

Motion and Time in Virgil's *Fourth Eclogue*
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When Virgil's *Fourth Eclogue* is viewed in terms of the motion of time and location, the poem reveals specific perceptions concerning the nature of the coming Golden Age. The way Virgil treats the movement of time, both in an astrological and a linear sense, suggests the inevitability of the "ultima aetas" and, to use a later term, a sense of divine providence (*Ecl.* 4.4). The "settings" and the movement between locales elucidate the divine order in the natural world and the connection between gods and men.

Near the beginning of the poem Virgil declares, "iam redit et Virgo," thereby establishing the time of year (late September or early October) of the Child's birth (4.6, Coleman [1977] *Ecl.* 4, 131). Such a line is reminiscent of Hesiod, who uses the movement of the stars to establish what ought to happen at a specific time of year (e.g. "When the Pleiades...rise before the sun, begin the reaping..." [*Erga* 383-86]). The annual schedule is repetitive, predictable, and very important for farming activities (Putnam, *Essays on Latin Lyric, Elegy, and Epic* [1982] 249). For Hesiod, this timeline was both created and maintained by the gods, especially Zeus (Nelson, *God and the Land* [1998] 98). Therefore, Virgil's association of the birth of the Child with astrological movement implies that the event ought to happen then, that it has been pre-ordained in the cosmic order of the gods. The repeated, regular movement of the stars engenders the idea of circular time, seen in the return to the Iron Age and then the Golden Age (Williams, *Trad. and Originality* [1968] 279; Mack, *Patterns of Time* [1978] 4).

The way Virgil treats the linear motion, or flow, of time further suggests the inevitability of the predicted Golden Age. In particular, the shifts between present and future tenses of verbs create this impression. The birth of the Child under Virgo is announced in present tense: "iam noua progenies caelo demittitur alto" (4.7). The effects of the new age are foretold in the future tense: "occident et serpens," and "omnis feret omnia tellus" (4.24 and 39). However, the Golden Age is not merely in the future: "Ultima Cumaevi venit iam carminis aetas" (4.4). The prophetic poem leaves no question about the approach of the new age; there are no pre-requisite conditions. The age is both here now and will inevitably continue to fully materialize in the future.

The "settings" (actually the different places mentioned in the *Eclogue*) are notable because of the frequent jumps from farming or earthy images to images of high heaven, the gods, and heroes. Virgil begins with "arbusta...humilesque myricae" (4.2), but only three lines later writes, "magnus ab integro saeculorum nascitur ordo" (4.5). He discusses the boons to common farmers ("ipsae lacte domum referent distenta capellae ubera" [4.21-2]) as well as heroic deeds ("iterum ad Troiam magnus mittetur Achilles" [4.36]). However, the two subjects may not be as antithetical as they appear to modern readers. Farming, although a mundane necessity of life, was also strongly connected to religion through gods and festivals. Hesiod's poems tie together farming and the divine order of the cosmos inextricably, with the result that his view of farming defines the relationship between gods and men (Nelson, *God and the Land* [1998] v). Likewise, Virgil's farming is closely associated with religion. The end of farming, predicted in the *Fourth Eclogue* when the earth produces uncultivated gifts for humans, signals a new, higher divine order, described in the first Golden Age as men living "like gods" (Hesiod *Erga*, 112).

The movement of time, seen in both the stars and in the conflation of present and future tense, as well as the movement of location from earth to the heavens reveals a divine order and plan; the connection between gods and men is enforced through the farming imagery. The poem looks toward a Golden Age where past wickedness is no more. Such optimism may well have appealed to Virgil's Roman readers after long years of civil war. Therefore, no matter the identity of the Child, the *Fourth Eclogue*, taken as a whole, portrays a divine plan progressing towards good for the human race.