

Zeus, Jupiter, Jesus and the Catholic Church

Zeus, Jupiter, Jesus and the Catholic Church:

What Good Is a God?

By

Andrew Carstairs-McCarthy

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To
my brother-in-law
Jonathan Patrick McCarthy
1958–2009

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As for the Catholic Church, even though I was not confirmed in her until 2019, I had my first substantial contacts with her in 1963. I was seventeen, studying Italian language and culture at the University for Foreigners in Perugia. The Pope at the time was John XXIII, famous among non-Catholics for his emphasis on friendly relations with 'separated brethren' (that is, non-Catholic Christians) and on *aggiornamento* (modernisation). But how successful was the Pope in carrying the Church with him? I recall a homily preached in the Cathedral at Perugia in which the preacher (the Bishop?) said to the congregation: 'As the Holy Father has reminded us, we must pray for those separated brethren who are still committing the sin of heresy'. I also remember being invited to make tape recordings of material from an English-language textbook in use at a Catholic school (perhaps a junior seminary). The book quoted the British press baron Lord Rothermere applauding the Fascist political arrangements of Mussolini's Italy, even though Mussolini had been deposed twenty years earlier. I was too startled and too shy to protest. So it was no surprise to find, more than fifty years later, that there is still plenty of disagreement within the Church on earth, on both practical and doctrinal issues.

Finally I acknowledge the help and encouragement of my partner Jeremy Carstairs-McCarthy over the years during which this book was evolving.

Andrew Carstairs-McCarthy
Christchurch, New Zealand
August 2021

CHAPTER 1

SHOCKS OF THE THIRD MILLENNIUM

1.1 Old hopes disappointed, new hopes in short supply

I recall on 1st January 2000 watching television clips of joyful celebrations around the world, ushering in a new millennium (or, if you prefer, the last year of the old millennium). We all knew that a calendar date is arbitrary, but we all hoped for some kind of fresh start: ‘Perhaps we can make the world a better place!’ Municipalities embarked on new projects (parks, walkways, playgrounds, artworks) as concrete expressions of this new hope.

When I said ‘we all’ just now, I am aware of possible criticism, indeed just criticism. I am a middle-class person living in a developed country (New Zealand), with enough to eat and a house in a pleasant city neighbourhood. The air is clean, and a park full of trees is two minutes’ walk away. But, in enjoying such comforts, I am aware that I belong to a privileged minority of the world’s population. As midnight struck on 31st December 1999, many millions had no reason to be hopeful: the people who were trapped in war zones or faced hunger or political oppression. And today, things are worse. The upbeat messages on the fading plaques that label those municipal projects of a quarter-century ago now sound sadly ironic.

For people in my position (the comfortable minority), the first big shock of the new millennium was ‘9/11’: the attacks on the World Trade Center towers in New York City and on the Pentagon in Washington D.C. on 11th September 2001. (Al Qaeda had also planned to fly a plane into the Capitol in Washington. However, passengers on that plane bravely foiled the terrorists, so that it crashed in Pennsylvania without killing anyone on the ground, though everyone on board perished.) All of us who are old enough remember what we were doing when we heard that news, just as those of us who are older still remember what we were doing when we heard in 1963 that President Kennedy had been shot.

In response to 9/11, President George W. Bush could have assembled a delegation of senior American Muslims to travel to Afghanistan.

Their task would have been to persuade the Taliban leadership that they were unwise to give safe haven to a non-Afghan terrorist group who did not scruple to kill Muslims as well as non-Muslims. Such an initiative might well have succeeded. Some at least of the perpetrators might have been brought to justice. Instead, the USA and its coalition of allies went to war against Afghanistan and also Iraq, whose leader Saddam Hussein may have been a dictator but had nothing to do with Al Qaeda and did not (as was alleged) possess ‘weapons of mass destruction’. As for the evidence that Al Qaeda had links with influential figures in Saudi Arabia and was largely financed from there—that evidence was ignored by the US-led coalition.

Since then, a dismal catalogue of military conflicts and terrorist attacks has dominated the international news, except when temporarily shunted aside by a global financial crisis (around 2008) and the Coronavirus pandemic (since 2020). The financial crisis was ultimately resolved mainly at the expense of taxpayers around the world. The only US financial institution whose shareholders lost their money entirely was Lehmann Brothers—which, ironically, had enjoyed an AAA credit rating. And, as I write, the Coronavirus pandemic (the worst such epidemic for more than a century) is far from over, while extreme weather confirms the climate crisis. So what new disaster lurks around the corner?

One of my purposes in this book is to discuss how the Roman poet Virgil, in his epic poem the *Aeneid*, tried to make sense of life in an equally turbulent period, when the political order of ancient Rome seemed in danger of collapse. I hope to show that thinking about the *Aeneid*—about the world-view underlying it, where that world-view came from and how it relates to what came later—can provide comfort and hope for us now, in the world of the third millennium. That is a big claim! I emphasise straight away that I do not offer any guarantee that meditating on such-and-such passages in the *Aeneid*, or any other work of literature, will make a reader happier. The most I am prepared to guarantee is that a closer acquaintance with one of the greatest works of European literature will not make any reader unhappier!

By ‘where that world-view came from’ I mean principally Homer’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, the earliest surviving works of European literature and (many would say) among the greatest. By ‘how it relates to what came later’ I mean its influence on European literature of the Middle Ages and beyond, and more especially its relationship with Christianity: what the Christian world-view offers that Virgil’s view lacks.

Comparing the *Aeneid*’s world-view with Christianity is not arbitrary, in that (as we shall see) Virgil was regarded by some in the

Middle Ages as a kind of proto-Christian. This is despite the fact that he died in 19 BC, well before any plausible date for the birth of Jesus of Nazareth. Nevertheless, Virgil's clear perception of the unfairness of life on this earth is not far removed from a Christian view, and it has been argued (though far from conclusively) that he was acquainted with parts of Jewish scripture, notably the prophet Isaiah.

Until about the middle of the twentieth century, almost every educated person in Europe and in those parts of the world that are most influenced by European culture would have had at least some acquaintance with Virgil. That is because every educated person in those days learned some Latin and was exposed to excerpts from the greatest Latin authors. Nowadays, the number of English translations of the *Aeneid* that are on the market suggests that there is still a demand for it in English. But all poetry loses much in translation. So I hope that some readers of this book will take advantage of Appendix B, where I will explain briefly how Virgil's verse metre works (contrasting it with Shakespeare's metre).

1.2 Life, the universe and everything, or: why get out of bed in the morning?

For pre-millennial readers, the title of this section will recall the 'ultimate question' in 'The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy': the question about 'life, the universe and everything' posed in Douglas Adams' BBC radio series of 1978. The answer, when it was at long last revealed, turned out to be '42'. But what of the question itself? That remained a mystery.

This book addresses a version of the same question. I write not as a scientist or a philosopher or a theologian, but rather as septuagenarian trying to make sense of a lifetime's experience: first as a religious believer, then as an agnostic, then as a religious believer again. 'Ah,' some will say, 'he is an apologist for Christianity, who will attempt feebly to rebut the confident atheism of people such as Dawkins, Dennett, Harris and Hitchens.'¹ But that is not quite right either. It's true, I am a Christian. But I approach the ultimate question primarily from a literary and historical angle rather than from a scientific or narrowly religious one.

What, then, is my version of the ultimate question? It is not 'What is eight times seven?' Nor is it 'What happened before the Big Bang?' nor 'How did life originate?' Rather, it is: 'Can we rely on always having a reason to get out of bed in the morning?'

¹ See 'Notes and references' at the back of the book for information on authors, their works, and individual passages cited in the text.

The word ‘always’ is important here. Many, perhaps most, people living in prosperous and peaceful countries have ample reasons to get out of bed every day. They will have a family that they love, or work of a satisfying and remunerative kind, or absorbing hobbies. I would be surprised if this did not apply also to Dawkins and the other atheist writers that I have just mentioned, at least during most of their lives. But, even in favoured parts of the world (the ‘global North’), many people are less fortunate, whether through illness, bereavement, loneliness, poverty, prejudice or injustice. And for people afflicted by famine, natural disasters, war or brutal repression, the situation is worse again. The puzzle is why, even in those most miserable situations, so few people commit suicide. Nearly everyone wants to cling on to life, even when life seems desperate. But why? In this book, I will attempt some sort of an answer.

The ‘global North’ is inhabited by God-believers as well as atheists, of course. One such is Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, the future Pope Benedict XVI. In a book subtitled *A Catholic Understanding of the Story of Creation and the Fall*, based on Lenten homilies delivered in Munich in the 1980s, Cardinal Ratzinger explores the role of biological evolution in creation. He suggests that, if we humans came into existence by chance, ‘it would be very questionable indeed whether one could declare that this was a fortunate outcome’. His implication seems to be that, because the outcome has indeed been fortunate (in other words, because we would rather exist than not), our origin must be attributed to design rather than to chance. Yet in the same breath he admits that there are indeed people who claim that they would rather not exist:

A taxi driver recently remarked to me that young people are saying more and more: ‘Nobody ever asked me if I wanted to be born.’ And a teacher mentioned to me that he once tried to make a child more grateful to his parents by telling him: ‘You owe it to them that you are alive!’ But the child replied: ‘I’m not at all grateful for that.’ He saw nothing fortunate in being human.

The air of surprise here suggests that the theologian Ratzinger and the biologist Dawkins are on the same side of what one may oversimplifyingly call the North-South divide. They both live satisfying lives in reasonable material comfort. Pope Francis, the papal successor of the former Cardinal Ratzinger, makes the same point in his 2015 encyclical *Laudato Si’*:

... many professionals [and] opinion makers, ... being located in affluent urban areas, are far removed from the poor, with little direct contact with their problems. They live and reason from the comfortable position of a

high level of development and a quality of life well beyond the reach of the majority of the world's population.

So, for God-believers just as much as for atheists, there is a question here with no obvious answer. Even in Munich, part of the 'global North', one can encounter fundamentally unhappy people, as described by the taxi driver and the teacher in the future Pope's anecdote. Yet even these unhappy people do mostly get out of bed in the morning and carry on living. Why?

There exists a Voluntary Human Extinction Movement, but it is unclear how many supporters it has. Also, the philosopher David Benatar argues that existence is always, on balance, an evil; no matter how happy some people may be, it would always be rational to decline to be born, supposing one had the choice. Yet, for me at least (and acknowledging that I am a fortunate member of the 'global North'), there is something more than a little creepy about this suggestion. Part of the purpose of this book is to suggest why this reaction is justified—that is, why most of us would rather be alive than not, despite everything.

1.3 Atheism and theism, optimism and pessimism

As I have said, I will be focussing in this book on Virgil's *Aeneid*. But Virgil himself does not tackle directly the issue of whether or not life is worth living. For that, we must look to other writers, some of whom will be touched on in this section and the next. Let us begin with two prose quotations and a poem:

Without death, the influence of faith-based religion would be unthinkable. Clearly, the fact of death is intolerable to us, and faith is little more than the shadow cast by our hope for a better life beyond the grave.

Sam Harris

Be still, my soul, be still; the arms you bear are brittle,
 Earth and high heaven are fixt of old and founded strong.
 Think rather, —call to thought, if now you grieve a little,
 The days when we had rest, O soul, for they were long.

Men loved unkindness then, but lightless in the quarry
 I slept and saw not; tears fell down, I did not mourn;
 Sweat ran and blood sprang out and I was never sorry:
 Then it was well with me, in days ere I was born.

Now, and I muse for why and never find the reason,
 I pace the earth, and drink the air, and feel the sun.
 Be still, be still, my soul; it is but for a season:
 Let us endure an hour and see injustice done.

Ay, look: high heaven and earth ail from the prime foundation;
 All thoughts to rive the heart are here, and all are vain:
 Horror and scorn and hate and fear and indignation —
 Oh why did I awake? when shall I sleep again?

A.E. Housman

Writers can be guilty of every kind of conceit except one, the conceit of the social worker: ‘We are all here on earth to help others; what on earth the others are here for, I don’t know.’

W.H. Auden

Pessimism comes in many forms. For the militant atheist Sam Harris, the thought of his own life coming to an end is ‘intolerable’, and he assumes that everyone shares that dread. For the poet and classical scholar Housman, equally an atheist, it is life, not death, that is dreadful—yet evidently not dreadful enough for him to put an end to his own life deliberately. (Instead, he assuaged his unhappiness in excoriatingly contemptuous critiques of the work of scholars less brilliant than himself.) Another poet, W.H. Auden, has a more subtle position: no writer (or, at any rate, no serious writer) can be content to see the world as a place where all we do is ‘help others’, each of us taking in our neighbour’s washing (so to speak) so as to keep the wheels of society and the economy turning. If that is all there is to it (Auden seems to imply), we are no better than trapped rats, everlastingly running inside a wheel that turns a spit on which a joint of meat is roasting for someone else to eat—and no one who believes that will have the creative urge to write.

The Harris view is shared by those billionaires who explore every avenue to extend their lives, or (more adventurously) aspire to be preserved in a deep-frozen state until medical science has discovered a means of prolonging human life for ever (barring accidents). They would thus resemble the people that Jonathan Swift in *Gulliver’s Travels* called Struldbruggs (that is, inhabitants of Luggnagg who live for ever), or like Elina Makropulos in Karel Capek’s play *The Makropulos Secret*. But there is a crucial difference. Swift’s Struldbruggs go on getting older, whereas Capek’s Elina (thanks to an elixir that she drinks periodically) remains fixed physically at the age of thirty. The ordinary mortals of Luggnagg do not envy the Struldbruggs but pity them. It is Elina that billionaires who seek to extend their lives wish to emulate. Yet even for Elina, when she

has lived for more than three hundred years (now going by the name Emilia Marty), boredom dominates everything, as illustrated in these fragments of dialogue:

EMILIA. ... And you know what? It [i.e. sexual pleasure] isn't worth it.

PRUS. What *is* worth it?

EMILIA. Nothing. Absolutely nothing.

GREGOR [TO EMILIA]. ... Nothing means anything to you. Cold like a knife.

As if you'd come out of a grave.

Emilia declines to take the elixir again. What is more, everyone else who knows her secret agrees to burn the parchment that contains the formula for the elixir. Would Sam Harris, in a similar situation, wish to preserve the formula? That is an intriguing question, but one which even Harris himself might hesitate to answer with confidence.

The two poets I have quoted sit at opposite poles: Housman a pessimistic atheist, Auden a (broadly speaking) optimistic God-believer. Are other combinations possible? Certainly, one will expect to find pessimistic God-believers in some severe Protestant Christian sects, particularly those who believe that everyone is predestined either to be saved or to be damned. Another poet who believes in God but whose cheerfulness is never more than skin-deep (a kind of whistling in the dark) is Stevie Smith. Her pessimism is illustrated in her most famous poem 'Not Waving but Drowning':

Nobody heard him, the dead man,
But still he lay moaning:
I was much further out than you thought
And not waving but drowning.

Poor chap, he always loved larking
And now he's dead
It must have been too cold for him his heart gave way,
They said.

Oh, no no no, it was too cold always
(Still the dead one lay moaning)
I was much too far out all my life
And not waving but drowning.

I labelled Stevie Smith a God-believer just now. Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that she could never quite bring herself to disbelieve in

God. In her *Novel on Yellow Paper*, the author's alter ego Pompey Casmilus exhibits a kind of defiant confusion:

And I think soon we shall be saying: Really, some of the people who go to church are just as good as those who stay away. But actually I am not a Christian actively. I mean I am actively not a Christian. I have a lot against Christianity though I cannot at the moment remember what it is.

A similar attitude is expressed more coherently in this poem, entitled 'The Reason':

My life is vile
I hate it so
I'll wait awhile
And then I'll go.

Why wait at all?
Hope springs alive,
Good may befall,
I yet may thrive.

It is because I can't make up my mind
If God is good, impotent or unkind.

Here, Stevie puts her finger on the apparent dilemma posed by the traditional Christian view of God as not only omniscient but also all-powerful and benevolent. If he is all-powerful, then he could abolish suffering, surely—so the fact that he does not do so shows that he cannot be benevolent. Conversely, if he is indeed benevolent, he cannot be all-powerful. (I remind readers that I am discussing a traditional view here, so the male pronoun 'he' is appropriate. In the twenty-first century, such a view is bound to be controversial. Aspects of that controversy will be discussed in chapter 5.)

But what about creative writers who are the converse of Stevie Smith: avowed atheists who are unequivocally cheerful? Such people would be poetic soul-mates of the geneticist Richard Dawkins. I have not searched systematically the corpus of English literature (let alone European or world literature) in order to seek out a major poet, novelist or playwright who is an optimistic atheist. But two European poets do spring to mind who illustrate the opposite extreme: they are rejecters of religion and also supremely, eloquently pessimistic—as pessimistic as A.E. Housman but of far greater stature.

1.4 Two atheist poets and their bias towards gloom

Consider this passage from the nineteenth-century Italian poet Giacomo Leopardi, in the final lines of his poem ‘Canto notturno di un pastore errante nell’Asia’ (‘Night song of a wandering shepherd in Asia’):

| | |
|--|---|
| <p>Forse s’avess’io l’ale Da volare su le nubi, E noverar le stelle ad una ad una O come il tuono errar di giogo in giogo, Più felice sarei, dolce mia greggia, Più felice sarei, candida luna. O forse erra dal vero, Mirando all’altrui sorte, il mio pensiero: Forse in qual forma, in quale Stato che sia, dentro covile o cuna, È funesto a chi nasce il dì natale.</p> | <p>Perhaps if I had the wings to fly above the clouds, and count the stars one by one or, like the thunder, wander from peak to peak, I would be happier (O my gentle flock), I would be happier (O shining moon). Or perhaps, observing the fates of others, my thinking wanders from the truth: perhaps in whatever form, in whatever state it occurs, in burrow or cradle, the day of birth is painful to whoever is born.</p> |
|--|---|

Ostensibly the wandering shepherd leaves the question open (‘Perhaps ... perhaps ... perhaps ...’). But there is little doubt which answer the poet opts for.

Night and stars recur in a remarkable ‘Shakespearean’ sonnet, composed however in not the sixteenth century but the twentieth. The stars tantalize us with hints of a greater light (‘day’), which however we never witness, because we live our whole lives under a night sky.

We are born at sunset and we die ere morn,
 And the whole darkness of the world we know;
 How can we guess its truth, to darkness born,
 The obscure consequence of absent glow?
 Only the stars do teach us light. We grasp
 Their scattered smallnesses with thoughts that stray,
 And, though their eyes look through night’s complete mask,
 Yet they speak not the features of the day.
 Why should these small denials of the whole
 More than the black whole the pleased eyes attract?
 Why what it calls ‘worth’ does the captive soul
 Add to the small and from the large detract?
 So, out of light’s love wishing it night’s stretch
 A nightly thought of day we darkly reach.

The teenage author is not English but Portuguese: Fernando Pessoa, who moved to South Africa in 1896, at the age of seven, when his step-father was appointed Portuguese consul in Durban. For that reason, Fernando received most of his education through the medium of English. Later, he

moved back to Portugal and made a living as translator of commercial correspondence, seldom leaving Lisbon.

The concealment of deep pessimism behind a misleading façade is the theme of this later poem, with its seemingly innocuous title ‘Conselho’ (‘Advice’):

Cerca de grandes muros quem te sonhas.
Depois, onde é visível o jardim
Através do portão de grade dada,
Põe quantas flores são as mais risonhas,
Para que te conheçam só assim.
Onde ninguém o vir não ponhas nada.

Surround your dream of yourself with high walls.
Then, where the bars of the gate grant a view
of the garden, plant whatever flowers are
the most smiling, so that people will know you
only like that. Where no one can see it,
plant nothing.

Faze canteiros como os que outros têm,
Onde os olhares possam entrever
O teu jardim como lho vais mostrar.
Mas onde és teu, e nunca o vê ninguém
Deixa as flores, que vêm do chão crescer
E deixa as ervas naturais medrar.

Where glances can catch a glimpse of your garden
as you intend to display it, make flowerbeds
like the ones that other people have. But where
it is your own, and no one else ever sees it,
let the flowers that come from the ground
grow and let natural grasses flourish.

Faze de ti um duplo ser guardado;
E que ninguém, que veja e fite, possa
Saber mais que um jardim de quem tu és—
Um jardim ostensivo e reservado,
Por trás do qual a flor nativa roça
A erva tão pobre que nem tu a vês ...

Make of yourself a guarded double being;
and let no one who sees and watches
know more of who you are than of a garden—
a garden both showy and secluded,
behind which the native flower brushes against
grass so poor that not even you can see it ...

At first it seems as if Pessoa is championing naturalness over artificiality, a trite poetic theme. Yet the ‘natural grasses’ mentioned in the second stanza do not really exist. In the two-fold enclosed garden (the ‘guarded double being’), the part that is invisible to the outsider is, it turns out, scarcely visible even to the garden’s owner. At the centre of the garden, representing the poet’s innermost being, there is emptiness.

Pessoa wrote not only his own poems but also the poems of several other fictitious poets: so-called ‘heteronyms’ invented by himself, with fictitious lives that interact with the lives of the others and with that of the ‘real’ Pessoa (the ‘orthonym’). But, in view of the inner emptiness that ‘Conselho’ reveals, what right have we to regard the orthonym as more than just another heteronym? Pessoa, one of the greatest poets of the twentieth century, put on display the ‘most smiling flowers’ in his ‘showy but secluded garden’. He participated influentially in Lisbon’s literary scene. But, in the light of what he tells us, it is sad but not surprising to learn that, although he did not commit suicide, he died in his forties of liver disease.

It seems reasonable to conclude that neither neither Pessoa nor Leopardi could offer a confident answer to the question that I posed earlier:

‘Why get out of bed in the morning?’ Before inquiring whether Virgil does any better, we need to look at Virgil’s principal model for his *Aeneid*, namely Homer’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. But first I will say something in chapter 2 about a direct link between Virgil and 9/11.

CHAPTER 2

THE INSCRIPTION AT THE WORLD TRADE CENTER MEMORIAL

2.1 Virgil, 9/11, and the emperor Augustus

I mentioned in chapter 1 the first big shock of the new millennium: 9/11. The victims of the 9/11 tragedy are commemorated at the World Trade Center memorial by a line of poetry in huge letters, against a background of blue tiles:

NO DAY SHALL ERASE YOU FROM THE MEMORY OF TIME

Virgil

This is a translation of a line from Virgil's *Aeneid*, a long poem that commemorates the Trojan hero Aeneas and his mythical establishment of a settlement in Italy that would lead to the foundation of Rome. In the context of the World Trade Center, the pronoun 'you' clearly refers to the people who were killed there on 11th September 2001. But in the context of the poem, it refers to a couple of young Trojan warriors called Nisus and Euryalus. Is this line really appropriate, then, for its place on the memorial? I will argue in the course of this book that the answer is yes, though for reasons that are not obvious at first sight.

Let me say straight away that I have no idea on what basis the designers of the World Trade Center memorial chose that Virgilian line. They may have chosen it for reasons that have nothing to do with why I believe it to be appropriate. But that does not matter. My purpose is not to discuss the history of the memorial's design. Rather, I will argue that, however that line was chosen, no one—and, in particular, no one who lost a relative or friend on September 11th 2001—need feel disappointed at the choice.

Virgil did not write the *Aeneid* solely as a tribute to a glorious past. It had contemporary political relevance. While he was writing it, order was being restored in Rome and its dominions after nearly a century

of intermittent civil war. The most recent strife arose from the assassination of Julius Caesar on 15th March (the Ides of March) in 44 BC—an event that will ring bells with anyone who has seen or read Shakespeare’s play *Julius Caesar*. The bringer of order was the murdered man’s great-nephew and adopted son, Gaius Iulius Caesar Octavianus, who is generally referred to in English as ‘Octavian’. (That spelling ‘Iulius’ reflects the fact that the letter J was not yet in use. In Roman times, the name was pronounced ‘yoo-lee-us’.)

Octavian’s original name was Gaius Octavius, ‘Gaius’ being a given name and ‘Octavius’ a tribal name (a kind of surname). On his adoption, however, Octavius acquired his great-uncle’s names, with his original tribal name demoted to the status of a supplement to the tribal name (called in Latin an *agnomen*). This complex naming system can lead to confusion. In Latin texts and old inscriptions, when we read of ‘Iulius Caesar’, is it the great-uncle or the great-nephew that is meant? This is a confusion that Octavian was only too willing to exploit. He was happy to be seen as almost a reincarnation of his great-uncle, who was elevated to divine status by a vote of the Roman Senate in 42 BC.

Gaius Octavius in his teenage years was vividly depicted in the TV series *Rome* that was screened between 2005 and 2007. He was an ambitious, clever, not very likeable young man. When still only eighteen, immediately after Julius Caesar’s assassination, Octavian was bold enough to announce himself publicly as his adoptive father’s heir. He thereby complicated the plans of not only the assassins but also, on the other side, of older and more experienced partisans of Caesar himself.

Being so young, with no troops under his command and with poor health, Octavian’s chance of survival in the rough-and-tumble that followed must have seemed negligible. But survive he did, as Shakespeare reminds us in *Antony and Cleopatra*. In 31 BC, seventeen years after Julius Caesar’s death, Octavian’s fleet defeated his last Roman rival, Mark Antony, in a battle near Actium, in the Adriatic Sea near the mouth of the Gulf of Corinth. Antony was allied with Cleopatra, Queen of Egypt—a country with an already ancient civilization, seen by most Romans as ‘oriental’ and decadent. Octavian was thus able to represent this last battle of the civil war as a triumph of Roman arms against a sinister foreign enemy. Egypt was brought under Roman rule, ending the tradition of rule by pharaohs that had endured for thousands of years.

Octavian’s problem, like that of so many dictators, was to pretend that the old order had been restored while ensuring that he himself remained effectively in control. The chief officials of government in republican Rome were the consuls, of whom there were two in office at

any one time, both serving for only one year. The republican system thus contrasted itself sharply with the monarchy that it had replaced, centuries earlier. But this system clearly posed problems for a political leader who wanted to achieve effective long-term control.

Octavian did indeed arrange to hold the consulship for a number of years in succession. But what eventually evolved was an arrangement whereby he acquired a vague status as *princeps* ('first citizen'), as well as a conveniently vague 'authority' (*auctoritas*), or power to take political initiatives, that was superior to the authority of other state officials. In addition, in 27 BC, he was awarded the title 'Augustus' ('Revered One'), and the eighth month of the year (our 'August') was renamed in his honour. (Augustus thus supplied a precedent for twentieth-century dictators to bolster their status with grand but vague titles such as *Führer* or *Duce*, both meaning 'Leader'.) Augustus also, either directly or through members of his inner circle, strove to enlist the support of Rome's opinion-formers (the contemporary equivalents of political journalists and internet political 'influencers'). This meant, especially, poets—including the up-and-coming young poet Virgil, whom Augustus rewarded in due course with a comfortable villa near Naples.

Augustus' new constitutional arrangements turned out to be extraordinarily successful. He himself died in 14 AD at the ripe age of seventy-four, still ruling as securely as ever. The planned transfer of power to his stepson Tiberius took place smoothly. In western Europe, the Roman Empire survived for more than four hundred years, until the emperor Romulus Augustulus was overthrown by Gothic invaders in 476. In eastern Europe and what is now the Middle East, it lasted a thousand years longer, until the Ottoman Turks entered Constantinople (now Istanbul) in 1453 and so put an end to the Byzantine Empire. Indeed, because the conquering Sultan Mehmed II and his successors called themselves 'Kayser-i Rûm' or 'Caesar of Rome' (the surname 'Caesar' having metamorphosed into a title), one could argue that the last ghost of Augustus' political settlement did not disappear until the sultanate was abolished by Kemal Atatürk in 1923. For this long-lived empire, the *Aeneid* became the founding myth. For most readers, even today, that aspect of the poem is central. But, as we shall see, this is not the only way of viewing the poem, nor (I will argue) the most satisfying way.

2.2 Outline of the plot of Virgil's *Aeneid*

The *Aeneid* is a long poem of nearly 10,000 lines, divided into twelve sections known as 'books'. Why twelve? The answer lies in the fact that

Virgil in the *Aeneid* sets out to provide for the emperor Augustus an account of Roman origins that can stand alongside the stories of Greek heroes in Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. Each of those two long poems came to be divided traditionally into twenty-four books. Virgil's choice of twelve is thus an implicit act of homage: 'I am engaged in the same kind of enterprise as Homer, yet I am not so presumptuous as to copy the structure of his poems exactly'. John Milton, in his turn, emulated Virgil less modestly; he divided his seventeenth-century English epic *Paradise Lost* into twelve books, just like the *Aeneid*.

We first encounter the Trojan hero Aeneas when he and his small fleet are washed up by a storm on the coast of north Africa. They find themselves in the territory of Dido, the founding queen of Carthage, in what is now Tunisia but was in Virgil's time regarded as part of Libya. Dido makes the Trojans welcome. Aeneas tells her about his escape from the destruction of Troy (where he has lost his wife Creusa) and his subsequent wanderings in quest of the land of Italy. It is from Italy that Aeneas's ancestor Dardanus originally came (*Aeneid* 3.94-8, 3.167-8, 7.196-211), and, according to prophecy, he and his followers are to settle there again.

Virgil reminds us constantly of one quality in Aeneas: he is *pius*. For Romans in Virgil's time, *pietas* meant devotion to the gods (particularly the supreme god Jupiter), to one's family and ancestors, and to one's country. Thus Aeneas always does, or tries to do, what Jupiter wants; he carries with him the sacred objects that represent the city of Troy; and his attitude towards his father Anchises is one of humblest respect. The sense of these Latin words is thus wider than that of the English words 'pious' and 'piety' derived from them, in that 'piety', unlike *pietas*, does not embrace patriotism and family loyalty.

Jupiter's wife and sister Juno, who is the patron goddess of Carthage, has a grudge against all Trojans. This is because the Trojan prince Paris, when asked by the three goddesses Venus, Athena and Juno to decide which of them was the most beautiful, chose not Juno but Venus—an event often depicted in Renaissance painting, referred to as 'the Judgement of Paris'. Juno contrives a 'marriage' between Aeneas and Dido while they are sheltering in a cave during a torrential thunderstorm. Dido has fallen in love with Aeneas, and he falls in love with her too, although he never acknowledges this explicitly to her. He dallies in Carthage for months, helping Dido to build her city. But at last Jupiter reminds him sternly of his destiny in Italy, where he is to marry the princess Lavinia and found a dynasty of rulers. So the pious Aeneas

wrenches himself away from Dido, and she in despair kills herself as the Trojan fleet sails away.

On arrival in Italy, Aeneas is granted a visit to the underworld, where his dead father Anchises shows him some of the Roman leaders yet to be born (including the city's founder Romulus), and impresses on him Rome's destiny as a bringer of order and civilization to the world. Back above ground, Aeneas is at first welcomed by Lavinia's father, the Italian king Latinus. However, Juno foments trouble. A trivial incident between the Trojans and the Italians leads to skirmishes. The Italian prince Turnus, who had been hoping to marry Lavinia himself, helps to inflate these skirmishes into full-scale war.

The Trojans are penned inside a stockade by the seashore while their leader, Aeneas, seeks help from a neighbouring king, Evander. Help arrives, but there are still desperate battles to be fought. Turnus kills Evander's young son Pallas, and strips Pallas's swordbelt from his body as a trophy. In heaven, Jupiter persuades Juno at last to accept a fusion of the Trojan and Italian peoples, while on earth the outcome is finally decided in single combat between Aeneas and Turnus. Aeneas wounds Turnus in the leg, and has him at his mercy. Turnus, recognising at last that Aeneas has Jupiter on his side, concedes defeat and begs Aeneas not to prolong hatred any further. But Aeneas kills him anyway, avenging the death of Pallas.

There the poem ends—or, rather, stops. We are not shown the predestined foundation of Rome, or even of the new settlement out of which Rome will arise, centuries later. We are not even shown the marriage between Aeneas and Lavinia. In fact, Lavinia plays almost no part in the poem. She never speaks, and Aeneas never speaks to her. The poem ends not in reconciliation but in bitterness and vengeful anger.

Was Augustus satisfied? Evidently, yes. The *Aeneid* quickly became a poem that all literate Romans were introduced to as part of their schooling. It continued to be read for as long as Latin remained on the syllabus for educated people in the western world—that is, up until the twentieth century. Truly, Aeneas has never been erased from the memory of time. Yet the people in the poem that are addressed as 'you' in that quotation do not include Aeneas. Who are they, then? The answer—the warriors Nisus and Euryalus—is surprising, but it provides a clue to the fascination of this poem. Yes, triumph is accompanied by grief. But, if we listen to Virgil carefully, we will hear him point towards something that outweighs both.

2.3 The ‘you’ that will be remembered for ever: Nisus and Euryalus

Besieged within their stockade, and with their leader Aeneas absent, the Trojans are desperate. If only Aeneas can be warned, so that he can bring help quickly! The young warrior Nisus devises a plan to sneak through enemy lines and get a message to Aeneas. His friend Euryalus insists on coming too. They present the plan to Aeneas’s worried lieutenants, and the offer is gratefully accepted.

All goes well at first. The enemy troops have been carousing, and are in a drunken stupor. Nisus and Euryalus, on their way through the enemy camp, take the opportunity to leave behind a bloody mess of corpses. Euryalus picks up as plunder a swordbelt and a splendid helmet. The two of them, by moonlight, thread their way through dense bush. But Euryalus, hampered by the extra armour that he is now carrying, falls behind. By the time Nisus realises this, it is too late. Moonlight glinting on Euryalus’s stolen helmet has attracted the attention of a party of Italian soldiers. Euryalus is captured.

Nisus rushes back to rescue his friend. With two spear throws, he kills two of the enemy. The enemy leader, Volcens, is furious. Unable to see where the spears are coming from, he threatens to take revenge by killing Euryalus. Nisus, in panic, reveals himself, shouting ‘No! It was all my idea! Kill me instead!’ But it is too late. As Nisus rushes forward, Volcens stabs Euryalus in the chest. Nisus is pierced through by Italian swords and spears. Yet he manages to plunge his own sword into Volcens’ mouth before collapsing in death on top of his dead friend’s body.

The Italians, in mourning, carry Volcens away. But Nisus and Euryalus are decapitated. Their heads are stuck on long poles and paraded in front of the Trojan camp. The Trojans are forced to witness the gruesome proof of the mission’s failure.

So Nisus and Euryalus are not only killed but humiliated. Yet Virgil inserts four lines of lavish praise for them, including the line now inscribed on the Twin Towers memorial. Here is my English prose translation of this passage, followed by the original Latin verses—the sound and meaning of which you can, if you wish, explore further in Appendix B:

‘Fortunate pair! If my poetry can achieve anything, no day will ever erase you from the memory of time, so long as the house of Aeneas occupies the unmovable rock of the Capitol [one of Rome’s seven hills] and a Roman father holds power.’

Fortunati ambo! si quid mea carmina possunt,
 nulla dies unquam memori uos eximet aeuo,
 dum domus Aeneae Capitoli immobile saxum
 accolet imperiumque pater Romanus habebit.

This is the most lavish praise that Virgil bestows on anyone in the poem. But why do Nisus and Euryalus deserve it? More specifically, why is it they who are addressed in this way rather than Aeneas? Or does Aeneas, somehow, deserve this praise too? We will return to these questions in chapter 6, when we consider what help gods offer to mortals—or fail to offer—in the worldview of Virgil’s poem.

2.4 The plot of Homer’s *Odyssey*

As I have said, Virgil’s *Aeneid* was an attempt to provide for Rome what Homer’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey* provided for the Greek world: that is, a myth that would inspire and unite the Romans under Augustus in the way that the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* inspired and united all Greeks culturally, no matter how divided they might be politically. Yet, if we consider the plot of the *Odyssey*, it is easy to how Virgil might well have constructed the *Aeneid* differently—and indeed more straightforwardly, so as to include Aeneas himself among those who are never to be erased from the memory of time.

After their semi-mythical ten-year seige of Troy, back in the thirteenth century BC, the Greeks go home. For most, this is a simple voyage of a week or two back across the Aegean Sea. But the hero Odysseus (also known as Ulysses), who has fallen foul of the sea-god Poseidon, has not yet reached his home in Ithaca again, even though ten years have passed. This means that, because the siege of Troy itself lasted ten years, Odysseus has not see his wife Penelope for twenty years, and his son Telemachus, who had only just been born when Odysseus left Ithaca, has grown up without a father.

At the beginning of the *Odyssey* we meet Telemachus as he sets out to visit the kings of other Greek cities to try to find news of Odysseus. This quest is becoming urgent because, in his father’s absence, Telemachus is not (as you might expect) ruling Ithaca as regent. Instead, the throne is vacant, and the royal wealth—perhaps also the kingship—will pass to whoever Penelope chooses to marry, on the assumption that she is now a widow. The royal palace of Ithaca is beset by a crowd of suitors, each hoping to marry Penelope once she can be persuaded to give up hope that Odysseus will return. It is becoming harder for Penelope to fend off these suitors, who dine and carouse in the palace at her expense, and Telemachus is too young to confront them successfully on his own. So