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0521427193 - Redeeming the Text: Latin Poetry and the Hermeneutics of Reception

Charles Martindale

Excerpt

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 CHAPTER

## I

## Five concepts in search of an author: suite

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Whether you can observe a thing or not depends on the theory which you use. It is the theory which decides what can be observed.

Einstein to Heisenberg

‘Lor!’, cried Mrs. Boffin. ‘What I say is, the world’s wide enough for all of us!’

‘So it is, my dear’, said Mr. Boffin, ‘when not literary. But when so, not so.’

...

‘But what was tokenz?’

‘Marks’, said Mr. Podsnap; ‘Signs, you know, Appearances – Traces.’

‘Ah! Of a Orse?’ inquired the foreign gentleman.

*Our Mutual Friend*

The first little bird flew into the bush . . . , and it sang – ‘Who’s bin digging-up *my* nuts? Who’s been digging-up *my*-nuts?’

Timmy Tiptoes went on with his work without replying; indeed the little bird did not expect an answer. It was only singing its natural song, and it meant nothing at all. But when the other squirrels heard that song they rushed upon Timmy Tiptoes and cuffed and scratched him, and upset his bag of nuts.

*The Tale of Timmy Tiptoes*

Words strain,  
Crack and sometimes break, under the burden,  
Under the tension, slip, slide, perish,  
Decay with imprecision, will not stay in place,  
Will not stay still.

T.S. Eliot

I

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

## FIVE CONCEPTS IN SEARCH OF AN AUTHOR

'The question is', said Alice, 'whether you *can* make words mean so many different things.'

'The question is', said Humpty Dumpty, 'which is to be master – that's all.'

*Through the Looking Glass*

### I Two short (tall?) stories

I offer two short stories about the world we inhabit and how we can know it. According to the first story we can survey the world, disinterestedly, 'from outside' and, at least to some degree, arrive at a rational (God's-eye) view of its constitution. According to the second story, the character of our knowledge is always dependent on the observer's angle of vision, and phenomena are only describable from 'within' particular discourses,<sup>1</sup> which indeed determine what are to count as 'the phenomena' in the first place. We can call the first story the Newtonian story, the story of 'Enlightenment' (a story which has brought us much that we, in the West, hold most dear, over a large range of human activities). The second story we can call the Einsteinian story,<sup>2</sup> the story of 'Modernism'. This book could be described as an attempt to think through some of the implications of inhabiting this second story for the study of what we call 'ancient' literature.

### 2 Are you receiving me?

There are many versions of 'reception theory', but, on any of them, interpretation cannot be separated from the ways texts are, and have been, received by readers. Let a poet start the conversation:

I met a traveller from an antique land  
 Who said: 'Two vast and trunkless legs of stone  
 Stand in the desert. Near them, on the sand,  
 Half-sunk a shattered visage lies, whose frown,  
 And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command,

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Veyne (1988a), who uses the image of a fish-bowl (118).

<sup>2</sup> For the importance of Einstein, and especially his paper of 1905, 'The electrodynamics of moving bodies', for literary theory see Holquist (1990) especially 20–1, 156–62. A number of earlier writers can, of course, easily be appropriated for 'Modernism' (Montaigne, Sterne, etc.).

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

## ARE YOU RECEIVING ME?

Tell that its sculptor well those passions read  
 Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,  
 The hand that mocked them and the heart that fed;  
 And on the pedestal these words appear:  
 'My name is Ozymandias, king of kings –  
 Look on my works, ye mighty, and despair!  
 Nothing beside remains. Round the decay  
 Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare  
 The lone and level sands stretch far away.

We could interpret this poem as a fable about reception. How, for example, should the inscription be read? Is it a sign of Ozymandias' authority? Or rather of the transience of all earthly power? The poem embodies a clash of viewpoints, and, consequent on this, a clash of readings. In the presumed historical context we have both Ozymandias' view and the view of the artist who mocked the king's pretensions and yet produced a work of art (this on the assumption that, in the ambiguous eighth line 'the hand that mocked them and the heart that fed [i.e. 'them': 'the passions']', the hand and heart are, respectively, those of the artist and the king, and are the objects of 'survive', taken as a transitive verb). Each finds a different meaning in the statue. But there are at least two further possible viewpoints within the poem, the traveller's and that of 'I', the speaker of the lines who may, or may not, also be the poet Shelley. There could be a further implication that both art and human greatness survive, even amid an eternity of sand. Although tyrant and sculptor are now dead, Ozymandias' 'passions' outlast them both, and live on as depicted in the shattered fragments, and that despite the sculptor's placing mockery; yet they are also ironized by their new context. And the 'despair' which an onlooker now feels is presumably quite different from that envisaged by Ozymandias, monarch of all he surveyed. And the complexities do not stop there. For there is also the question of where authority resides, in the poem, for identifying, and describing, these diverse receptions. How reliable, in other words, are the various voices and the claims made for them? And, beyond that, my reading of the poem, in the light of reception theory, becomes itself a tiny part of the dialogical processes of its reception and thus of any argument about its meaning. *Meaning*, could we say, *is always realized at the point of reception*; if so, we cannot assume that an 'intention' is effectively communicated within any text. And also, it appears, a writer *can never*

Cambridge University Press

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Charles Martindale

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## FIVE CONCEPTS IN SEARCH OF AN AUTHOR

*control the reception of his or her work*, with respect either to the character of the readership or to any use which is made of that work.

Let us juxtapose with the voice of ‘Shelley’ a second, more academic voice. In the *Journal of Roman Studies* for 1989 there appeared an essay on the *Eclogues* by Richard Jenkyns, which begins thus:

There is an obstacle to our natural appreciation of Virgil’s *Eclogues* which looms as large in their case as in that of any poetry whatever. . . . though they themselves take Theocritus as a model, they were to become the fountainhead from which the vast and diverse tradition of pastoral . . . was to spring. To use them as a model was in itself to distort their character . . . Moreover, the growth of the later pastoral tradition meant that many things were attributed to Virgil which are not in Virgil . . . It is hard, therefore, to approach the *Eclogues* openly and without preconceptions about what they contain . . . No poems perhaps have become so encrusted by the barnacles of later tradition and interpretation as these, and we need to scrape these away if we are to see them in their true shape.<sup>3</sup>

Anyone at all familiar with the writings of classical scholars will have met this kind of rhetoric before, for here we approach what is still, for many classicists, the holy of holies, the reified text-in-itself, its meaning placed beyond contingency. Produced in an apocalyptic moment of creation (like the emergence of Athena out of the head of Zeus) the text comes forth, fully armed with the intentions of its creator, and available and present to at least the wiser readers of the day. Unfortunately, during the intervening years, it suffers depredations from the follies, incompetencies and sheer ignorance and naivety of our nearer ancestors (particularly those unfortunate enough to live in the Middle Ages, as we quaintly call the thousand years from St Augustine to Dante). Luckily modern classical philology is at hand, to roll back the years and reveal to us the original in all its gleaming, pristine purity. I exaggerate, of course, but not much (and will my irony help, or hinder, the reception I hope for, but cannot control?).

Some of the terms Jenkyns uses to valorize his approach merit further inspection. For example, he starts by invoking the discourse of the ‘natural’; a competent reader, it is implied, would, ‘naturally’ and

<sup>3</sup> Jenkyns (1989), 26. Further quotations (in order) are from 26, 29, 35, 31, 37, 36.

When Jenkyns invokes such parallels as *Le Grand Meaulnes*, we see the discourse deconstructing itself (29). For the sensibility cf. Jenkyns (1980).

Cambridge University Press

0521427193 - Redeeming the Text: Latin Poetry and the Hermeneutics of Reception

Charles Martindale

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## ARE YOU RECEIVING ME?

without excessive difficulty, arrive at an original meaning corresponding with the 'true shape' of the poems, were it not for the barriers interposed between reader and text by history, tradition and critical misinterpretation. But, it can be replied, this drive for interpretative singleness, far from being in any sense 'natural', has a history and is rooted in specific cultural practices; it would, for example, have surprised Dante, for whom the text was, precisely, 'polysemous', containing many signs, including allegorical senses not necessarily under the full control of the (human) author (*Letter to Can Grande*, 7). Jenkyns likewise draws a sharp distinction between what is 'in Virgil' and interpretations 'put upon Virgil'; but such a distinction will only hold absolutely firm if we posit a 'metaphysics' of the text and a meaning immanent within the signs regardless of any readerly activity. Jenkyns urges us to approach the *Eclogues* 'without preconceptions' (while at the same time reminding us that they are modelled on Theocritus, and assigning them to the pastoral genre, thereby inviting a certain sort of reading); but any notion of a naked encounter between a text and a reader who is a sort of *tabula rasa* is absurd. We all approach the reading of texts with the baggage of our values and our experience, with certain categories, assumptions, prejudices and 'fore-understandings'. To have such baggage is what it is to be a human being in history; *without it we could not read at all*. It is easy to show how Jenkyns' own essay can readily be situated in a particular time and particular place, dependent on particular (contestable) methods of interpretation, and revealing particular (equally contestable) local tastes, containing the traces of the Victorian writers Jenkyns so admires, and with ideological implications which could be further unpacked. Thus Jenkyns, we may note, finds 'a sort of shy urgency' in 'the tiny scene of the children in the orchard' (8.37–41) which 'some have thought the most affecting thing in all the *Eclogues*' ('all is so small, all so tender'); of *Eclogue* 10 he writes 'one has only to read line 14 or line 52 aloud to hear their lovely cold romantic sounds'. Further instances of a post-Romantic sensibility of this kind include his remarks on 'the mystery of ocean or its perennity or even its salt indifference', or his references to the 'sweet, pretty' world of the Italians in the *Aeneid*, and the 'modest country-gentlemanliness' of Evander's life-style. None of this, of course, means that Jenkyns' reading is a purely subjective or private one. Rather it reflects public argument, and institutional practices and questions. It is enmeshed in previous readings by previous reading communities, and thus testifies to much wider agreements and disagreements than the

Cambridge University Press

0521427193 - Redeeming the Text: Latin Poetry and the Hermeneutics of Reception

Charles Martindale

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## FIVE CONCEPTS IN SEARCH OF AN AUTHOR

merely here and now. Or rather the here and now is always the locus of discourses stretching back into a largely lost past and forwards to an unknown future. But, for all that, it is evidently the view of a British scholar of 'our' time.

'Jenkyns', we may say, is enlisting, in support of his own reading, the authority of a particular (here mystified) version of historicist discourse. In Classics one of the founding documents of this brand of historicism is Wolf's *Prolegomena ad Homerum* of 1795. In a letter to Heyne, Wolf stated that 'the most pernicious' of the obstacles to 'genuinely historical research' are the opinions 'which attempt to adapt antiquity to our taste, our scholarly desires and artistic ideas'.<sup>4</sup> In practice, however, readers may find their responses modified by a reading of 'Homer'. Thus, just as the use of 'our' smooths away competing tastes, so too such a notion of the formation of taste seems to ignore the influence of the past on the present. We do not merely interpret 'Homer' by the light of our taste, since the Homeric poems have themselves contributed to the formation of that taste. Historicism of this kind in the end denies history. Homer has been changed for us by Virgil and Milton, who have left their traces in his text, and thereby enabled new possibilities of meaning. Aesthetic preferences and supposedly 'pure' historical judgements in the event prove inseparable, as Wolf's own judgements can illustrate. Indeed we need to remember the historical contingency of the categories involved, categories including 'the aesthetic' and 'the historical'.

Two views about the significance of works of art are not infrequently set in opposition. The first ('humanistic') view is that such works are the vehicles of eternally valid truths and experiences (but it may be doubted whether such verities exist or, if they did, whether we could recognize them). The second is that these works are wholly or largely contingent on an original set of historical determinants (but against this clearly readers can both enjoy, and advance persuasive readings of, works about whose historical circumstances they know little, or nothing). Again a widespread recognition that, almost inevitably, we read *from the present interest* conflicts with a desire for otherness and a supposed recognition, or experience, of it during the process of reading; theorizing the gap has, however, proved difficult.<sup>5</sup> In this book, in an attempt to negotiate these two sets of conflicting positions, I shall explore a historicized version of

<sup>4</sup> Wolf (1985), 246.

<sup>5</sup> Thus in Beer (1989), 1 there is a lack of 'middle' between the claims in the first and second paragraphs ('Literary history . . . starts now . . . Engaging with the *difference* of the past . . .').

Cambridge University Press

0521427193 - Redeeming the Text: Latin Poetry and the Hermeneutics of Reception

Charles Martindale

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## ARE YOU RECEIVING ME?

reception theory, associated above all with Hans Robert Jauss; but it will be one of a less positivistic character, which will concede rather more than he does to the operations of *différance*, the key term of Derrida's, which combines the idea of difference (meaning is an effect of the contrast between signs) and deferral (meaning always resists closure, a final – or originary – meaning, because signs never stand still). Jauss's 'reception-aesthetic' (to use his preferred designation) is linked with the German hermeneutical tradition culminating in Hans-Georg Gadamer's important work *Truth and Method*, published in 1960 (the 'and' of the title is disjunctive). On Gadamer's view 'the truth of works of art is a contingent one: what they reveal is dependent on the lives, circumstances and views of the audience to whom they reveal it'.<sup>6</sup> In Gadamer's words, 'It is part of the historical finiteness of our being that we are aware that after us others will understand in a different way'. Understanding in which 'the dead trace of meaning' is 'transformed back into living experience'<sup>7</sup> is always made *within history*; indeed our historicity is a necessary concomitant of understanding of this kind. Beliefs and fore-understandings ('prejudices' to use Gadamer's word) are not barriers to understanding but their precondition.<sup>8</sup> Interpretation also involves a constantly moving 'fusion of horizons' between past and present, text and interpreter. Accordingly, to use a more Eliotic formulation, we have to learn to respect not only the presentness of the present but also its pastness, and not only the pastness of the past but also its presentness.

From such a reception-theory stance I shall advance two theses, one 'weak' and the other 'strong'. The weak thesis is that numerous unexplored insights into ancient literature are locked up in imitations, translations and so forth (this thesis may be uncontroversial, but it is more honoured in the breach than the observance). The 'strong' thesis is that our current interpretations of ancient texts, whether or not we are aware of it, are, in complex ways, constructed by the chain of receptions through which their continued readability has been effected. As a result we cannot get back to any originary meaning wholly free of subsequent accretions. Meaning is produced and exchanged socially and discursively, and this is true of reading, even in a society like ours, in which it has become, to a greater or lesser degree, a 'private' activity. In order to be read, a text has to be made *readable*, in a complex process which begins

<sup>6</sup> Warnke (1987), 66.    <sup>7</sup> Gadamer (1975), 336, 146.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Michaels (1978), 780: 'Meaning is not filtered through what we believe, it is constituted by what we believe'; cf. 782, and Gadamer (1975), 358.

Cambridge University Press

0521427193 - Redeeming the Text: Latin Poetry and the Hermeneutics of Reception

Charles Martindale

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## FIVE CONCEPTS IN SEARCH OF AN AUTHOR

with the acculturation of children and continues through educational institutions to wider interpretative groups. If we take the case of Homer and Virgil, the weak thesis would be that Virgil gives us powerful insights into Homer; the strong thesis, that, since Virgil, no reading of Homer, at least in the West, has been, *or could be*, wholly free of a vestigial Virgilian presence – not even one given by an interpreter not directly familiar with Virgil's poems – because the Homer–Virgil opposition is so deeply inscribed, both in the exegetical tradition and in the wider culture, because the two texts are always and already culturally implicated. In general poets have played the largest part in creating our sense of what earlier poems can 'mean', partly because their 'readings' have carried such cultural authority.

Accordingly, when we read an ancient poem, we have to remember the vast amount of cultural activity over the centuries which has made it possible for us to do so, including such material and institutional factors as scriptoria, publishing houses and the whole apparatus of scholarship, together with countless acts of appropriation by readers. To take a specific instance: 'Horace' and 'Horatian' are ideological signifiers, always already written but always on the move. Tennyson's 'To the Rev. F.D. Maurice', for example, can be read as an imitation, or recreation, of the Horatian invitation poem, its stanzas recalling Horace's Alcaics and echoing one of Horace's most famous phrases ('far from noise and smoke of town' recalls *C.* 3.29.12). The young Tennyson, we are told, had learned the Odes by heart, and thoroughly internalized what they stood for. Tennyson is writing to a friend who was a classical scholar and a unitarian minister, and who had aroused hostility by denying the doctrine of Hell. Tennyson, a modern 'Horace', invites him to the Isle of Wight to see his godson and to share conversation and companionship. Friendship thus blurs into Roman *amicitia* (indeed it is my contention that they cannot now be wholly disentangled), British imperial rule and the *pax Britannica* into the *imperium Romanum*, Christianity into pagan ethics, Tennyson in his house and garden into Horace on his Sabine estate. The poem is a small part of what 'Horace' now 'means'. And yet many scholars continue to believe that Horace is the 'same' today as he was 2,000 years ago.<sup>9</sup>

The point can perhaps be clarified by means of an example from one of literature's 'sister arts'. A form of historicism has now been operative for some time in the performance of 'early music'. Such 'authenticity', it is

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Smith (1988), 48, 53.



Cambridge University Press

0521427193 - Redeeming the Text: Latin Poetry and the Hermeneutics of Reception

Charles Martindale

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## ARE YOU RECEIVING ME?

claimed, takes the listener back to a more accurate recreation of the original work in its first context. But, even if such a recreation were possible (anyway doubtful), how could we know, exactly, how such music was, 'then', 'received'? Richard Taruskin has argued, plausibly, that, behind the historicist crust, the crucial point about such performances, at their best, is rather their *modernity* (even if the appeal to the authority of a historicist discourse initially helped to validate the new approach). He shows how the style of performance can be linked with the aesthetics of Modernism, as defined by Pound and Eliot in literature, or by Stravinsky in music. Bach's 'authentic' interpreters are really 'reinterpreting' him 'for their own time – that is, for our time – the way all deathless texts must be reinterpreted if they are . . . to remain deathless'.<sup>10</sup> In a contribution to the ensuing debate, Charles Rosen, arguing that 'the philosophy of Early Music is indefensible, above all in its abstraction of original sound from everything which gave it meaning', concludes: 'Every performance today is a translation; a reconstruction of the original sound is the most misleading translation because it pretends to be the original, while the significance of the old sounds have irrevocably changed'.<sup>11</sup> The musical analogy can also assist in destabilizing reified conceptions of the literary text. We can readily concede that a musical performance, though necessarily time-bound, can be a wholly satisfactory 'realization' of a score on a particular occasion, without thereby becoming in any sense definitive. Moreover we have been shown that a work like Handel's *Messiah* was performed by the composer in different versions on different occasions, and was only given a single canonical form by subsequent editors and performers. With music the metaphysical 'text-in-itself' is more evidently a mirage.

Jauss's historicized version of reception theory is not without its defects. It exaggerates the knowledge which we can have of earlier readers, thereby reverting to a positivism which it supposedly rejects. It over-emphasizes the conformity of reading practices within designated 'periods'. Indeed, on the model of reading I am proposing, the identity of a period is intricately connected with the cultural politics of reading; *a period is recognized as such only at the point of reception*. Confident divisions of period, whether ancient or modern, constitute an essentializing move. What we call 'our' time is always something made up of fragments of 'the past'. Similarly the boundaries we select for historical

<sup>10</sup> Taruskin (1988), 197.

<sup>11</sup> Rosen (1990), 52. I shall return to this argument in ch. 4; Rosen's formulation of it involves obvious reification ('the significance of the old sounds').

Cambridge University Press

0521427193 - Redeeming the Text: Latin Poetry and the Hermeneutics of Reception

Charles Martindale

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## FIVE CONCEPTS IN SEARCH OF AN AUTHOR

definition are always, from some other perspectives, tendentious, or arbitrary, or hegemonic. We privilege a 'period', or a 'culture', which we then define, and characterize, on the basis of our selection, eliding innumerable possible differences of place, life-style and discourse. Periodization – like the division into Antiquity and the Middle Ages, or Republic and Empire – is so engrained that we take it for granted (we can call this 'the ideology of periodization'). Similarly, since the 'present' is not one thing, the difference between past and present need not be seen as *necessarily* greater than the difference which exists today within a single 'culture'; thus 'understanding' some Romans may not be more difficult than understanding some of our fellow citizens.

In an anxiety to avoid the charge that reception theory treats all interpretations as equally valid, Jauss resorts to a variant of the traditional appeal to the 'verdict of the ages', redefined by him as 'the successive unfolding of the potential for meaning that is embedded in a work and actualized in the stages of its historical reception as it discloses itself to understanding judgement, so long as this faculty achieves in a controlled fashion the "fusion of horizons" in the encounter with tradition'.<sup>12</sup> Quite apart from the problem of deciding what constitutes an 'understanding' judgement (and who is to decide), the notion of 'potentiality' (i.e. that the various interpretations were, in a sense, always 'there') is either trivially true (the potential is whatever meaning has been assigned), or occluded idealism, or false. How, for example, could any Roman, before the rise of Christianity, have guessed that Ovid's *Metamorphoses* would be subjected to Christian allegorizations of a sophisticated and comprehensive kind (whereby, for example, the story of Orpheus became, *inter alia*, an allegory about Christ and the human soul), which may well have appeared to readers operating within new paradigms of interpretation reasonable, authoritative, or even inevitable? If interpretation is contingent, then its future is unknowable in advance. For Jauss, by contrast, reception is, in Aristotelian fashion, organically inevitable rather than historically contingent. In the next section I shall accordingly modify Jauss's picture in the light of other, more deconstructionist models of dissemination. But the central point, I believe, still holds. What else indeed could (say) 'Virgil' be other than what readers have made of him over the centuries?

<sup>12</sup> Jauss (1982), 30; cf. the idea of 'horizons of potentiality' in Booth (1988), 91, and cf. 86.