

Introduction

Publius Vergilius Maro, generally known in English as Virgil, was born on 15 October 70 BC in Andes, a village near Mantua in Cisalpine Gaul (now northern Italy). He was educated in Cremona and Milan before he came to Rome. At some stage of his life he was involved with the Epicurean community at Naples. He died at Brundisium, a harbour in south-east Italy, on 21 September 19 BC, and was buried in Naples. He is said to have composed his own epitaph on his deathbed:

Mantua gave me birth, Calabria snatched me away;
Now Naples holds me. I sang of pastures, fields and leaders

This simple account should be viewed with caution. Scarcely a single fact about Virgil's biography can be stated with certainty.

Much of his life was lived against a backdrop of intense political unrest. Rome was traditionally governed by groups of aristocratic families competing for power by means of more or less democratic elections. This is the system to which we give the name the 'Roman republic'. During the first century BC it broke down amid a remorseless succession of ever more violent struggles between leading figures, until towards the end of the century power became concentrated in the person of Julius Caesar's great-nephew and adopted son Octavian, who called himself Augustus and instituted the line of Roman emperors. Virgil's twenties witnessed the civil war between Julius Caesar and Pompey (49–48 BC). Caesar won, but was assassinated on the Ides (15th) of March 44 BC. Another civil war broke out between (on the one hand) Octavian, Caesar's heir, and Mark Antony, the murdered man's great friend, and (on the other) Brutus and Cassius, the two leading assassins. The latter were defeated at Philippi in northern Greece in 42 BC. But then Italy was flung into unrest yet again when Octavian seized large areas of land on which he could settle the veterans of his and Antony's victorious army. These confiscations provide the context for poems 1 and 9 of Virgil's *Eclogues*, his sequence of poems about 'pastures'.

In 43 BC Antony, Octavian and a third individual called Lepidus had seized power and given themselves a facade of constitutional respectability by calling themselves the 'committee of three for the re-establishment of government', an arrangement which historians call the 'second triumvirate'. This was one of the many nails driven into the coffin of the Roman republic but, though the three of them instituted a reign of terror, they did offer a measure of stability. However, the 30s BC proved to be years of constant tension between Octavian and Antony. Antony was in command of Roman territories in the eastern Mediterranean and found himself able to achieve success in his military plans only with the help of the Egyptian queen Cleopatra, in favour of whom he divorced his Roman wife Octavia, Octavian's sister. What was in effect another civil war flared up. It ended

with Octavian's victories over Antony and Cleopatra at the battle of Actium in 31 BC and at Alexandria in the following year. The Roman republic was now, beyond gainsaying, a thing of the past.

In the 30s BC Virgil became a member of the poetic circle surrounding the great statesman and patron of the arts, Maecenas, and thus came into contact with Octavian, who was Maecenas' friend. In 29 BC he published the *Georgics*, the work about 'fields', a didactic poem about farming which also voices a passionate plea for political stability. (For the term 'didactic poem', see the introduction to the *Georgics*.)

The tension between optimism and pessimism in Virgil's work is an apt reflection of the times in which it was written. When Octavian changed his name to Augustus in 27 BC, he was making use of a word with strong religious associations, and in a remarkably successful exercise of political spin, he left behind his ruthless and blood-stained image, reinventing himself as the pious father of the fatherland, a title he actually assumed in 2 BC. He had certainly brought an end to the horrors of civil war and given Italy the stability for which Virgil longed. However, he had also become Rome's first emperor and freedom had been extinguished, though this may not have become fully evident until after Virgil's death. In the *Aeneid*, the great epic about 'leaders' to which Virgil devoted the last ten years of his life and which remained incomplete at his death – it was edited by his friends Varius Rufus and Plotius Tucca – the poet celebrates Augustus' achievements. But many have felt that another voice is sounding a very different, anti-Augustan message.

It is certainly possible to articulate a clear-cut response to the question of the poem's two voices, saying, for example, that at the time Virgil was writing the *Aeneid* it was still allowable to be frank and balanced about Augustus' regime without being thought to oppose him. But so deep is the pessimism that has often been identified at many stages of the poem that such an explanation can seem altogether inadequate in the face of the profound doubts about Augustanism that this pessimism raises. For those who feel like this and wonder how Virgil got away with writing such a poem under Augustus' autocracy, the twentieth century provides an interesting parallel. Up till 1979 it was taken for granted that the Russian composer Dmitri Shostakovich (1906–75) had created works which gave undiluted support to Soviet communism when it was under the control of the mass-murdering dictator Stalin. But in that year Solomon Volkov published a book called *Testimony* which claimed that the composer's public music, far from straightforwardly asserting Soviet ideals, was often informed with bitter sarcasm and thus deeply subversive. A battle has subsequently raged over Volkov's claims, but our experience of listening to Shostakovich has certainly been transformed. As we hear music that we used to consider nobly patriotic, we can find ourselves tugged in other, deeply disturbing directions. It may be that reading Virgil offers a similar experience. To the objection that the language of music is more subject to a range of interpretations than that of poetry, it can be answered that we are here talking not about Virgil's words but his tone.

Other tensions can be found in Virgil's work. He overtly lays claim to Epicureanism at *Georgics* 4.563–4, thus aligning himself with the philosophy of the Greek Epicurus (341–270 BC), who recommended withdrawal from the turmoil and confusion of the active life into the study of philosophy. At the same time, one can identify in his work a profoundly Stoic sensibility. The Stoic school, founded by Zeno of Cyprus (335–263 BC), preached that to be virtuous was the only good and not to be virtuous the only evil. Man should accept whatever happens to him with calm, giving way neither to intense joy nor to excessive grief. Thus he will come into harmony not only with the universal brotherhood of man but also with God. The two philosophies are irreconcilable, and the presence of both of them in Virgil's work offers the opportunity for thought-provoking contrasts.

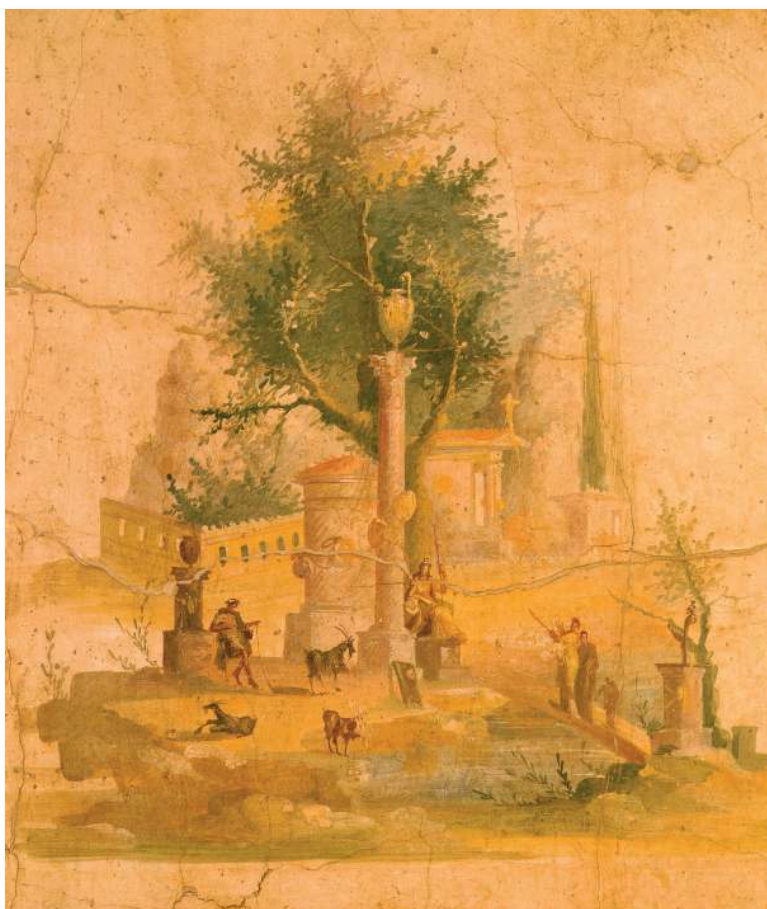
Another striking paradox in Virgil's work arises from the fact that the writer of a great Roman epic was so deep-dyed in the Hellenistic poetic tradition. When we talk of Hellenistic culture, we refer to the art of the Greek world from 323 to 30 BC, a world dominated by the Greek-ruled kingdoms established in the wake of the conquests of Alexander the Great. Its epicentre was the Greek city of Alexandria. Indeed 'Alexandrian' is another name used to describe aspects of this culture. In poetry the Hellenistic ideal lay in elegance, the display of learning, and brevity. Callimachus (third century BC), the poet who was its archetypal embodiment, famously wrote that 'a big book is a big evil'. There was a self-conscious contrast with the grand, discursive, wide-ranging tradition of Homeric epic. Virgil can work wonderfully on a miniature scale. His telling of the story of Orpheus and Eurydice in *Georgics* 4 is a small-scale epic which is altogether true to the Hellenistic tradition, but it is superbly assimilated into the poem's larger design. And throughout the *Aeneid* he invokes both the spirit and the letter of the works of Homer. Virgil the pointillist could paint with broad brushstrokes too. To balance the two techniques in a masterly equipoise was not the least remarkable achievement of Rome's greatest poet.



Italy, Greece and Asia Minor showing the route of Aeneas' wanderings.

1 Eclogues

The ten *Eclogues* (or pastoral poems) were written by Virgil at around the age of 30. His first poems to be published, they evoke the world of the pastoral poetry of the third-century Syracusan poet Theocritus, though they are, of course, written in Latin and not the Sicilian's Greek. Two of the *Eclogues* which we shall look at, 1 and 9, link the pastoral world of poetry with real – and for many, tragic – events. The civil war between Mark Antony and Octavian, the avengers of Julius Caesar, and his assassins ended when the assassins were defeated at Philippi in 42 BC. The victors agreed that land in Italy, including the area round Mantua where Virgil had been born, should be confiscated and settled by their veterans, who perhaps numbered 50,000. In the first of the *Eclogues*, Tityrus has had his farm restored to him by an unspecified young man in Rome, while Meliboeus has been forced out from his property.



A wall painting from Pompeii showing a rustic shrine set in an idyllic pastoral landscape.

Eclogue 1

1.1–83	MELIBOEUS	Tityrus , you lying there beneath the shade of a spreading beech practising your woodland music on a slender pipe, we are leaving the boundaries of our country and our sweet fields. We are being exiled from our country, while you, Tityrus, at your ease in the shade, teach the woods to re-echo the name of beautiful Amaryllis . 5
	TITYRUS	O Meliboeus, a god brought us this peaceful life. For that man will always be a god to me, a tender lamb from our flocks will often stain his altar. He it was who allowed my cows to graze, as you see, and me, their master, to play what I want on my rustic pipe. 10
	MELIBOEUS	For my part I do not begrudge you this. Rather I marvel at it. There is such complete chaos everywhere throughout the countryside . Look, I myself am driving my goats forward, sick at heart. This one here, Tityrus, I can scarcely drag along. For just now, here amid the thick hazel trees, she gave birth to twin kids, the hope of the flock, but left them, alas! on the bare flint . I remember that this disaster 15 was often foretold to us by oaks struck by lightning – but I was too foolish to take any notice. But still, tell me, Tityrus, who this god of yours is.
	TITYRUS	The city which they call Rome, Meliboeus, I thought in my folly was like this one of ours to which we shepherds are often accustomed to 20 drive the tender lambs. I used this yardstick: I knew that puppies were like dogs, kids like their dams. That was the way I used to compare great things with small. But this city towers above all others as far as cypresses often do amid the yielding shrubs.
	MELIBOEUS	And what was the great cause of your seeing Rome? 25

MELIBOEUS the name means ‘cattle-minder’. The names **Tityrus** and **Amaryllis** come from Theocritus. Compare line 68 of Milton’s pastoral poem *Lycidas*: ‘To sport with Amaryllis in the shade’.

teach the woods to re-echo the name of beautiful Amaryllis Philip Hardie suggests that the echo may be ‘the sign of nature’s sympathy with men’, while at the same time ‘we are made aware that the magic of pastoral song may be such stuff as dreams are made on’.

a god Tityrus refers to his benefactor with understandable hyperbole. He plans to sacrifice to him (1.7–8, 42–3).

such complete chaos everywhere throughout the countryside the countryside has been turned upside down by the confiscations.

left them, alas! on the bare flint either the kids were born dead or they were so weak that they could not be saved.

this disaster that his farm would be confiscated.

oaks struck by lightning Jupiter is the god of lightning and the oak is his own sacred tree. His striking of his own tree may have made these omens particularly threatening.

TITYRUS **Freedom.** Though late in the day, she did at last look upon me in
my paralysis after my beard became whiter as it fell beneath the
scissors. Yes, she looked upon me and came to me after a long time,
now that Amaryllis holds me in her power and Galatea has left me. 30
For, I shall confess it, as long as Galatea ruled me, I had neither
any hope of freedom nor any thought of **savings**. Although many
a victim left my sheep stalls, and many a rich cheese was pressed
for the ungrateful town, I never returned home with my right hand 35
weighed down with money.

MELIBOEUS I used to wonder, Amaryllis, why you used to call sadly on the
gods, and **for whom you were letting the fruits hang on their**
trees. Tityrus was away from here. The very pines, Tityrus, the very
springs, these very orchards were calling you.

TITYRUS What was I to do? I could neither get away from my slavery nor find 40
gods to give me such present help **anywhere else**. **Here**, Meliboeus, I
saw **that young man** for whom **our altars smoke twelve days every**
year. Here that man was the first to respond to my petition: ‘Feed
your cattle as before, boys. Rear your bulls.’ 45

MELIBOEUS Fortunate old man, so the lands will remain yours then, and they
are large enough for you, although bare rock and the marsh with

Freedom personified as a goddess. We now discover that Tityrus had been a slave. He has now bought his freedom. His spendthrift partner Galatea had not allowed him to think of spending his savings on this. His liaison with Amaryllis has instilled in him more thrifty ways.

savings the Latin word translated here (‘peculium’) in fact means something more precise. A slave could not own property himself but could occupy a piece of land (*peculium*) on sufferance from his master, surrendering to him a percentage of the profits on working it. If he saved sufficient money, he could buy his freedom and gain full possession of the land. Tityrus has done this, and so it would be a disaster for him if the land he was working was confiscated.

for whom you were letting the fruits hang on their trees is Amaryllis too grief-stricken in Tityrus’ absence to look after the estate? Or is she hoping that her partner can have fresh fruit when he gets home?

anywhere else According to Appian, crowds of threatened occupants came to the forum and temples of Rome to protest, and the Romans had a lot of sympathy with them (*The Civil Wars* 5.12).

Here i.e. at Rome.

that young man presumably Octavian, who was 21 at the time of the confiscations. On 1 January 42 BC the senate had confirmed the deification of his adoptive father Julius Caesar, and Octavian was given the title ‘son of a god’ on coinage struck in the following years.

our altars smoke twelve days every year Tityrus is preparing to make a monthly offering.

its muddy rushes cover the whole pasture. No unfamiliar pasturage will assail **the sickly mothers in your flocks** and no damaging infection from a neighbour's flock will harm them. Fortunate old man, here amid well-known rivers and **sacred springs** you will seek out the cool shade. On this side, as ever, the hedge on your neighbour's boundary will often soothe you to slumber with its soft whispers as **Hybla's bees** feed their fill on its willow blossom. On that side beneath the lofty rock the pruner will sing to the breezes; and meanwhile your pets, the throaty wood-pigeons, and the turtle doves shall not cease from moaning from the towering elm.

TITYRUS Sooner, then, will the light-footed stags pasture in the air and the seas leave the fish uncovered on the shore, sooner, **wandering in exile** over each other's territories, will the Parthian drink of **the Arar** or the German of the Tigris than that man's face could fade away from my heart.

MELIBOEUS But we shall go away from here, some to the thirsty Africans, some of us will reach Scythia and **the Oaxes** that snatches up chalk as it flows, and the Britons, utterly cut off from the whole world. Ah, shall I ever, a long time hence, look upon the land of my fathers and the roof of my humble cottage heaped high with turf, look upon and marvel one day at my kingdom, **a few ears of corn**? Will some **godless** soldier hold this fallow land which I have cultivated so well, some barbarian hold these crops? See where **civil war** has brought

the sickly mothers in your flocks the she-goats are especially vulnerable immediately after giving birth.

sacred springs each spring has its own divine nymph.

Hybla's bees bees will play a significant part in Virgil's future work. Hybla, on the southern slopes of Mount Etna in Sicily, was famous for its honey. The idyllic landscape Meliboeus here describes is reminiscent of Theocritus (7.133–45 – bees in line 142). It is interesting that the evocation of the pastoral dream comes from the man about to be excluded from it. But is the dream a never-never land in any case?

wandering in exile as Meliboeus and those like him must now do.

the Arar the river Saône, which joins the Rhône at Lyons in eastern France.

the Oaxes possibly a river in Mesopotamia.

a few ears of corn the state to which Meliboeus feels that the new occupant will have reduced his farm.

godless 'impious', the Latin word used here, is to prove of major importance in Virgil's *Aeneid*.

civil war literally 'discord', to be personified in one of the horrific shapes at the entrance to hell in *Aeneid* 6 (280).

our wretched citizens. It was for **them** that we sowed these fields.
Now, Meliboeus, graft your pears, plant your vines in rows. On,
my goats, once a happy flock, on! No more, as I lie in a mossy cave, 75
shall I watch you at a distance, poised on the edge of a bushy cliff;
no songs shall I sing; I shall be your herdsman but you will not crop
flowering **clover** and bitter willows.
TITYRUS But for this night you could take your rest with me here on the green
foliage. We have ripe fruits, tasty chestnuts and an abundance of 80
cheeses. Already now the roofs of the country houses are smoking
in the distance and longer shadows are falling from the lofty
mountains.

- 1

How expressive do you find Virgil’s evocation of the countryside? How realistic does it seem to you to be?
- 2

Compare the characterization of Tityrus and Meliboeus. How do you feel about them both? Does Meliboeus’ attitude change in the course of the poem? Do you find that Tityrus is offputtingly absorbed in his own good fortune? If so, does anything he says modify your impression?
- 3

How do you respond to the fact that Tityrus calls Octavian, a living human being, a god, to whom he will make sacrifices?
- 4

‘By including such images of current events in his poems, the poet boldly transformed the pastoral genre’ (Josiah Osgood, p. 112). Do you feel that the fact that it reflects actual historical events makes a difference to your appreciation of this poem?

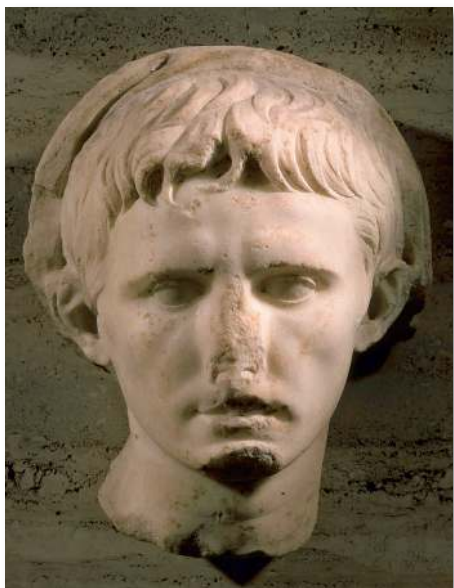
Eclogue 4

Before long the relationship between Mark Antony and Octavian had deteriorated to such an extent that another civil war looked imminent. Two men, both important figures in the literary world and hence known to Virgil, Maecenas, acting for Octavian, and Asinius Pollio, acting for Antony, brokered a treaty between them at Brundisium in September 40 BC.

To cement the peace, Antony married Octavian’s sister Octavia. (Both their spouses had just died.) Virgil’s fourth Eclogue celebrates this peace, asserting that a new golden age will begin with Pollio’s consulship (40 BC) and

them bitterly used to refer to the new occupants of the farm.
Now, Meliboeus, graft your pears, plant your vines in rows what do you feel is Meliboeus’ tone here?
clover actually shrub trefoil, which has clover-like leaves and yellow flowers.

foretelling the birth of a Messiah-like boy. Among a number of suggestions proposed for **the identity of this figure**, which inevitably but implausibly include Jesus Christ, the most convincing is a hoped-for child of Antony and Octavia. (In fact, they were to have no sons.)



Octavian. The original of this marble copy dates from the earliest years of his political career.

4.1–25 Sicilian Muses, let us sing of somewhat greater things. It is not everyone that woodlands and the low-lying tamarisk bushes delight. If we sing of woods, let the woods be worthy of a **consul**.

Now there has come the final age of **Cumaean prophecy**. The great line of the centuries is being born anew. Now even **the Virgin** returns, **the reign of Saturn** returns. Now a new generation is being sent down from the high heavens. Only

the identity of this figure perhaps the poet left the identity of the boy in doubt quite deliberately. As Philip Hardie remarks, ‘The *Eclogues* were written in the rapidly changing and unpredictable conditions of the second Triumvirate, and a poet with an eye to future fame but also with a desire to intervene in contemporary political debate could do worse than develop an allusive and polysemous manner.’

Sicilian Muses a reference to the powers that inspired the Sicilian Theocritus, the inventor of pastoral poetry.

consul i.e. Pollio, the consul for 40 BC.

Cumaean prophecy the reference is to the Sibyl of Cumae, priestess of Apollo.

the Virgin Justice or Astraea, the last of the immortals to leave the world when the behaviour of mankind became intolerable to her (see *Georgics* 2.473–4).

the reign of Saturn Saturn, father of Jupiter, had presided over the first golden age.