

VIRGIL

# The Aeneid

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Second edition by

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## Chapter 1

# Background

### 1 Virgil in the light of his time

Virgil's *Aeneid* has almost certainly generated a longer and larger tradition of commentary than any other poem in the European canon. A critic who offers to add to this enormous accretion might take as his starting point a reflection by Frank Kermode (*Forms of Attention*, 1985): 'since we have no experience of a venerable text that ensures its own perpetuity, we may reasonably say that the medium in which it survives is commentary'. The *Aeneid*, a venerable text if ever there was one, has been subjected to a continual process of revaluation from the fourth century AD until our own time. Consequently, while remaining as it always was, it has undergone successive transformations which have had the effect of making it seem perpetually modern, and which have in a sense become part of the totality of the text as experienced by the reader. Translation, as well as critical commentary, 'appreciation' and interpretation, must be included in this process of transformation and accretion.

The poem's unique place as a landmark in European letters is partly owing to historical circumstances. On 2 September 31 BC Gaius Julius Octavianus, adopted son and heir of the assassinated and deified Julius Caesar, defeated Mark Antony and Cleopatra at the battle of Actium – events familiar to English readers from Shakespeare's play – and emerged as *princeps*, nominally first citizen but effectively sole ruler, of the Roman world. It was a decisive moment in history. About a year later, Virgil, then aged forty, began work on the *Aeneid*, and included in the poem's eighth book a splendid panegyric of this victory: his treatment is epic, not history, and shows how in the space of a few years Actium had become, in the

words of Sir Ronald Syme (*The Roman Revolution*) ‘the birth legend in the mythology of the principate’.

In 27 BC Octavian received the title of Augustus and established peace throughout the Roman world. It was a peace not without local interruptions and campaigns in Europe and the east, but for the Romans it was a true peace, for it marked the end of civil strife in Italy after decades of power-struggles between rival leaders. In unifying Italy Augustus achieved something which in modern times was not to happen again until the nineteenth century.

During the years preceding Actium Virgil had completed his *Georgics*, a poem about agriculture full of praise of the fruitfulness of the Italian countryside: in the words of a modern translator of the poem, C. Day Lewis, he ‘sang in time of war the arts of peace’. But the first book of the *Georgics* had ended with a powerful evocation of a nation torn by the horrors of civil war – *saevit toto Mars impius orbe*, ‘wicked war rages over the whole earth’ – and a prayer to the gods to allow Octavian to come as saviour of his generation:

hunc saltem everso iuvenem succurrere saeclo  
ne prohibete  
Forbid not this young man from coming to rescue at last  
Our ruined generation

The ‘Pax Augusta’ was marked by an expensive religious programme of rebuilding and restoration in Rome: temples and altars of victory and thanksgiving were erected, notably the splendid marble temple of Apollo on the Palatine (remains of which can still be seen) built alongside Augustus’ own house and dedicated on 9 October 28 BC. Taking poet’s licence, Virgil imagined in the eighth book of the *Aeneid* that this temple was already finished in 29 BC when Augustus celebrated a triple triumph, in commemoration of victories in Illyricum, Egypt and Actium itself; he depicts the *princeps* reviewing the parade of conquered peoples on the steps of this temple:

at Caesar triplici invectus Romana triumpho  
moenia, dis Italis uotum immortale sacrabat,  
maxima ter centum totam delubra per urbem . . .  
ipse sedens niveo candentis limine Phoebi  
dona recognoscit populorum . . .  
incedunt victae longo ordina gentes . . .

But Caesar, riding in triple triumph into the city,  
 Made a solemn and undying vow to the gods of Italy –  
 Three hundred great temples throughout the city . . .  
 He himself sitting on the snow-white steps of shining Apollo's temple  
 Acknowledges the gifts of the people . . .  
 and the defeated nations pass in long procession.

Here too Virgil takes poetic licence, for in his autobiography *Res Gestae* (Things Achieved) Augustus says he built twelve new temples and restored eighty-two others. These acts of *pietas* (observance of what is due towards gods and men) were of the greatest importance. The Romans seem understandably to have felt that the years of civil bloodshed they had experienced were a kind of curse going back to Romulus' legendary killing of his brother Remus and perhaps even further back to an act of impiety by King Laomedon of Troy, who was said to have withheld payment promised to the gods for building the walls of Troy; Virgil refers to this in the *Georgics*:

satis iam pridem sanguine nostro  
 Laomedontae luimus periuria Troiae.  
 We have long ago sufficiently expiated  
 the perjury of Laomedon's Troy.

(*Georgics* 1. 501–2)

The hero of the *Aeneid*, Aeneas, was himself a Trojan who escaped from the ruins of Troy when the gods themselves helped the Greeks to destroy the walls they had once built: this is described in *Aeneid* II, the tale of the fall of Troy. The Romans sometimes attributed their own misfortunes to want of *pietas*, whence Virgil's emphasis of this quality in his hero, *pius Aeneas*. Virgil's contemporary, the poet Horace, also says that until the temples which have been allowed to fall into neglect and desecration are restored and rededicated, the sins of the fathers will continue to be visited on the children.

Augustus died in AD 14, having by then laid the foundations of the Julio-Claudian dynasty and thus in effect, succeeding where his adoptive father Julius Caesar had failed, established the Roman Empire. During his reign another event occurred, of greater importance to the world than the battle of Actium. By one of history's significant accidents Virgil's celebration of the Pax Augusta coincided with the birth of Christ, the Prince of Peace, 'the still point of

the turning world' (in T. S. Eliot's phrase). Thus the Romans' heartfelt belief that at last, in the words of Shakespeare in *Antony and Cleopatra*, 'the time of universal peace is near', was justified in the temporal world a few years before the unique, unrepeatably transition from paganism to Christianity, though it was to be several centuries before the Roman empire officially adopted the new religion. Throughout nearly the whole of its 2,000 years of life the *Aeneid* has been read in a Christian context, and its celebration of the Pax Augusta could be seen as inaugurating a new order of time and history. This reading reached its zenith in the middle ages when Virgil was revered as a 'magus' and as '*anima naturaliter Christiana*', a naturally Christian soul, appearing as Dante's guide through hell and purgatory in his *Divine Comedy* (see below, pp. 98–100); but it has been revived, albeit with different premises, by modern critics, e.g. Frank Kermode in his book *The Classic*.

In *Aeneid* VI the shade of Aeneas' father Anchises reveals to his son, in the Elysian fields, the future heroes of Rome, culminating in Augustus:

hic vir, hic est, tibi quem promitti saepius audis,  
 Augustus Caesar, divi genus, aurea condet  
 saecula qui rursus Latio regnata per arva  
 Saturno quondam, super et Garamantes et Indos  
 proferet imperium; iacet extra sidera tellus,  
 extra anni solisque vias, ubi caelifer Atlas  
 axem umero torquet stellis ardentibus aptum . . .  
 . . . nec vero Alcides tantum telluris obivit.  
 This is the man, this is he, so often promised you,  
 Augustus Caesar, of race divine, who shall  
 Establish again in Latium the golden race  
 In the fields where Saturn reigned. He shall extend  
 His empire beyond the Africans and the Indians,  
 To a land beyond the zodiac and the paths of the solar year  
 Where on his shoulders heaven-bearing Atlas  
 Revolves the world's axis studded with blazing stars . . .  
 Not even Hercules travelled so far.

The 'Messianic' tone and language of this passage are impossible to ignore. In addition, in a short pastoral poem (the fourth eclogue) written long before the *Aeneid*, in 40 BC, Virgil tells of the imminent



birth of a boy-child of divine origin who shall rule over a world to which peace and justice shall return, and restore the golden age. Some of the imagery of this poem is found in other prophetic literature (see further below, 13–15).

The idea that Augustus was the ‘promised saviour’ of his people is firmly rooted in the various ‘saviour cults’ of the first century BC, of which only Christianity was destined to survive. One such was Hercules, to whom Augustus is compared in the passage quoted above. These saviour-heroes laboured on behalf of civilisation, ridding the world of various manifestations of evil and barbarism – they are sometimes called ‘culture-heroes’ – and were eventually deified.

One such exploit of Hercules, his slaying of a fire-breathing monster called Cacus, took place, according to a legend which Virgil uses in *Aeneid* VIII, on the very site of the future Rome, on the Aventine hill. Hercules was subsequently deified and was worshipped in Rome at the Great Altar of Hercules which survived into imperial times. Virgil imagines the cult to have already started in the heroic age of Aeneas. His description of the ritual bears some resemblance to the corporate ceremonies of Christian communion: the shared feast, the wine, the hymn, the prayer, the deity who will come to help those in need; the phrase Virgil uses to describe how Hercules came to those in danger, *auxilium adventumque dei*, has an almost liturgical ring, and the same word *adventus* is used also of Augustus in *Aeneid* VI.

The poet Horace also refers to Augustus’ divine origin and divine destiny: *serus in caelum redeas*, ‘may you return late to heaven’, he writes in Odes 1.2; in Odes 3.5 he is more fulsome: *praesens divus habebitur/Augustus adiectis Britannis/imperio gravibusque Persis*. ‘With the addition of Britain and Persia to the empire, Augustus will be accepted as god made manifest.’ In Odes 3.3 Horace visualised Augustus drinking nectar with Hercules and Bacchus, another ‘culture-hero’ who according to legend brought the arts of civilisation, including viniculture, to the East. In Epistles 2.1 Horace provides a useful register of these culture-heroes and their achievements.

Romulus et Liber pater et cum Castore Pollux  
post ingentia facta deorum in templa recepti,  
dum terras hominumque colunt genus, aspera bella

componunt, agros assignant, oppida conduunt,  
 ploravere suis non respondere favorem  
 speratum meritis . . . extinctus amabitur idem.  
 praesenti tibi maturos largimur honores,  
 iurandasque tuum per numen ponimus aras,  
 nil oriturum alias, nil ortum tale fatentes.  
 Romulus and father Bacchus, Castor and Pollux,  
 After mighty deeds were received into the temples of the gods;  
 But while they were [performing these deeds], civilising  
     nations and men,  
 Ending wars, redistributing land, founding cities,  
 They felt it keenly that they received no favours  
 Corresponding to their deserts . . . You have to be dead to be loved.  
 But to you [Augustus] we pay due honours in good time,  
 While you are still among us, to you we set up altars,  
 And we admit that none like you will ever come or ever came.

The old culture-heroes had to wait till they were dead to be celebrated: in Pope's words, 'these suns of glory please not till they set'. Augustus did not have to wait. It should be remembered that this poem was written some years after Virgil's death, when the 'personality cult' of Augustus had grown, and that this poem is intended as panegyric or 'praise of Caesar'.

All the great culture-heroes were notable for fighting against barbarism on behalf of civilisation. The fight between Hercules and Cacus in *Aeneid* VIII is a paradigm of many such encounters. They have their literary origin in the mythical battles of Zeus and the Olympian deities (who were always presented by the poets Homer and Hesiod anthropomorphically, possessed of great physical beauty and strength) against various giants, monsters, centaurs, Amazons, at the very dawn of time. All these encounters might be seen as examples of an eternal conflict between order and disorder, good and evil, light and dark. By the time we reach Homer, these encounters have become more humanistic, though there remains Achilles' extraordinary fight with the river-god in *Iliad* XXI, and, in the *Odyssey*, various engagements in which the rational hero outwits a one-eyed giant, a witch, a magic whirlpool, etc. When we reach the *Aeneid*, the description of the battle of Actium in book VIII is presented as a fight between the Olympian deities on the side of Augustus,

and the dog-headed monsters of Egyptian worship, on the side of Cleopatra.

Aeneas himself, the hero of Virgil's epic, fits into this sequence of culture-heroes. His principal enemy in the poem, Turnus, is not monstrous or barbarous, though he is depicted as irrational, hot-headed, selfish and self-vaunting. Virgil takes even Homer's tendency to present both sides of a conflict with dignity and humanity. Nevertheless, Aeneas' civilising mission is emphasised throughout. The role of the saviour was not merely to rid the world of evil, but also to build some positive and lasting good. 'Not by conquest alone, but by the founding of a lasting city, did a hero win divine honours in life and divinity after death' (Syme); Horace, in the passage quoted above, lists the founding of cities as one of the civilizing achievements of the culture-hero. The real theme of the *Aeneid*, as was clear to its earliest readers, was the founding of Rome and its subsequent rise, under Augustus, to its greatest glory. In this respect Aeneas could be seen as a prefiguration of Augustus himself. The labours of Aeneas are presented as the first stage of a mighty endeavour which will later call on the efforts of Romulus and the great heroes of the republic, and which will culminate in the triumph of Augustus: *tantae molis erat Romanam condere gentem*: 'so great a toil it was to found the Roman nation' (*Aeneid*, 1.33).

## 2 Life of Virgil

Publius Vergilius Maro was born on 15 October 70 BC (the traditional date, though according to Dante he was born in July, see *Inferno* 1.70) at Andes, a village near Mantua, the modern Pietole; he died at Brindisi on 20 September 19 BC. He was buried near Naples, on the road to Pozzuoli: a tomb purporting to be his can still be seen. The spelling of his name in antiquity was Vergilius. But by AD 400 the spelling Virgilius had begun to creep in: perhaps by corruption through the kind of popular and usually false etymology the Romans themselves had been so fond of. The new spelling might suggest a connection both with *virga*, the rod by which the god Hermes 'Guide of Souls' marshalled the souls of the dead to the underworld – a reference to the poet's own role as the magus of *Aeneid* VI in which Aeneas is led to the underworld – and with *virgo*:

Virgil was nicknamed Parthenias, 'Maiden', in his own lifetime, rather as Milton was nicknamed 'Our Lady of Christ's' at Cambridge. Virgil never married and may have had homosexual inclinations: although the presence of homosexual themes in the *Eclogues* is a traditional characteristic of the pastoral genre, deriving from Greek exemplars, the intense mutual affection of the young Trojan heroes Nisus and Euryalus in *Aeneid* IX does seem more evidently homoerotic than, say, the friendship of Achilles and Patroclus in Homer's *Iliad*.

The new spelling ousted the older, correct Latin spelling and passed into the English and French vernaculars as Virgil(e). It is a common though misguided piece of pedantry to spell his name in English as Vergil, though his Latin name is nowadays always correctly spelt Vergilius.

A biography of Virgil was written during the reign of Trajan (AD 117–38) by Suetonius. This survives in a version by Aelius Donatus (4th century AD), whose commentary on Virgil apart from this *Life* and a preface, is lost; but it was used by another critic, Servius, who also wrote in the 4th century AD and whose monumental commentary does survive, both in its original form and in an expanded form first published by the French scholar Pierre Daniel in 1600. The additional matter in this longer version may represent parts of the earlier commentary by Donatus. The Donatus *Life* lists various juvenile writings of the poet, but these are nowadays regarded (with one or two possible rather than probable exceptions) as spurious imitations written shortly after the poet's death: they are included in the ancient manuscripts and are known as the Appendix Vergiliana. It is generally assumed that the canon of the poet's authentic compositions consists of three books: the *Eclogues*, the *Georgics* and the *Aeneid*.

Virgil was by temperament shy and retiring and made no mark on Roman public life. He was brought up in the country and educated at Cremona, Milan, and Rome, where he studied rhetoric, and was preparing for a legal and political career, which he soon abandoned, retiring to Naples when the civil war broke out (49 BC) to study philosophy, his first, and, as tradition tells us concerning his plans for his old age, last love. His father lost his land during the 'dispossessions', when land was redistributed by the triumvirate of

Lepidus, Antony and Octavian (as he then still was) to returning veterans after the campaign of Philippi (42 BC). The poet himself may also have been temporarily dispossessed and had his land restored through 'friends in high places', though this episode is speculative and is based on the scenarios of the first and ninth eclogues, which should not be read as literal autobiography.

Virgil was also a friend of Horace and of other poets, notable in their day, whose work does not survive or survives only in fragments, including Cinna, Gallus and Varius; the last-named, together with Plotius Tucca, edited the *Aeneid* for publication after Virgil's death. These writers made up a literary circle which was linked to Augustus through his friend and counsellor Maecenas, a notable patron of the arts and a friend both of Virgil, who dedicated his second work, the *Georgics*, to him, and of Horace, who refers to him frequently: in his fifth satire he describes a journey to Brindisi made in the company of Maecenas, Varius, Tucca and Virgil, 'than whom purer souls never breathed, nor any to whom I am closer'; and in his tenth satire he says that he writes for the discriminating few and that it is enough for him if Plotius, Varius, Maecenas, Virgil and several other chosen spirits like his work.

Virgil began the composition of his greatest work, the *Aeneid*, around 29 BC. A few years later its progress was arousing such expectancy that the poet Propertius wrote:

nescio quid maius nascitur Iliade  
something greater than the *Iliad* is in the making.

In the year 26 BC Augustus wrote to Virgil from Spain that he had not yet seen the outline of the poem or any passage from it; but a few years later the poet read books II, IV, and VI to Augustus and his circle. In 19 BC Virgil left Italy to travel to Greece, intending to spend a further three years revising and polishing the *Aeneid* and then to devote the rest of his life to the study of philosophy. In the event, he never carried out that plan. He met Augustus in Athens, and was persuaded to return home with him. He fell ill at Megara after going sightseeing on a hot day. He embarked for Italy none the less, and died at Brindisi on 20 Sept. All details in this paragraph are taken from the ancient *Life*, as is the tradition that he first tried to persuade Varius to burn the manuscript of the *Aeneid* if anything should happen to him,

but that Varius refused to give any undertaking; in the event Virgil left the manuscript to Varius and Tucca, who published the poem on Augustus' instructions. They evidently did very little editing, since the sixty-odd incomplete lines which it contains (and which support the statement that he intended to revise the whole text) were reproduced as they stood, and do so to this day; though some ancient scholars did make attempts to complete them, these were never accepted into the text. It should however be emphasised that the poem, though unrevised, is in no sense incomplete or unfinished (as Spenser's *Faerie Queene* is unfinished). We know, also from the ancient *Life*, that Virgil first wrote a prose draft of the whole work, then began to compose it passage by passage, not necessarily in the order of the twelve books, so that some portions of the earlier books may well have been written after some of the later sections. But it is to be observed that nothing from the second half of the poem is recorded as having been read to Augustus.

### 3 The *Eclogues*

The *Aeneid* draws continually on the past: not only on earlier Greek and Latin epic poetry but also on its author's own previous compositions. A brief account of these earlier works is therefore necessary. The first publication was the collection of ten short pastoral eclogues (only two of them exceed 100 lines in length) called in Latin *Bucolica*, and modelled on the *Idylls* of Theocritus, the Greek poet of the third century bc, who is the earliest known exponent of the genre. Virgil's eclogues were probably originally issued separately or in pairs (Coleman 15), though the precise order and date of their composition remains speculative: none is likely to be earlier than 42 bc or later than 37 bc. Each poem is a self-contained artefact, but it seems probable that Virgil planned a set of poems from the start. Six of the poems, nos. 2, 3, 4, 5, 7 and 8 are either dedicated to, or in some way connected with, the historian Asinius Pollio, who according to the ancient *Life* first proposed to Virgil that he should try his hand at pastoral; these form the core of the book. The other four eclogues seem from internal evidence to have been added later to make up the set of ten. The first is evidently a 'programme' poem written as an introduction to the whole work; both it and the ninth

eclogue contain references to the land confiscations which may have affected the poet personally (see above, pp. 8–9). The ninth eclogue also contains echoes and reminiscences of other poems in the set. The tenth eclogue was clearly written as an end piece to the whole book; it is the poet's farewell to pastoral, and also contains echoes of no. 1. The sixth eclogue is the most difficult and least pastoral of the ten, a proclamation of new literary allegiances, to Hesiod and Callimachus rather than Theocritus; here Virgil is already experimenting with other genres. It is dedicated to Alfenus Varus, who served with Pollio as a land commissioner, and contains references to the elegiac poet Cornelius Gallus, whose unrequited love-affair forms the sad theme of the final eclogue.

These beguiling, deceptively simple yet elusively complex little poems have had an influence out of all proportion to their modest size. That size, that small compass, was itself something of a literary manifesto: the *deductum carmen*, the 'thin spun', slight poem, was the ideal not only of Theocritus but of another Alexandrian poet, Callimachus, to whom Virgil alludes in the sixth eclogue, which begins with a *recusatio*, a literary apologia, a refusal to tackle large heroic themes such as military campaigns:

agrestem tenui meditabor harundine Musam  
I shall exercise my rustic muse on a slender reed.

This line is itself echoed in the first line of eclogue 1:

Tityre, tu patulae recubans sub tegmine fagi  
silvestrem tenui musam meditaris avena.  
Tityrus, you lying at your ease under the spreading beech  
Exercise your pastoral muse on a slender reed.

Tenuis, 'slight', was a key word of Alexandrian literary precept and practice, and marked a reaction against the cumbersome epics written in imitation of Homer.

Pastoral was a self-consciously sophisticated genre, autonomous and self-reflexive, in which characters purporting to be shepherds were often poets in thin allegorical disguise. It was the product of metropolitan cultures with nostalgic hankerings for rural simplicity, and for an idealised 'Arcadian' landscape where one could pass the time singing songs, making and celebrating love or lamenting

it when unrequited, and discussing poetry. The ideal landscape was that of mediterranean urban man: cool shade, the sound of water – the rhetorical topos which became classified as the ‘locus amoenus’ (pleasant place) where one could forget the world of labour and pursue leisure (*otium*, the Latin word, is the opposite of *negotium*, business) and personal relationships. When occasionally in the *Eclogues* (e.g. no. 2) a character wanders out of this ideal place into the wild woods and the deserted mountain side, this is a conscious reflection of his own emotional dislocation. It is this correspondence between personal emotion and external landscape which first clearly enters European poetry with Virgil’s eclogues and which has made them of such significance to their successors.

But it is not only the despair of unrequited love which invades the placid world of Arcadian *otium* presented in the *Eclogues*. Virgil related this world to the harsh realities of contemporary politics; in particular to the policy of land confiscations which had been operating intermittently ever since Philippi and continued after Actium. Eclogues 1 and 9, which treat of these dispossessions, seem to include disguised figures of the poet himself, and have since ancient times intrigued critics. We must, however, be careful not to take such ‘autobiographical’ elements too literally. What is important to us is that the theme of exile seemed to move the poet deeply and that he treated it with profound insight and subtlety, entering into the sadness of the dispossessed:

nos patriae finis et dulcia linquimus arva,  
 nos patriam fugimus.  
 we leave the pleasant fields and farms,  
 we leave our home.

I have deliberately used, in that translation, the echo of Virgil’s words in Tennyson’s *In Memoriam* CII:

We leave the well beloved place . . . My feet are set  
 To leave the pleasant fields and farms.

Virgil also records the heartfelt relief of those whose farms are saved by official decree. In particular, the first eclogue celebrates the *libertas* of the pastoral poet (his freedom to write as he pleases, to indulge in art for art’s sake) in terms of political freedom, salvation



from exile conferred by Octavian, hailed in the poem as *deus*. Only one with divine attributes, says 'Tityrus', could offer such largesse; his friend Meliboeus, however, has been less successful; no intervention from on high has saved him, he must go into exile. Like many of the eclogues, the first is a dramatic dialogue (between the lucky Tityrus and the unlucky Meliboeus). The ninth eclogue is on the same theme, but is much sadder: for here Virgil articulates the artist's awareness that sometimes art itself, as well as farming, can be a 'casualty of war' (Coleman, 273). Attempts to recall fragments of pastoral song avail nothing in this poem, and the fragments serve only to intensify the sense of loss and waste: *nunc oblita mihi tot carmina*, 'now I have forgotten so many songs,' are among the most moving words in the entire collection.

The fourth eclogue deserves special mention for quite a different reason (it has been briefly alluded to above, p. 4). It is a political and philosophical prophecy; there are no characters, no dialogue, but the poet speaks in his own voice, addressing Pollio in the year of his consulship (40 BC). The poem extends the usual modest parameters of the pastoral genre: *paulo maiora canamus*, says the poet, let us sing a somewhat grander song: that 'somewhat' is self-consciously imitated by Milton when he, too, sets out in *Lycidas* to extend the range of pastoral elegy: 'begin, and somewhat loudly sweep the strings'.

The fourth eclogue describes the imminent birth of a boy, a divine child who shall move among both gods and mortals, and in whose lifetime the golden age associated with Saturn, who ruled the universe before Jupiter, will return. St Augustine suggested that the boy referred to Christ and that Virgil had come across the prophecy in the Sibylline oracles. Certainly the apocalyptic imagery of the poem has an oracular tone. It also possesses a high proportion of end-stopped lines, and other stylistic features, such as repetition, rhyme and formulaic phrasing, which can be paralleled in Sibylline oracular texts. The Sibyl of Cumae prophesies to Aeneas in *Aeneid* VI (see below) and prophecies associated with her were written down and consulted periodically, as part of the Roman state religion. Some of these texts survive, but they are of a much later date than Virgil and are of doubtful authenticity. They may have been influenced by Jewish prophetic writing. This would account for similarities

between Virgil's fourth eclogue and Isaiah: 'the cattle shall not fear the lion' occurs in the eclogue, in Isaiah 11.6, and in the Sibylline oracles. The last two also employ the phrase 'and a little child shall lead them', and although this is not in Virgil, the sense that the child will be a ruler is strong in the poem: *pacatumque reget . . . orbem*, 'he shall rule a world at peace'.

What is striking about this poem is not whether we should accept that Virgil had read pre-Christian prophetic texts (it is improbable that he could have read the Hebrew of Isaiah), but the poem's vision of a universal regeneration and the proposition that the golden age, traditionally located in a lost and irrecoverable order of time past, will return. The Greek poet Hesiod, in his poem *Works and Days*, articulated the myth of the five races of man, a declining and irreversible sequence from gold to iron, ending with a gloomy forecast that the present iron race will degenerate still further when grey-haired babies are born 'and there will be no help against evil'. Virgil reverses this: *his* baby will grow up to preside over a world in which the last traces of evil will linger for a while and then disappear. In the context of the saviour figure of Augustus, the nostalgic optimism of the fourth eclogue can be related to certain passages in the *Aeneid*, especially Jupiter's prophecy in book I, which uses the same apocalyptic imagery to foretell an age of universal peace:

*aspera tum positis mitescent saecula bella*  
The fierce generations will grow gentle, wars being ended.

The word *saecula* also occurs in the fourth eclogue, and belongs to the Roman sybilline tradition. A *saeculum* was a period of time, 100 or 110 years. The *ludi saeculares* were fixed after consultation of the Sibylline books; these games were celebrated by Augustus in 19 bc and Horace wrote his *Carmen saeculare* for the occasion. Horace's poem takes the form of a hymn to Apollo, presiding deity of Troy, Augustus and Rome; in Virgil's poem the 'reign of Apollo' will precede the return of the age of Saturn, the golden age proper.

It must be emphasised that there is no evidence, and little likelihood, that Virgil was referring in this poem to Christ. Nor indeed, since it was written in 40 bc, could the reference be to Augustus himself, then still a minor partner of Mark Antony, although in the *Aeneid* his coming is 'prophesied' by Anchises in similar Messianic

language (see above, p. 4). Other candidates have been proposed, including Marcellus, briefly Augustus' adopted heir (he died in 23 BC).

The identity of the child was a subject of speculation even in Virgil's lifetime, and it is unlikely that the mystery will ever be solved. What we do know is that the two *topoi* it develops, the 'Wonder-Child' and the golden age, were both accessible to Virgil in his time; the latter, indeed, was evidently of special interest to Pollio; it also figures in *Eclogues* 3 and 8 (both addressed to Pollio). Another *topos*, that of the good ruler, goes back to Homer (*Odyssey*, 19. 108–14) and Hesiod; while the prophecy of a glorious offspring is traditionally part of the epithalamium or marriage-hymn, cf. Catullus 64, to which Virgil was certainly indebted. But the eclogue remains unique and *sui generis*, summing up, in powerful metaphors still relevant to us today, the recurrent hopes and dreams of mankind.

#### 4 The *Georgics*

Virgil's second composition, the *Georgics*, was again inspired by a Greek model, the didactic 'wisdom' poetry of the Boeotian poet Hesiod, who probably lived a generation or so after Homer. The *Georgics* is a poem about agriculture (the Greek title is from *georgos*, a farmer), including the care of livestock, bees and vines, but again Virgil has pushed the limits of the genre further than his predecessors, who also include Varro, the Roman writer on agriculture. If the theme of the *Eclogues* was *otium*, the leisure and freedom to write as one pleased – a freedom which could only operate under certain political guarantees – the theme of the *Georgics* is *labor improbus*, which might be translated 'damned hard work'. The poem is in four books, totalling 2,188 verses. In book 1, Virgil describes how Jupiter took away from man the benefits of the first golden age – fruits available for the plucking, honey on tap, 'all men idle, all', as Shakespeare's Gonzalo puts it in his picture of the golden age in *The Tempest*, and made man work for his bread by the sweat of his brow, as after the Fall in Genesis, when Adam and Eve were expelled from their *locus amoenus*, the earthly paradise. In the new dispensation of Jupiter, nature still collaborated with man, especially in naturally blessed and fruitful Italy, but man was now an equal partner:

without his efforts the land would revert to the wild, weeds would choke the crops, the vines be blighted, the cattle die.

This motif of hard work offers no nostalgic vision of a return to the golden age, as in the fourth eclogue; but in his portrait in the second *Georgic* of the self-sufficient Italian farmer, at peace on his own land, living the good life, Virgil saw another and different metaphor for the ideal society. He thus showed up an ambiguity in the whole *topos* of the golden age, which has haunted poets and visionaries through the ages. The golden age offers man a vision of happiness without the need for toil; yet, once that age has ended, if work continues to be seen as a curse, nothing will ever be achieved in the real world. Virgil sees the life of the Italian farmer as itself a version of the legendary 'good old days' when Saturn, exiled from Olympus by his usurping son Jupiter, was said to have taken refuge in Italy and there recreated the golden age over which he had once presided: *aureus hanc vitam in terris Saturnus agebat*, 'this was the life that golden Saturn led in our land'. Virgil picks up this theme in *Aeneid* VIII, in which the Arcadian settler Evander, now living on the site of what was one day to be Rome, explains to Aeneas how Saturn came to Italy and established peace there:

aurea quae perhibent illo sub rege fuere  
 saecula: sic placida populos in pace regebat.  
 The centuries they call golden were under that king:  
 He ruled the people in unbroken peace.

Thus the life of the farmer in Italy was a symbiosis of natural fruitfulness and human energy and resourcefulness. A recurring motif of the golden age *topos* (it is found in *Eclogue* 4) is that men did not construct ships to cross the sea, import costly delicacies or mine for gold, for the golden age was golden in a metaphorical not a literal sense (a metaphor which goes back to Plato): Virgil's farmer does none of these things; he operates a kind of self-sufficient village economy which has been a dream of man ever since, especially as technologies have become more complex. Moreover, the Stoic philosophy of being content with a modest livelihood was used by Virgil in *Georgics* 2 to criticize the growing wealth of the metropolitan Rome of his own day, which imported many costly and superfluous luxuries. Virgil saw a correlation between material excess and moral decline; his

praises of rural Italy in the *Georgics* show the farmer's life as morally sounder than the city-dweller's.

The *Georgics*, with its emphasis on hard work and traditional virtues, may be seen as a transitional poem leading us to the *Aeneid* and the epic labours of the great saviour-hero Aeneas. Its real subject is not so much the practical details and advice on agriculture, though Virgil does include these, and the idea of a verse-handbook sounds sillier to us than it would have done in the first century BC; ancient handbooks were written in verse (albeit not as sophisticated as Virgil's) long before they were written in prose. The poet's true subject is the praise of Italy, of its farmers and of the exploitation of the natural resources of the land. These resources had been available in the first golden age, but without any incentive to improve them; what is already created perfect by divine act cannot be improved, which is why Hesiod, in his myth of the five successive races of man, presents a decline from pristine perfection, whereas Virgil often prefers to follow his predecessor Lucretius in seeing man's progress, as we do today, in evolutionary terms, as a move from primitivism to civilisation. But Virgil, like Augustus himself, thought the progress of civilisation had gone too far towards excess.

The *Georgics*, it should be remembered, was written in a time of war. Man's struggle to improve his environment is never ending, and war disrupts this process, turning ploughshares into swords. The virtues of the Italian farmer appear again in the *Aeneid* in the 'Spartan' virtues of the aboriginal Italians whom the Trojans under Aeneas encountered when they landed in Italy.

I have called the *Georgics* a transitional poem, and this is true of its technique and style as well as of its subject matter. The didactic mode is enriched and enlivened by various devices which we associate with heroic epic verse, such as similes and narrative digressions: for instance, the famous story of Orpheus and Eurydice, familiar to us from the operatic stage, is movingly told to form the climax of the whole work. In this tale of how a legendary 'culture hero', a poet and singer, descended into the underworld on a sad vain quest, for there are limits to what even great heroes can achieve, Virgil not only returned to the theme of art's limitations, touched on in *Eclogue* 9, but also looked forward to the *Aeneid*. The story of Orpheus in

*Georgics* 4 contains verses which Virgil was to use again in *Aeneid* VI, Aeneas' descent into the underworld.

The battle of the bees in *Georgics* 4 is also notable for its epic treatment:

nam saepe duobus  
regibus incessit magno discordia motu.  
... for often civil strife arises  
Between two kings amidst a mighty upheaval.

This passage has been seen as an allusion to the rivalry between Augustus and Antony. It seems clear that the notion that he would one day have to write an epic was already knocking, so to say, on the door of Virgil's creative mind. In a passage at the beginning of *Georgics* 3 he expressly refers to Augustus and to a projected literary monument to his achievements.

In medio mihi Caesar erit, templumque tenebit  
In the middle [of my song] I shall have Caesar, he shall have the temple.

This is the 'temple of song', a metaphor first used by the Greek poet Pindar, and Virgil seems to have had in mind some sort of panegyric of Augustus' victories; indeed, such a panegyric did eventually find its way into the *Aeneid*, in the extremely grand and hyperbolic presentation of the battle of Actium 'prophetically' engraved by the god Vulcan on Aeneas' shield. But meanwhile, Virgil returned to the matter in hand, and to Maecenas, to whom the *Georgics* are dedicated:

Meanwhile, Maecenas, I shall return to the beasts of the field, and carry  
out your own not inconsiderable commission. Later I shall set myself  
the task of singing Caesar's wars and carry his name far and wide  
beyond his own time.

It appears that this projected epic on Caesar Augustus' wars, which might have been composed in the annalistic tradition of Ennius, the principal Roman epic poet of the republican era (see below, p. 23), was at some stage abandoned in favour of the more ambitious work which became the *Aeneid*. This is not primarily about Augustus at all, but about Aeneas, but through various technical devices the poet was able to prefigure the achievements of the *princeps* in a more

complex discourse, in which events separated by a thousand years of legend and history could be treated synchronically rather than diachronically.

Just as the last eclogue included a self-quotation from the first, so in the epilogue to the *Georgics*, an eight-line 'coda', Virgil 'signs off' as a writer of both didactic and pastoral verse:

These things I sang of, field cultivation and livestock, and trees, while  
great Caesar was shaking the Euphrates and victorious was settling  
disputes among the welcoming  
nations on his way to the stars.  
As for me, Virgil, Naples, city of virgins,  
Sweetly in my salad days of unheroic leisure  
Took care of me, and I played my youthful shepherd songs,  
And sang you, Tityrus, under the spreading beech.

That last line echoes the first line of *Eclogue* 1. What other poet has so self-consciously planned and unified his life's work? His three compositions, 'of man, of nature, and of human life' (to borrow a phrase from Wordsworth) form a structured hierarchical progression, from modest pastoral to high epic, with didactic epic occupying the middle ground. The eclogues are art for art's sake, self-referential worlds depicting a kind of community or college of young poets at play, in love with love and art, sharing their experiments and experiences, creating a private world. The *Georgics* are collective and social, man at work replacing man at play; they are deeply moral where the *Eclogues* were amoral, and clearly project the old Roman values, Republican in the best sense, which Augustus wanted to promote and revive. Finally, like Milton 'long choosing and beginning late', Virgil turned from the patriotism of the *Georgics*, with its love of the countryside, to the *Aeneid*, in which that patriotism is set in a larger historical context, showing how the land was first won for civilisation, not by the plough but by the sword, a labour which in the poet's own day human ambition and violence had caused to be done all over again.

## 5 Metrical unity and continuity

Perhaps the most obvious way in which Virgil's three compositions, the *Eclogues*, the *Georgics* and the *Aeneid*, are linked is that they are

all written in the same metre. The earliest Greek poets, Homer and Hesiod, used the dactylic hexameter for their narrative and didactic epics. Other Greek metres followed, lyric, iambic and choric, but it happened that Theocritus, Virgil's chief model for his *Eclogues*, chose the hexameter for his pastoral *Idylls* (he might have picked the more 'conversational' iambic). Thus all three of Virgil's models, Theocritus, Hesiod and Homer, were hexameter poets. This metre established itself in Latin as the appropriate one for epic (it was first used by Ennius, see below) as well as for other kinds of verse, such as satire and epistolary verse (the metre of Horace's *Epistle to Augustus*, quoted above, p. 5, is hexametrical) and it was a natural choice for the young Virgil when he sought to emulate Theocritean pastoral. The Greek hexameter is largely dactylic, the Latin one uses far more spondees, because of the nature of the Latin language, which has far more long syllables. A dactyl is a foot consisting of a long syllable followed by two short ones, a spondee consists of two long syllables. The hexameter consists of six 'feet' (six 'beats' to the line) disposed as follows:

$$\begin{array}{cccccccc} -v\bar{v} & / & -v\bar{v} & / & -v\bar{v} & / & -v\bar{v} & / & -v\bar{v} & / & - & - \\ - & - & / & - & - & / & - & - & / & - & - & / & -v\bar{v} & / & -v \end{array}$$

The fact that Virgil's three compositions are all in the same metre naturally facilitates self-quotation, and gives the reader a sense of continuity from work to work. It is possible to trace the development and maturing of Virgil as an artist through his handling of the hexameter. In an analogous way we may trace the development of Shakespeare from his early plays to his late ones through his treatment of the so-called iambic pentameter, a decasyllabic line which corresponds in its centrality and continuity in English prosody to the classical hexameter. (It is interesting to note that this metre, in its unrhymed form, the so-called blank verse line, was first introduced into English verse from Italy during the reign of Henry VIII by the Earl of Surrey for his translation of part of the *Aeneid*.) Like Shakespeare, Virgil moved towards an ever increasing freedom and flexibility in his handling of metre.

The Latin hexameter, like the Greek one, is 'quantitative', as indeed is nearly all ancient poetry: that is, the length of each syllable is fixed and predetermined. Medieval Latin poetry and modern



vernacular poetry use a stress-based prosody. Thus, in the line:

Now is the winter of our discontent

the second syllable of *discontent* is unstressed, but in Latin verse that syllable would be ‘long’ because the vowel is followed by two consonants. But Latin was spoken with stresses like any modern language, and the prosody of the hexameter, in consequence, consists of a fixed syllabic pattern of dactyls and spondees which might accord with the actual pronunciation of the words, or might conflict with it. In Virgil’s poetry more than in any other Latin poetry, the variety of effects made possible by exploiting coincidence and conflict between quantity and stress is seen at its richest and subtlest.

It happens that there survives an apocryphal opening of the *Aeneid* which is overtly autobiographical. It consists of four lines, stated in the ancient *Life* of Donatus, and Servius’ commentary, to have been written by the poet himself but deleted by his editors. They are almost certainly spurious: but whoever wrote them was alert to the habit of self-reference which marks the close of the *Georgics*, and to a sense that Virgil’s three poems exhibit a remarkable continuity.

The lines are:

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 . . .

I the man who once versified on my slender pastoral pipe  
And then, abandoning the woods, taught my native fields  
To obey the farmer’s eager demands, and the poem  
Pleased them, now bristling Arms and the man I sing . . .

The tradition that these lines were Virgil’s still flourished in the Renaissance; they are closely imitated by Spenser at the beginning of his epic *The Faerie Queene*:

Lo I the man, whose Muse whilom did mask,  
As time her taught, in lowly shepherd’s weeds,  
Am now enforced a far unfitter task,  
For trumpets stern to change mine oaten reeds  
And sing of knights and ladies’ gentle deeds.

The canonical opening of the *Aeneid* was, however, famous enough to have been almost a cliché in antiquity: *arma uirumque*, 'arms and the man', has been found scribbled on the walls of Pompeii, and was quoted as the catchphrase of the epic by Ovid, Persius, Seneca, Martial and Quintilian; it was used as the title of a play by Bernard Shaw.