

Virgil's Epitaph, Donatus' *Life*, Biography and the Structure of Time

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*Iuxta eos, qui opus Virgilii altius volunt animadvertere. Hic ordo:
Virgilium iuxta ordinem vitae mortalium carmina composuisse.*

Vita Philargyrii 2

1. Introduction

Virgil's *Lives* comprise one of the most prolific and influential biographic traditions of antiquity.¹ Part of their success lies in the way they match the account of a life to the formal order of Virgil's literary canon,² though the canonicity of this poetic *œuvre* was no doubt itself enhanced by the impact of the *Lives*.³ In what follows, I want to consider the foundations of this achievement by looking at the temporal structure of narrative, at the order of events as they are recounted, in the *Vita Suetonii Vulgo Donatiana (VSD)* and in the poet's epitaph, the emblem of Virgilian biography at the centre of *VSD*. As I will try to show, these texts weave together different strands of temporality. Understanding each of these strands, their different character and functions, and the manner in which they are combined can, I suggest, provide us with insight about Virgil's life in discourse after the end of his biological life – his “afterlife” – and about the unique success of his life as a model of progress and excellence in the literary history of the West, and as a catalyst in the conception of literary lives and literary history.

¹ Discussions: Suerbaum (1981); Stok & Giorgio (1993); Brown (1998); Brugnoli & Stok (2006); also Brugnoli & Naumann (1990) with bibliography to 1990; Stok (2014).

² Already in the ancient tradition; cf. Ziolkowski & Putnam (2008) 179; Putnam (2010) 17.

³ “Representations of the social world themselves are the constituents of social reality”, Chartier (1982) 41.

2. Time and Biography

Before we approach our text, let us set out in brief some critical assumptions about narrative time, literary genre and biography.⁴

Nothing occurs out of time, yet time is “the element of invisibility itself”. It is not directly accessible to the senses. We are only aware of time indirectly through the mind or, as Aristotle puts it in book 4 of the *Physics*, through the perception of change (κίνησις), most often as movement from one point to the other, as if on a linear, directional axis. In Aristotle’s formulation, “time is the number of change”.⁵ This perception finds its way into the many narratives we tell ourselves, into “the representation of a real or fictitious event or series of events by language”, wherein the element of “narration” (in contrast with the element of “description”) “links itself to actions or events considered as pure processes, and by this puts the emphasis on the temporal and dramatic aspects of narrative”.⁶ Temporal structure is thus the backbone of telling a story. It defines the basic morphology of different accounts of the world, and can tell us a great deal about the nature, function and generic identity of particular kinds of narrative.

Amongst the most significant manifestations of change through which we perceive time and tell stories is the temporal progress of a person’s life, framed by birth, before which, from the perspective of the subject, there is “nothing”, and death, after which, from the same perspective, there is, again, “nothing”. Narrative, however, is man-made. There is no “natural” way to tell the tale. Each form of narrative has its own objectives and temporal structures. Tragedy, for example, tells stories of the lives of its protagonists, but does not record all life-events or arrange them in linear order.⁷ Dramatic tension, περιπέτεια, ἀναγνώρισις and other key elements

⁴ See Kahane (forthcoming) section 3 for related comments.

⁵ Aristotle, *Physics* 4.219b. “Invisibility”: Derrida (1992) 165. The perception and nature of time are fundamental philosophical cruxes which I can only acknowledge peripherally here. See e.g. Le Poidevin (1997); also James (1890); McTaggart (1908); Russell (1915); Poppel (1978); Newton-Smith (1980); Orenstein (1997); Hoerl & McCormack (2001); Le Poidevin (2007); Phillips (2008). For spatial representations of time, see Zerubavel (2003).

⁶ Genette & Levonas (1976) 1, 5, an influential early formulation. Narratological discussions of temporal structure and formal relationships, e.g. between *story* (or *fabula*, events in natural time) and *plot* (or *sjužet*, events in represented time) are an important part of the background to this essay, but sometimes do not take sufficient account of contingent generic, thematic, philosophical and historical factors, that affect our perceptions of represented time, and require separate discussion. Other approaches, for example by Bakhtin (see e.g. discussion of the *chronotope*, and comments on biography and autobiography, 1981, 130–46) and Ricœur (1980, with a useful overview at 170; cf. Ricœur, 1985–89) pay closer attention to more diverse factors that affect our perception of represented time, but raise separate problems, e.g. about Bakhtin’s relation to Hegelian materialism, notions of progress and historical consciousness, about Ricœur’s phenomenology and its relation to foundational argument. Useful discussions e.g. in Moretti (1996); Brandist (1997); Dowling (2011). For an important overview of time and narrative in antiquity, see Kennedy (2013).

⁷ Aristotle, *Poetics* 1451a, 16–20: “A plot is not unified, as some think, if built round an individual. Any entity has innumerable features, not all of which cohere into a single unity; likewise, an individual performs many actions which yield no unitary action” (trans. Halliwell, 1986).

of the genre depend precisely on selective narrative presentation of events that occur in the natural order of time.⁸ History-writing follows linear narrative timelines and part of its claim to represent “what was” depends on the replication of a real-life movement in time. But, as a genre, history “is more often concerned with humanity in the plural rather than the singular.”⁹ The lives of its individual agents, however important (Pericles, Augustus), are only part of a larger whole.¹⁰ This is one of the reasons why history almost always indexes events by means of “objective” external dates (Olympiads, consulships, festivals).¹¹ The genre epic is concerned with the life of a hero. Yet “divine Achilles”, “many-minded Odysseus”, “pious Aeneas” and “faithful Achates” are heroes of a mythological time. The structure of epic narratives often resists closed temporal frames.¹² The *Iliad* begins *in medias res*; the *Odyssey*'s flashback narrative is the model of discursive rearrangement of natural time in the literary history of the West.¹³ Of the *Aeneid*'s temporal analepses and prophetic prolepses we need say little here, except that we cannot reduce them to “natural” timelines.¹⁴ The poem's *imperium sine fine* (*Aen.* 1.279) bursts through the boundaries of both Virgil's narrative and individual mortal life. Epic aspires to “imperishable” and thus timeless existence. Such aspirations give the hero a transcendental aura, although, for this very reason, they also take epic a step beyond plain truth. As Philip Hardie has shown, eternal “fame” (κλέος, *fama*) is inseparable from the voice of “rumour”.¹⁵

Of all literary forms, it is biography, of course, that most distinctly tells the story of an individual. Biography is “an account of the life of a man from birth to death”.¹⁶ The relation of such accounts to truth is as contrived as that in any other literary genre,¹⁷ but biography

⁸ For time in tragedy, see Easterling (2014); Cairns & Scodel (2014). Note also that some tragic elements, e.g. choral lyric, are in essence ethical, reflective and in this sense non-narrative and atemporal

⁹ Cohn (1999) 18. See her extended analysis (18–37), separating third-person and first-person narrative regimes, referential genres (history) and non-referential narrative (fiction).

¹⁰ For history and time, see Möller & Luraghi (1995); for history & biography, Krauss (2005).

¹¹ See further below on “historical time”. Philosophical aspects of historical indexing are an important contemporary critical concern. See e.g. Lampert (2006) 71–96, ‘Dates and Destiny: The Problem of Historical Chronology’.

¹² See e.g. Schlegel (1979) 124: “In its essence the purely poetic narrative [Homeric poetry] has neither beginning nor end”.

¹³ See Purves (2010); plotlines and discussion in Kahane (2012).

¹⁴ See recently Kennedy (2013) 43–82.

¹⁵ Hardie (2012). For time in Virgilian epic see Schwindt (2005); also Kennedy (2013).

¹⁶ Momigliano (1993) 11. Hägg (2012) 4: “Biography is typically a narrative form: it relates the history of a person from birth to death”, citing Eagleton (1993) on “the remorseless linearity of biographical time”; Swain (1997) 1–2: “Biographical texts are texts which furnish detailed accounts of individuals' lives. They may be complete, from birth to death, or sectional, and partial. *True biography* [my emphasis] tends to the former”. Overview of biography in antiquity in Stadter (2007), who rightly separates biography from biographical interests and materials (528); for an attempt to characterize ancient literary biographies, see Leo (1901); for biography as a genre, Lee (2009); Renders and de Haan (2014), with bibliographies.

¹⁷ Momigliano (1993) 56: “The borderline between fiction and reality was thinner in biography than in ordinary historiography”. Also Hägg (2012) 1–9. For literary biographies, see Fairweather (1974), (1984) and, from a more abstract perspective, Cohn (1999) 18–37, 79–95; generally, Lee (2009); Holroyd (2003). See also the beginning of section 3, below.

cannot afford the charge of rumour and hearsay. As a literary form, it claims the authority of plain report. Biography's common medium is prose, the representation of "ordinary" speech and often of rational, factual discourse.¹⁸ More important from our perspective, biography's authority relies on its essential guise as artless *μίμησις* of the temporal order of events in a person's life. It adopts the pretence that it is an account of events as they occurred in nature, unaffected by the intervention of *μητις* and ulterior motive. The most immediate reflection of this claim is ancient biography's appropriation of the words for "life", *vita* and *βίος*, for its own generic use to mean "biography", as if real life and the words describing life-events are one.¹⁹ The formal parity between the structure of biographic time and the structure of an individual's real-life time is one of the devices by which biography asserts its generic identity – in essence a claim to objective verisimilitude, authority and truth – even as its objectives, especially in antiquity, often lie elsewhere: in praise, in moral education, or in the formation of values and patterns of thought.

Beyond biography and other narrative genres, there is a whole range of discourses which are in essence atemporal, even if they deal with the subject of time and even when they contain embedded narrative elements. Lyric poetry, for example, tells many stories but is focussed on an inner present tense.²⁰ Scientific discourses such as Aristotle's *Physics* or the formula $E=mc^2$ are in essence *not* temporal narratives. Also, many forms of scholarship are atemporal. Lexical and grammatical handbooks of the Latin language, for example, are non-narrative, as are commentary traditions like those of Donatus and Servius. Commentaries usually follow the sequence of a given text, but not otherwise any linear temporal order. Such atemporal discourses will play an important part in our discussion.

Finally, let us stress that generic boundaries are fluid and permeable.²¹ Almost every text is to some degree a generic melange. But this is precisely the basis of the critical readings below. The manner by which a biographic narrative structures its time in relation to other temporal narratives and to natural time is also the shape of its perspectives and agendas.

¹⁸ See Goldhill (2002) 113. The medium of verse is more closely associated with transcendent knowledge (e.g. in magical, prophetic and heroic hexameters), with "more philosophical" literary form (e.g. iambic trimeter, dactyloepitrites in tragedy) or with inner reflection (hendecasyllabic stanzas in lyric, etc).

¹⁹ The term "biography" uncouples the synonymy of life and a *Life*, but is unattested in antiquity (except in Damascius, *Vita Isidori* 8.6 = Photius, *Bibl.* 242, referring to the *practice* of writing philosophical biography). See Momigliano (1993) 12; Cox (1983) 6 n.11. Hägg (2012) 379 regards the emergence of this term as "incidental", but others see it a key moment in the development of historical consciousness and modernity. See Giddens (1991); Cohn (1999); Tillyard (2008).

²⁰ See Miller (1994); Hummel (2003); generally, Culler (2015), esp. ch. 2. Lyric represents a particularly complex case outside the purview of this essay.

²¹ See recently Frow (2007).

3. A Very Short Biography of Everything

The *Vita Suetonii Vulgo Donatiana* stands at the centre of the tradition of Virgilian biography. At the centre of *VSD* is the poet’s epitaph (36).²²

*Mantua me genuit, Calabri rapuere, tenet nunc
Parthenope. Cecini Pascua, Rura, Duces.*

As already noted, this short text matches Virgil’s life to his art. It does so in seemingly plain fashion. Yet very little about this text is plain, especially its construction of biography and time.

Note first that the epitaph’s own character and precise place in (Virgilian) time are uncertain. We assume that it is the “earliest extant *vita* of the poet”.²³ Yet it is not attested as an independent text, and is instead embedded in the 4th century CE text of *VSD*. Even among epitaphs embedded in larger texts it is almost unique. The couplet is a verse *mise en abyme*, a generic emblem of biography and biographic time within the frame of a more ordinary *life* in prose.²⁴ It may have already been recorded in Suetonius’ *Life*, and in any case probably predates Donatus.²⁵ Yet direct extant historical record does not tell us about the epitaph before Suetonius nor when exactly it was composed.²⁶ Significantly, like many other first-person funerary texts, the verse epitaph invokes near-transcendental claims as a record from the time of death. Its autobiographical format²⁷ and presentation in *VSD* (“on the tomb he composed a distich as follows”) link it directly to Virgil and to the time of his death. Critics have long pointed out the difficulty: “without knowledge of death at Brundisium and burial at Naples, Virgil could not have written this couplet, which was possibly transmitted with the so called *Epigrammata*”.²⁸ Let me suggest, however, that the epitaph’s un-natural temporal position is

²² For *VSD*, see Horsfall (1995); bibliography (Holzberg and Lorenz) in Bayer (2002) 339–61. Text in Brugnoli & Stok (1997) (for the epitaph, 334); cf. Brugnoli & Naumann (1990); Naumann (1981); translation (used here) in Ziolkowski & Putnam (2008) (the epitaph, 193); studies of the epitaph: Pease (1940); Fringes (1998). For the Virgilian lives generally, see n.1 above.

²³ Ziolkowski & Putnam (2008) 179.

²⁴ See Appendix for a comparative discussion.

²⁵ See the 2nd century CE graffito *MANTUAMEGEN* in the Basilica Argentaria: Della Corte (1933) 115; Van Buren (1934) 478–80, fig. 4. For Suetonius and his sources, see Stok (2010); Power & Gibson (2014).

²⁶ There is no direct evidence of its inscription on Virgil’s tomb. For the tomb, see Capasso (1983); Trapp (1984). For later readers, see Stat. *Silv.* 4.4.51–55; Mart. 11.48, 50; Pliny *Ep.* 3.7.8 (quoted n.31 below); cf. the anonymous epitaph for Lucan (*Anth. Lat.* 485c / 668: *Corduba me genuit, rapuit Nero, praelia dixi*) and other late imitations. See Pease (1940); Hoogma (1959) 221; Fringes (1998).

²⁷ Cf. Momigliano (1993) 14: “we cannot separate biography from autobiography”; Baslez, Hoffmann & Pernot (1993); also Bakhtin (1981) on parity of biography and autobiography in antiquity. But such views do not fully acknowledge the complexity of literary self-representation: see Cohn (1999) 18–37; Beaujour (1992).

²⁸ Horsfall (1995) 21; see also Laird (2009) 7. Cohn (1999) 22 notes: “No instant of life ... can highlight more dramatically than death and dying the difference in kind between biography and fiction”.

likely to have also been a critical asset, confirming the verses' near-magical force. This position is all the more interesting given that the text otherwise assumes the guise of plain biography and seems to describe a "natural" linear movement of time.²⁹

The epitaph's first three asyndetic sentences trace a rapid temporal sequence: a beginning, a middle and an end. They also match birth, life and death to three toponymic / localized proper-names, *Mantua ... Calabri* (the people of Calabria) ... *Parthenope*, recreating the temporal sequence of Virgil's life as a journey in the landscape.³⁰ Unlike time, space and landscape can be seen, both in sensible reality and also in the mind's eye. Furthermore, we often conceive of the essence of landscape as unchanging and in this sense as timeless. The epitaph thus embeds the life of Rome's poetic legend within an eternal but sensible material world, and, at the same time, turns ordinary Roman landscape into a mythical domain for Virgil's many devotees.³¹ It recreates biographic time as a movement in topographic eternity.

The choice of verbs in these three sentences gives the epitaph's time and space continuum an important third dimension. *Mantua*³² in combination with *genuit* creates the intimate, poetic image of a mother and child. The land of Italy itself has thus given birth to the poet. Calabria, the site of Virgil's last days (*Brundisium ... ubi ... obit, VSD 35*), is a place the poet knew well throughout his life.³³ *Calabri rapuere* again casts this life in the language of a person-to-person contact with a place.³⁴ *Parthenope*, the epitaph's poetic name for Naples (cf. *Geo.* 4.564), completes the narrative of personal intimacy. Virgil is cradled (perhaps with a hint of Epicurean pleasure – Virgil was among friends in the Epicurean circles at Naples) in the arms of a virginal Siren whose song is proverbially associated with death and whose name

²⁹ Kahane (forthcoming) describes the epitaph as a "site of memory". See Nora (1996) xvii: "A *lieu de mémoire* is any significant entity, *whether material or non-material in nature* [my emphasis], which by dint of human will or the work of time has become a symbolic element of the memorial heritage of any community". Sites of memory (war memorials, public buildings, etc.) often use deceptively simple language to play their roles in cultural memory.

³⁰ The use of toponyms is important. Hartog (1988) 248, citing de Certeau (1977) ix, notes that place-names are the "mainspring" of writing travellers' tales and historical narratives.

³¹ See e.g. Pliny the Younger's letter to Caninius Rufus, describing Silius Italicus' veneration of Virgil: *Vergili ante omnes, cuius natalem religiosius quam suum celebrabat, Neapoli maxime, ubi monumentum eius adire ut templum solebat* (3.7.8); comments in Boyle (1993) 233; Henderson (2002) 116–17. On space as a metaphor for time (used by Aristotle and others), see Dannenberg (2008) 252: "Nonspatial concepts are often mapped using spatial metaphors. The more abstract phenomenon of time is often conceptualized in spatial terms; time is conceived of as a path".

³² Virgil was born in the village of Andes (*VSD 2*); see Calzolari (1999); Della Corte (1988); Albertini (1983); also further discussion below. The name Andes is otherwise unattested in extant classical sources (except as the name of a tribe in Caesar). It conveys historical accuracy but seems to have had no external poetic or historical resonance. *Mantua* and *Andes* are metrically interchangeable (**Andes me genuit ...*). The choice here thus seems meaningful.

³³ See McKay (1970) 281.

³⁴ Calabria otherwise appears only in *Geo.* 3.425 in Virgil's poetry, as the habitat of the poisonous Chresydrus (*malus Calabris in saltibus anguis*). Wordplay (*Calaber / coluber*) may enhance the dramatic transition from birth to illness and death: see Mynors (1990) 244–45; O'Hara (1996) 280–81; Davis (2012).

is echoed in his own nickname.³⁵ The combination of toponymic proper-names and verbs denoting key actions thus re-imagines the temporal sequence of the life of Rome's canonical poet and the spatial journey of that life, as a relationship in intimate personal time between poet and land.³⁶

The staccato of the epitaph's first three sentences is repeated by *Cecini Pascua, Rura, Duces*. This sequence adds several more layers to the narrative, each of which lays claim to yet another distinct domain of time. First and most obvious is the layer of *literary-historical* time and the ascending sequence of Virgil's canonical works. This crescendo also embodies an order of *qualitative* time and poetic gravitas that progresses from youthful achievement and growing ambition to mature *magnum opus*. This ascending value-structure of the works is embedded in the material order of the words, and validated both by later statements within *VSD* (31: Propertius' "something greater than the *Iliad*")³⁷ and by the readers' independent knowledge. As often recognized, these parallel temporal sequences are reflected in the idea of an ascent of genres, from pastoral to didactic to epic.³⁸ We should, however, stress that this is yet another kind of temporal structure, which we could describe as *generic* time. The epitaph defines an order of the *genera dicendi* (cf. e.g. *Ad Herennium* 4.11–16) as a linear temporal movement of literary form.³⁹ This qualitative / temporal / generic movement seems so natural as to be hardly worth further consideration. Yet it is often the semblance of nature in art that masks the politics of artistic *habitus*.⁴⁰ The epitaph constructs a generic sequence that begins with pastoral and culminates in epic ("something greater than Homer"). Yet, elsewhere in ancient literary history, epic is the beginning of the sequence, not its end. Furthermore, the fundamental qualitative hierarchy of ancient literary history, and of antiquity itself as a framework of historical consciousness, assumes that the beginning of the sequence, "first" and not "last", is always best. The qualitative /

³⁵ Virgil was associated with the Epicureans, with Siro and Philodemus (see further in section 5.IV, below). Enjambed verse-initial *Parthenope* is emphatic and echoed elsewhere, not merely in *Georgics* (4.464 // *Parthenope*) or in Ovid (*Met.* 15.712 // *Parthenopen*) but also in the *incipits* of two poems by Philodemus (*P.Oxy.* 3752 col. iv 13–14 // Παρθενόπη): see Sider (1997) 18–19, 212–23 and (1995) 43–44, noting suggestions by Obbink. Could Epicurean resonance have also had a lighter undertone? Virgil enjoys fear-free rest in the arms of death. For Virgil's nickname Parthenias see *VSD* 11; Korenjak (1995). It is not impossible that this *pietà* scene could have had further resonance in the Christian era. The tradition associating Parthenope and virginity is broad, but the trope has yet to receive full scholarly attention: Johannsen (2000) is of little help, but see Hägg & Utas (2003) 46–52, with comments on the novel *Metiochos and Parthenope* and its medieval Persian descendant.

³⁶ A common feature of "sites of memory". See n.29 above.

³⁷ But Propertius' relationship to the canonical sequence is probably more complex. See 2.34.59–80 (also 2.10) and Barchiesi (2001) 94.

³⁸ See Putnam (2010).

³⁹ On the order of the *genera dicendi*, see Quadlbauer (1962).

⁴⁰ For the argument and *habitus* in general (a system of inculcated social dispositions, values and practices, and its political substance), see e.g. Bourdieu & Passeron (1990).

generic / temporal sequence *Pascua, Rura, Duces* – later visualized in the structure of the *Rota* – thus contains the kernel of a radical reversal of temporal-historical perspectives and an ancient foreshadowing of modernity.⁴¹ As Putnam and others have long pointed out, the metonymic sequence *Pascua, Rura, Duces* also creates within the epitaph a narrative summary of the whole history of human time, from its beginning in the “pastures” of nomadic herdsmen, through the “plough-lands” of permanent settlements and finally to human warfare and “heroes”.⁴²

It would seem, then, that the epitaph’s temporal structure embodies the essential force of the biography of an individual, but replicates and extends it many times over. “Biography”, as Simon Goldhill says, “makes the classical past ‘classical’ – a world populated by great men and great deeds which project the examples by which the present can be judged”.⁴³ Virgil’s short and seemingly plain epitaph weaves together multiple overlapping temporal dimensions to create a mythographic emblem of the whole Roman world, of birth and death, of eternal landscape, intimate human relations, literature, literary genre and universal history, compressed into the life-narrative of just one person. There are, we should note, no calendar dates in this narrative emblem of time. This sharply contrasts with the historical element in the prose of *VSD* (see next section). We do not expect historical dates within verse epitaphs,⁴⁴ but the absence of chronological indices in the poem means that what is otherwise claimed to be an inscription on the tomb of a famous historical figure is not bound by the constraints of any one point in time. Virgil’s epitaph is a truly universal emblem. Very few other short narratives in the history of Western literature have managed to produce such powerful effect. None possess the compact intensity of Virgil’s epitaph. Almost like some *vox magica*, the epitaph’s short, relentless repetition and overlaying of different temporal narratives of the world help create a revelatory unity.⁴⁵

⁴¹ See e.g. Murray (2001) 19: “For the ancients (as is well known), time past lay in spatial terms before us (*ante*), visible to the human intellect and capable of providing models of behaviour; time future lay behind us (*post*), obscure, invisible, unknowable, but not likely to be different from that past which we could see in front of us ... Darwinian homo sapiens looks the other way, forward into a future in which biological selection underpins the notion of advances in all areas of human endeavour. The way may lie uphill, but somehow at the top we shall find the promised land spread out before us. We face the future resolutely, and the past is behind us. It is noticeable that most modern travellers prefer to sit in a railway carriage facing the engine, to see where they are going; the ancients sat with their backs to the engine, looking at the landscape they had passed through”. For the *Rota* and its order (*humilis, mediocris, gravis*) see Quadlbauer (1962); Curtius (1953) 231–32; Hardie (2010).

⁴² Putnam (2010) 17, who does not pursue the wider historical implication of this order. See also further below, on the deleted opening of the *Aeneid*.

⁴³ Goldhill (2002) 113.

⁴⁴ Dates are sometimes inscribed alongside but outside verse elements in monuments.

⁴⁵ Repetition is often attested in magical discourse (e.g. *abracadabra*; see Brashear 1995, 3394, no. 22).

4. *VSD* and Historical Time⁴⁶

Virgil's verse epitaph canonizes the life of Rome's classical poet in a biographically appropriate form – a poem for a poet. The transcendental element in verse is well-suited to the production of a numinous effect, but for this very reason also carries the risk of suspect veracity.⁴⁷ To act effectively in the world beyond myth, Virgil's (after-)life needs the medium of prose and what we might call the temporalities of prose.

As in the case of the epitaph, we should first bear in mind the complex status of the *Vita Suetonii Vulgo Donatiana* as context and *in* context. Donatus was above all a grammarian and commentator, not a biographer. *VSD* was *not* a separate work but part of Donatus' larger Virgilian commentary, whose main purpose was exegetic, not biographic. As the work's standard title suggests, this biography rightly belongs to Suetonius. Donatus is relegated to the status of a biographic go-between.⁴⁸ Furthermore, although Donatus is the great Virgilian critic, tradition has not preserved his commentary as an independent text, and has allowed it to be absorbed, altered and augmented within the variorum traditions, in Servius, Servius *auctus* (DServ), Macrobius, Isidore and other exponents of Virgil's critical afterlife.⁴⁹ Thus, at play in our discussion, both in general and with specific reference to temporality, are several imbricated yet distinct types of material: the epitaph, a separate but not independent text of *VSD*, and Donatus' larger critical project (once separate but already in antiquity dissolved within the larger context of Virgilian commentary traditions). We are dealing with epitaphic, biographic and exegetic discourse, and with verse, narrative prose and non-narrative prose, all of whose different temporalities we shall now try to unpack.

VSD's biographic timeline begins one tick of the clock before the beginning of Virgil's life, with a brief comment on parentage and on the poet's father (1):

P. Vergilius Maro Mantuanus parentibus modicis fuit ac praecipue patre, quem quidam opificem figulum, plures Magi cuiusdam viatoris initio mercennarium, mox ob industriam generum tradiderunt egregieque substantiae silvis coemendis et apibus curandis auxisse re<c>ulam.

⁴⁶ Horsfall (1995) is the most compact discussion of historical references.

⁴⁷ See comments on epic in section 2, above.

⁴⁸ Cf. also the prefatory *Epistula ad Munatium* (Brugnoli & Stok, 1997, 15, who note "epistula in uno P exstat, alia manu ac quae vitam scripsit"); also the omission of Donatus' name from the inscription in most MSS (*ibid.* 17).

⁴⁹ The relations between Donatus' work and the later tradition are highly complex and the bibliography extensive, but see e.g. Marinone (1946); Comparetti (1908); Stok (1994). As the much-reduced and formalized biographic section in the *Expositio Donati* demonstrates, *VSD* itself, despite tradition's insistence on the title *Vita*, was more than just a "life". For the text of the *Expositio*, see Brugnoli & Stok (1997), also Bayer (1970) 713–15.

Reference to ancestry is a biographic commonplace. Yet the character of *VSD*'s rhetoric, weighing up possible second-hand evidence (*quidam ... plures*), also hints at a learned recognition of the limits of our knowledge and the slippage between endless cycles of emergence and decay in nature and the finite narrative constructs of biography.⁵⁰ Such slippage sharply contrasts with the absolute mythographic temporalities of Virgil's epitaph.⁵¹

Immediately after the opening section, *VSD* nevertheless establishes its historical credentials. It acknowledges the formal temporal structure (its narrative "backbone", see above, section 2) of biography with special emphasis on chronology. *VSD* 2 marks Virgil's birth: *Natus est Cn. Pompeio Magno M. Licinio Crasso primum cons. Iduum Octobrium die* ("[Virgil] was born on the Ides of October, during the first consulships of Gnaeus Pompeius the Great and Marcus Licinius Crassus": Oct. 15, 70 BCE), with reference to external, *homogenous* (*i.e.* the same at every point – moving at an equal pace from one year to another, marked by the Consulships) time that aligns the course of Virgil's life with the history and chronology of Rome.⁵² The precise and external nature of this key biographic date is matched by reference to an exact geographic location. *VSD*'s prose says that Virgil was born "in a village called Andes" (*in pago qui Andes dicitur*).⁵³ The place-name *Andes* is not attested in any other context in classical sources. It has no cultural resonance, but precisely for this reason carries with it the enhanced impression of objective historical fact. Contrast the epitaph, where the event of Virgil's birth, undated, is linked to the common place-name *Mantua*. Both the epitaph and the *Life* are biographic texts. Yet in our context *Mantua* and *Andes* separate different strategic approaches to the genre. One is linked to *mythographic* space-time, the other to the everyday facticity of chronological time and historical prose.

Not surprisingly, *VSD* marks two more points in Virgil's biographic narrative in exact chronological terms. Following the beginning of birth, the text describes a middle point, the poet's movement in youth and his pivotal progress from childhood to becoming an adult (6):

*Initia aetatis Cremonae egit usque ad virilem togam, quam XVII anno natali suo accepit
idem illis consulibus iterum duobus, quibus erat natus, evenitque ut eodem ipso die
Lucretius poeta decederet.*

⁵⁰ "All literatures ... have always designated themselves as existing in the mode of fiction ... The self-reflecting mirror-effect by means of which a work of fiction asserts, by its very existence, its separation from empirical reality ... characterizes the work of literature in its essence", De Man (1971) 17.

⁵¹ Epitaphic texts also make frequent reference to ancestry; in the context of Virgil's epitaph, see Kahane (forthcoming). But autobiographic epitaphs do not normally express doubt about parentage ("My name is ... some say my father was ...").

⁵² For chronology in general, see Bickerman (1980). The term "homogenous time" is derived from scientific language, but is also central to contemporary discussions of historical time; see Benjamin (1968) 261.

⁵³ Note again what may be *VSD*'s scientific caution: "a village *called* Andes", rather than simply "in the village of Andes".

This important moment in life is linked to an external date and, in addition, to the end of the life of a prominent poet, creating a historical sequence of literary-biographic dates.⁵⁴

The third and final indexed biographic event in *VSD* is, of course, Virgil’s death in 19 BCE (35):

Anno aetatis quinquagesimo secundo impositurus Aeneidi summam manum statuit in Graeciam et in Asiam secedere triennioque continuo nihil amplius quam emendare, ut reliqua vita tantum philosophiae vacaret. Set cum ingressus iter Athenis occurrisset Augusto ab oriente Romam revertenti, destinaretque non absistere atque etiam una redire, dum Megara vicinum oppidum ferventissimo sole cognoscit, languorem nactus est, eumque non intermissa navigatione auxit ita ut gravior aliquanto Brundisium appelleret, ubi diebus paucis obit XI Kal. Octobr. Cn. Sentio Q. Lucretio cons. Ossa eius Neapolim translata sunt tumuloque condita, qui est via Puteoloaeana intra lapidem secundum, in quo distichon fecit tale ...

Underlying this account is a poetic metaphor: the journey of a life cut short. This use of the metaphor is however very different from its un-indexed mythographic use in the epitaph. By marking a numeric personal index of Virgilian time, “in his fiftieth-second year”, and linking it to a precise external date, Sept. 21, 19 BCE, *VSD* places Virgil’s personal time in objective historical time. The narrative is otherwise characterised by prosaic and thus historically credible detail (even as it speculates on Virgil’s inner intention): Virgil “meant to do nothing but revise for three straight years”.⁵⁵ Note that the scene is set in the context of wider historical events: Virgil meets Augustus as the Emperor “was returning to Rome from the East”. Similarly, the text also offers a rationalistic cause-and-effect diagnostic of Virgil’s medical condition: “under a strongly blazing sun, he became ill. Because he did not suspend the sea travel, his sickness grew so much worse that it was considerably more serious when he put ashore at Brindisi”. The scene concludes with a terse and detached report on death – otherwise the most dramatic event in any life: “he passed away there, after a few days”. An equally practical comment follows, noting the poet’s burial place not at poetic Parthenope, but in the everyday city of Naples, adding the location, “on the road to Puzzuoli, less than two miles out from the city”, with dry cartographic precision.

These, then, are the three key dates marking an explicit beginning (= birth), middle (= entry into adult life), and end (= death) – points that comprise *VSD*’s necessary frame of formal biography. These, let me stress, are the only events in *VSD* to be indexed by external

⁵⁴ See Horsfall (1995) 5–6; Fairweather (1974). For the reading *xvii* see Brugnoli & Stok (1997) 20–01. Harris (undated) sees this as an implicit reference to Epicureanism, for which see further below, section 5.IV.

⁵⁵ See O’Hara (2010) 98–99.

chronology. They structure *VSD*'s *historical* time and link Virgil's life to the homogenous, public temporality of Rome.

But it is immediately after this historical account of Virgil's death, when we the readers have been assured of the facticity of *VSD*'s time, that – still using the same terse factual prose – the text pulls out its mythographic trump card: “on the tomb he composed a distich as follows”. The contrastive effect of the epitaph's universal, unindexed, ahistorical verse time could not be greater.

5. The Scholar's Time and the Poet's Time

Into the frame of historical time and chronological dates *VSD* weaves many observations that are unattached to external points in time. Some of these are general by nature. They add bodily materiality, a social existence and other attributes to the figure of the poet. Virgil “was large in person and stature, with a swarthy complexion” (8); “he owned a house in Rome on the Esquiline” (12). However, many other details, often describing significant biographic moments, also have no date. This aspect of *VSD* is not unusual. No biography can index all of its events or arrange them in perfect order. Nevertheless, in many of its details, *VSD* develops yet another strand of biographic time which is distinct from the arc of history and external chronology on the one hand, and from a poetic mythography on the other. As we shall see, we are dealing with time which reflects the cumulative and *ad hoc* traditions of commentary and scholarship within which *VSD* was transmitted and preserved, and which, perhaps a little surprisingly, is also a form of time which is well attuned to the deep back-and-forth swerve of Virgil's practice as a poet.

I discuss this temporal layer in four parts, reading *VSD* more or less in order and thus following its narrative structure. In part I, I note some preliminary qualities of such *poetic* time marked by the absence of temporal indexing. In part II, I consider the temporal anomalies in the description of Virgil's juvenile and minor literary works. In part III, I consider *VSD*'s discussion of Virgil's canonical works. Finally, in part IV, I look at *VSD*'s discussion of Virgilian composition and what we shall eventually describe as discreet *Virgilian* time.

I – Life Events

Having assumed the *toga virilis* (6, see above), Virgil leaves the region of his place of birth and makes his way to Rome (7):

Sed Vergilius a Cremona Mediolanum et inde paulo post transit in urbem.

These words describe an important movement in Virgil's life. However, despite the tripartite reference to geographic points familiar to us from the epitaph, this sequence is of a different kind. As in the epitaph, no dates are given. Yet this brief account does not describe the arc of a whole life, only a practical, unceremonious transitional movement. Indeed, in a geographic sense, the narrative does not describe an arc at all. The poet first heads up north, from Cremona to Milan, then back south, to Rome.⁵⁶ This sequence describes a topographic movement which is neither precisely chronological nor a mythographic construct.

In section 9, embedded in comments on Virgil's sexual habits, we find mention of the gift of a particular favourite:

Cibi vinique minimi [fuit], libidinis in pueros pronioris, quorum maxime dilexit Cebetem et Alexandrum, quem secunda Bucolicorum ecloga Alexim appellat, donatum sibi ab Asinio Pollione, utrumque non ineruditum, Cebetem vero et poetam.

Alexander / Alexis is a notable personal and poetic figure, yet he is described in plain, factual terms.⁵⁷ He was the gift of a patron who is a known historical personage at an unspecified date. This, again, is neither history nor myth.

In section 14 we are told of the loss of Virgil's family "when he was full grown" (*parentes iam grandis amisit*). This significant biographic event, easily dramatised, is described in terse, un-poetic terms and its date is left unmarked. Likewise, Virgil's academic and professional activities, and his single appearance in the courts, are undated (*inter cetera studia medicinae quoque ac maxime mathematicae operam dedit. Egit et causam apud iudices unam omnino nec amplius quam semel*, 15). In these details, then, we find an approach to biographic time that properly belongs neither to the historian nor to the chronologist or the mythographer, but to a literary biographer and commentator of a type which in itself is not uncommon in antiquity.

II – Juvenile and Minor Works

As we already stressed, *VSD* is part of Donatus' larger critical opus and of the broader tradition of Virgilian scholarship, whose main interest is Virgil's literary activity. From section 17 to section 39, the narrative strings together a range of comments focussing largely on literary events, starting with epitaphic verses Virgil composed while still a boy, for the gladiator-master and robber Ballista (17):⁵⁸

⁵⁶ Virgil and Cremona: Tozzi (1984); Milan: cf. Jerome, *Chron.* Ol. 181, 4: *Vergilius sumpta toga Mediolanium transgreditur.*

⁵⁷ See *Ecl.* 2, also 5 and 7.

⁵⁸ See Rincón González (1994); Zarker (1971).

*Poeticam puer adhuc auspicatus in Ballistam ... distichon fecit:
Monte sub hoc lapidum ...*

As before, the text marks time not by an external date, but in a vague manner.⁵⁹ It relies on the anaphoric *adhuc*, whose formal point of reference is the preceding narration.⁶⁰ Yet only a few sentences earlier (14), we were told that Virgil lost his parents *iam grandis*, “when he was full grown”. Narratives are always at liberty to rearrange story time, but that precisely is our point. Speaking of Virgil’s first poem, *VSD* seems to have broken with a strictly linear order of biographic time and slightly backtracked, so as to focus on its main interest, an account of Virgil’s literary output. We may add that the poet’s first juvenile effort is of little independent poetic merit. It is above all a literary scholar’s detail, an anecdote that marks the starting point of Virgil’s literary career, but which is too unimportant to be included in a mythographic account or in the formal dated sequence of a public, historical account of Virgil’s life.

Immediately following this boyish effort, *VSD* considers some more significant juvenile poems. The text, again, does not specify precise external dates for the *Catalepton*, the *Priapea*, the epigrams, the *Dirae*, *Ciris* and *Culex*, noting only that they were composed when Virgil was “twenty six” (*cum esset annorum X[X]VI*).⁶¹ Such relative personal dating provides the needed order for a literary account. From the relative date we can, of course, calculate a general historical date, but the text’s main interest here is clearly a literary sequence whose temporal index is the figure of Virgil himself, not external historical time or a precise chronological date for each work. *VSD* sums up the plot of the *Culex* (18) and cites the famous *Parve culex ... distichon* (*Culex* 413–14). Whatever their literary merit, these funerary verses, like Ballista’s epigram, underscore the prominence of Virgil’s epitaph and of verse emblems of death in *VSD*’s prose.⁶²

The text also mentions “a poem about Aetna”, but says nothing of the chronology of this work of doubtful authorship (*scripsit etiam, de qua ambagitur, Aetnam*, 19). Where the poet’s life – rather than external events – is the measure of time, the date of spurious works matters little.

These accounts, then, are preliminary indications, on their own not unusual, of a literary scholar’s time. Their swerve is more anecdotal and contingent, relative to both the epitaph’s mythographic time and to the external homogenous time of historical biography. As we

⁵⁹ General discussion and further references in Horsfall (1995).

⁶⁰ The function of *adhuc* is either limitative or durative; see Pinkster (2015) 865: 10.41.

⁶¹ For the textual problem, see Brugnoli & Stok (1997) 25. The difficulty does not affect our basic argument, which relies simply on the presence of a number.

⁶² Death often defines the narratives of a life. Consider *e.g.* the Gospels, the life of Julius Caesar, John F. Kennedy, etc. See discussion in Kahane (2003).

approach *VSD*'s account of Virgil's canonical works, the most important elements in his life, this perspective becomes more explicit.

III. The Canonical Poems

The public and therefore external status of the canonical trilogy clearly requires more attention to history and to historical time, though by their very nature as canonical works the *Eclogues*, *Georgics* and *Aeneid* also invoke a stronger interest in literary commentary. *VSD* offers us a series of observations set in history, yet, significantly, no precise chronological references. The text preserves the basic sequence *Eclogues-Georgics-Aeneid*, but also incorporates a different, contingent and, let me suggest, explicitly Virgilian form of biographic temporality which requires close consideration.

Composition of the *Eclogues* is discussed in relation to prominent historical figures (Asinius Polio, Alphenus Varus and Cornelius Gallus) and the historical "distribution of lands after the victory at Philippi" (19; cf. also 62–63). While this gives us a time frame, *VSD* provides no specific chronological date.⁶³ The *Georgics* are, again, mentioned with reference to history and to Maecenas' help, but with no date and only loose reference to a dispute with "a certain veteran" (20).⁶⁴ "Lastly", we are told (21), Virgil "commenced work on the *Aeneid*, a varied and complex theme" (*argumentum varium, ac multiplex*).

If there was ever a need of precise chronological dating (attested or assumed) for a literary work, it would surely be for the *Aeneid*, the keystone in Virgil's life and the most important *public* poem in Latin literature and in the tradition of the West. Needless to say, *VSD* gives no such date. At the time of Virgil's death, the poem was "unfinished".⁶⁵ *VSD* discusses the poem's composition at length (21–35), yet in sharp contrast to the biographical frame, and despite references to places and events and to Augustus, even the poem's date of publication after 19 BCE remains unspecified. However, as *VSD*'s narrative makes clear, such vagueness is not merely the result of the biographer's historical uncertainty. It is affected by distinct Virgilian practice.

IV. Virgilian Time

In section 22, *VSD* describes Virgil's general composition technique. He would compose a large number of verses in the morning but reduce them to only a few by the end of the day,

⁶³ See Horsfall (1995) 11–13, with further references.

⁶⁴ See *ibid.* 13–14.

⁶⁵ See *ibid.* 14–15. What matters for our argument is only the biographic presentation of the *Aeneid* as incomplete, which is beyond doubt, not the hermeneutic status of inconsistencies in the poem (see e.g. O'Hara, 2010; O'Hara, 2007).

famously saying that he licked his verses into shape like a she-bear licking her cubs (*more ursae parere dicens et lambendo demum effingere*).⁶⁶ Whatever the exact meaning and provenance of this aphoristic expression, it describes animal-like, intimate and “slurpy” creation, not a reasoned, cerebral process. Immediately afterwards (23), *VSD* explains that, having constructed a prose crib, Virgil worked on parts of the poem, “each part as it seized his fancy, taking up nothing in order” (*prout liberet quidque, nihil in ordinem arripiens*), adding that “lest anything should impede his momentum, he would let certain things pass unfinished” (*ne quid impetum moraretur, quaedam imperfecta transmisit*, 24). Whether these statements are historically accurate, biographic constructs, or something in between,⁶⁷ they are explicit descriptions of non-linear composition. They emphasise the organic character of the most important aspect of the creative activity of Rome’s most important poet. In philosophical terms, we are dealing with a stochastic phenomenology of time that fundamentally opposes Aristotle’s linear time as the “number of change” and the linear time of biography as a genre.

As *VSD* has it, Virgil headed off to Greece and Asia Minor so that, after revising and completing the *Aeneid*, “the remainder of his life would be free for philosophy only” (*ut reliqua vita tantum philosophiae vacaret*, 35). Virgil was not a “card-carrying” member of any philosophical sect, but he was close to the Stoics and especially to the Epicureans. And it is in Epicurus that we can find some helpful context for Virgilian practice as it is described by *VSD*.⁶⁸ In contrast to Aristotle’s conception of time, in Epicurean philosophy time was precisely non-linear. It was not defined by arithmetic progression (the “number of change”) but by the accidental *clinamen* of atoms.⁶⁹ We must be careful *not* to apply reductive notions of nuanced and complex philosophical ideas instrumentally to poetic practice or indeed to secondary reports of such practice. But Epicureanism can provide us with the backdrop of a wider, Roman framework of thought against which we can view Virgilian personal poetic time and its self-determined progress. Furthermore, no matter what the precise philosophical element in this personal poetic time, it is clearly far removed both from the mythographic temporal arc of his epitaph and from the time of historical biography. It is, however, closer to the time of literary biography and to the temporality of all non-narrative literature, amongst which we may count, of course, both traditions of writing on grammar and commentary traditions like those of *VSD*.

⁶⁶ Cf. Gellius, *NA* 17.10.2–4 and discussion in O’Sullivan (1989); Ziolkowski (1995) 349. *Effingo* above all denotes artistic production and depiction; see *OLD s.v.*

⁶⁷ Horsfall (1995) 16–17: “Fragile, weakly-based and open to attack on all fronts as the account in *VSD* is, it is not incompatible with the evidence of text and scholia and is accepted fully (and without question!) by Geymonat [*EV* 2, 286–96].”

⁶⁸ For Virgil and Epicureanism, see Ferguson (1988); Armstrong, Fish *et al.* (2004); and the well-balanced views in Braund (1997), with bibliography.

⁶⁹ For Epicurean time, see Simplicius *On Aristotle Physics* 6, 934.23–30 Diels; Warren (2006); Gœury (2012). For Epicurean time in Lucretius, in the context of Latin literature, see recently Kennedy (2013) 160–07.

6. The End of (Narrative) Time

Whatever the personal or philosophical merit of Epicurean time, the scholar's time and Virgil's private poet-time, it is hard to reconcile their stochastic nature with the practical demands of cultural hierarchy and with social and political order. A Virgilian biography organized *exclusively* around the principles of "Virgilian" time or other non-linear time would have been too private and too unpredictable to have met with much success in the public sphere. Yet, as we have seen, *VSD* weaves an intricate web of many different strands of time and temporality, each of which caters to different needs and performs a different kind of task.

In section 25, even in the midst of its discussion of stochastic composition and performance technique, *VSD* offers an internal, historically un-tethered yet linear chronological order, whose numerical crescendo matches the conventional ascending literary-biographical order of qualitative hierarchy:

Bucolica triennio, Georgica VII, Aeneida XI perfecit annis.

This arrangement echoes the linear crescendo of the epitaph's *Cecini Pascua, Rura, Duces* and presages the totemic sequence of the *Rota Vergilii* and later tradition.⁷⁰

The full intricacy of *VSD*'s web of temporalities is, however, best attested immediately after the narrative of the end of the poet's life (35), as the text moves to a discussion of the scholarly aftermath of his death – the birth of Virgilian reception. Here, temporal sequence evolves into a literary-critical discussion that leaps backwards and forwards in time. Varius and Tucca's editorial work is described in section 38. Section 39 then jumps back to Virgil's plans before his death: "Before leaving Italy, Virgil had arranged with Varius to burn the *Aeneid* if anything befell him". In scholarly terms, such leaps are entirely commonplace. But the non-linear, non-chronological temporality of these passages, which in practice refer to *VSD*'s narrative in preceding sections, highlights the contrast to the linear time of biographic and historical discourse.

Finally, in section 42, citing Nisus the grammarian (reaching back to older sources), *VSD* notes that Varius changed the order of two books, moved the second book into third place, and, of course, subtracted the original opening lines of the *Aeneid*:

⁷⁰ The numbers 3, 7 and 11 are probably not historical and are all particularly significant prime numbers, separated by equal intervals. We might note the interest of later interpretive traditions in numerology. See e.g. Yarbro Collins (1972) 221: "Numerical symbolism is part of the activity of discovering order in environment and experience ... First, [numerical symbolism] is used to order the experience of time ... Numerical symbolism also expresses order in the experience of space. The perception of such order is expressed in the Greek idea of the cosmos". Cf. also Bovon (2001).

*Ille ego, qui quondam gracili modulatus avena
carmen, et egressus silvis vicina coegi
ut quamvis avido parerent arva colono,
gratum opus agricolis, at nunc horrentia Martis
arma virumque cano*

The link between these verses and Virgil's epitaph has been widely discussed.⁷¹ They replicate, in verse, as in the epitaph, not merely the superimposition of biography and literary history, but also the narrative of historical human progress in general from nomadic to agrarian and finally to martial culture. Yet, of course, these lines are precisely the ones which were excised from the official corpus of Virgil's poetry. Varius' interventions change Virgil's original order and work against a rigid conception and arrangement of time. Order becomes a more-flexible matter of individual (in this case Varius') choice.

We need to stress *VSD*'s description of Varius' editorial actions in relation to Virgil's own process of composition. Varius' intervention, which determines the canonical text, breaks linear order by the transposition of the second and third books of the *Aeneid*. If "time is the number of change", then here, through the perception of *non-linear* numeric change, we seem to experience a different modality of time, time which is determined by *subjective* human intervention and which we can thus, with full justification, call a "human time", yet which is no less the time of canonical history. A hint of such a time, open to detours and interruption, can perhaps also be detected in the next section (43), where *VSD* says *obtretractores Vergilio numquam defuerunt* ("Virgil never wanted for detractors").⁷²

Perhaps the most obvious mark of the open prospect of such interventions can be found already in the first and most famous episode in *VSD*'s narrative of Virgil's afterlife, in the account of Virgil's response to his work and his plan to burn the *Aeneid* in the event of his death. The failure of this plan, blocked by Augustus, the most authoritative personal subject in Roman history, like the ultimate failure of Virgil's detractors and the subsequent publication of the poem by Varius with Augustus' approval, demonstrates to us how history is ultimately made, not as a series of formal repetitions and predictable, one might say linear, grand designs, but through individual, sometimes contradictory interventions.⁷³ And, at the heart of *VSD*'s *prose* narrative of Virgil's history, we find his epitaph, a compact poetic

⁷¹ See, recently, Putnam (2010) 17.

⁷² For Virgil's detractors, see Farrell (2010).

⁷³ In other words: fixed, linear repetition assumes a mechanical natural order in which "past" and "future" are, in principle, predetermined and are thus known and predictable. It is only when evolution (in history, as in genetics) breaks free of mechanical replication, through unpredictable or even accidental acts, that we can speak of a truly historical process. For discussions, see references above, n.5, 6.

emblem whose mythical force, we might say, binds together many different types of temporality and lies, almost, beyond time.

Appendix: Virgil and Homer

It is important to grasp the uniqueness of the epitaph’s embedded, multi-layered temporality.

Epitaphs commonly list the achievements of the deceased.⁷⁴ Likewise, the link between a poet’s life and his art in funerary epigrams is not without antecedents, and indeed is attested already in the tradition of Homeric *Lives*.⁷⁵ It is hard to imagine a more suitable model for the Virgilian tradition. Homer’s ancient biographies, mostly in prose (with the notable exceptions in the *Certamen*), contain accounts of the poet’s birth and death but also record – almost exactly as in the case of *VSD* and the tradition of Virgil’s *Lives* – a verse epitaph which Homer composed for himself.⁷⁶ Like Virgil’s epitaph, Homer’s funerary verse is not attested independently or in epigraphy. Yet Homer’s epitaph is clearly *not* a biography and *not* a biographic emblem or *mise en abyme*. Its text immediately attests to the uniqueness of Virgil’s biographic couplet and its temporal structures. Thus we find (*Vit. Herod.* 515–16 and in other *Lives*):

ἐνθάδε τὴν ἱερὴν κεφαλὴν κατὰ γαῖα καλύψει
ἀνδρῶν ἡρώων κοσμήτορα θεῖον Ὀμηρον.

Like Virgil’s epitaph, Homer’s text binds the poet’s biological life and death to his poetic *oeuvre*, the latter compressed into the expression ἀνδρῶν ἡρώων κοσμήτορα, “the one who arranged and adorned heroes” (which clearly refers to the Homeric poems and the ordered κόσμος of their verse). Yet, unlike Virgil’s epitaph, these lines are exclusively a “description”, not a “narration”.⁷⁷ They are not an account of a sequence of life events or of a movement in time or, indeed, of a series of poetic works. There is no “I sang of *wrath* (*i.e.* the *Iliad*) and of the *man* (*i.e.* the *Odyssey*)”. Note similarly that, unlike the spatial sequence in Virgil’s epitaph, the Homeric verses mark space and the poet’s place of burial as a single point, and

⁷⁴ See, in the context of Virgil’s epitaph, Kahane (forthcoming).

⁷⁵ For the lives, see Graziosi (2002); Kahane (2005), also Lefkowitz (2012); Kivilo (2010). Models: Graziosi (2009).

⁷⁶ In the *Certamen*, the *Vit. Herod.*, Alcidas *On Homer* (*Mich. Pap.* 2754), etc, but not *e.g.* in the *Vit. Plut.* and Aristotle (*Fr.* 1.76 Rose = Ps. *Plut. Vita* 1. 3), in which the Ians composed the verses on Homer’s behalf.

⁷⁷ See Genette & Levonas (1976), n.6 above. The present tense would have been more suitable (cf. *Il.* 14.114), but the aorist in verse-terminal position is more common, especially in the context of death (cf. *Il.* 4.461, 503; 5.310, etc). We should perhaps treat καλύψει in the specific funerary sense as denoting a “state or condition” (Goodwin, 1897, 16: sect. 55; Klug, 2009). Translation here: Muir (2001) 39. Note that the only other verbal element in the epitaph is expressed by a common noun, κοσμήτορα.

do so by means of the conventional epitaphic deictic “here”.⁷⁸ Homer’s biographic tradition contains many references to places and events in the poet’s life and to its chronology. Yet there is no toponym in the epitaph itself. Indeed, since deixis indexes reference to the discursive act, Homer’s “here” refers to an abstract anywhere and anytime, wherever and whenever the epitaph is read. The Homeric reference is thus both more precise and less precise than Virgil’s.⁷⁹

Like Virgil’s, Homer’s place in the cultural history of antiquity and ancient pedagogy is central. In many ways, Homer’s verse epitaph is parallel to Virgil’s. Yet in sharp contrast to *Mantua me genuit*, and despite its placement in a larger, prose biographic frame, Homer’s epitaph cannot function as a biographic emblem or as a model for literary, ethical or temporal progression.

Royal Holloway, University of London

AHUVIA KAHANE
(ahuvia.kahane@rhul.ac.uk)

⁷⁸ For epitaphic deixis, see Tsagalis (2008) 21–26.

⁷⁹ For deixis, see Lyons (1995) 293–311. Generally, Fillmore (1999); Levinson (1983). The plurality of space generated by epitaphic deixis echoes other aspects of plurality in Homeric biography, for which see *e.g.* Most (2005).

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