or perhaps an elegant compliment to) Pollio's treatment of such themes in his own poetry is suggested by the association of the consul's literary activity with symptoms of supernatural fertility in the natural world in the preceding eclogue: *qui te, Pollio, amat ueniat quo te quoque gaudet; | mella fluant illi, ferat et rubus asper amomum* ('May he who loves you, Pollio, come where he rejoices that you too have gone; may honey flow for him, and may the rough bramble bear *amomum*', *Ecl.* 3.88–9). The possibility that the burgeoning *amomum* and sweating honey at lines 25 and 30 of *Eclogue* 4 reflect imagery that appeared in the *noua carmina* ('new poems', *Ecl.* 3.86) of Pollio himself thus cannot be ruled out.²⁵ It has also been proposed that Pollio's Jewish interests and connections may be responsible for the well-known similarities between Virgil's messianic prophecies and those of the Hebrew bible²⁶ – again, if this is the case, the tone could as easily be construed as teasingly jocular as elaborately eulogistic. Perhaps the most extreme assertion of the eclogue's frivolity sees in it 'a delightful nonsense poem for a child's birthday',²⁷ which suggests that we are no more to look for matters of grave political or spiritual import here than we would in the works of Lewis Carroll or Edward Lear.

Whilst the overriding tone of the fourth Eclogue has overwhelmingly been read as solemn and oracular, therefore, the perennial malleability of Virgil's poem may owe at least something to the impossibility of recapturing the specific nuances it might have held for the poet, his addressee and contemporary literary circles. If it were immediately apparent that the grandiloquent predictions of a miraculous Golden Age represent a wry parody of messianic expectations, it is unlikely that the earnest apologists of early Christianity would have seen fit to adduce it as an instance of pagan revelation, or that obsequious court panegyrists would have drawn so freely on its effusions to salute their sovereign employers.

²⁴ Nisbet 1993: 266.

²⁵ See Du Quesnay 1977: 29; Berg 1974: 159–62; Erdmann 1932: 74, 133; Garrod 1905: 37 (cited by Conway 1907: 28 n. 1) and 1908: 150–1; note also the possible verbal echo 3.89 *rubus* ~ 4.29 *rubens*. On the anticipation of *Ecl.* 4 in these lines (but without any suggestion of an allusion to Pollio's own poetry), see also Clausen 1994: xxi–xxii, who sees *Ecl.* 3.84–91 as a later addition to the poem; Segal 1977: 162.

²⁶ See Garrod 1905 and Feldman 1953; *contra* Braund 1983: 240–1 (with response in Feldman 1985) and Rose 1942: 194.

²⁷ Smith 1983: 13, quoted by Collins 1997: 192 and discussed by Cervelli 2011: 229–30.