

# I

## Epic

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Thus they held funeral rites for Hector, tamer of horses.  
*Iliad* 24.804

### I

In the modern world epic as a genre of poetry is no more: in lamenting its passing we can mimic one of the most characteristic activities of the form, grieving for what is lost, whether it be a dead hero or a vanished age. Yet we all feel we know what ‘epic’ means. Hardly a week goes by without some claim that a new Hollywood blockbuster is epic in scope. Here we need to distinguish between epic form and epic spirit. The ancient poems grouped under this title (though the title is of surprisingly late origin) follow certain rules and conventions: notably, they are almost universally composed in the metre which Homer used, a long and swiftly moving line known as the dactylic hexameter, and in a dignified, self-consciously elevated style. Certain formal features are particularly frequent in epic: an invocation of the inspiring Muse is one; others are the extended simile and the use of elaborate speeches. Even more obvious, an epic is a lengthy work, often extending to many thousands of lines. But we can also see that epic regularly addresses certain kinds of theme. Epic does not restrict itself to the adventures of an individual, nor to the private lives of its characters: the scope of the genre often embraces major events, events of historical or even cosmic import (the destruction of Troy, the foundation of Rome, the fall of the Roman Republic; in Milton, the Fall of Man). Both the length of the work and a large cast of characters make the reader conscious of the narrative as significant, an effect often reinforced by the involvement of supernatural powers. Epic records great events or great achievements, often involving great suffering: the characters are noble or at least exceptional. Thus *War*

and *Peace* or *The Lord of the Rings* can be said to have something of the epic scope or spirit, although their medium is narrative prose.

Already these generalizations evoke objections. The *Odyssey* is more the tale of the individual Odysseus than of any larger theme: the world would not be changed if the hero failed to return to tiny, marginal Ithaca. The high seriousness and public dimension of epic are at least severely compromised in Ovid. The characters in Statius, and still more in Lucan, may be larger than life, but they would be hard to call noble. And so on. As in all genres, the later writers reshape or rethink the tradition, reacting to and often fighting against the work of their predecessors. This is inevitable in any literary tradition but is perhaps especially conspicuous in epic, and from the beginning: the *Odyssey* is a reaction to, almost a critique of, the *Iliad*; Ovid's *Metamorphoses* has been seen as an anti-*Aeneid*; Lucan defies many of the conventions of his models, not least in the expulsion of the gods from his cast of characters. This reaction is partly a form of self-assertion against impossibly great predecessors: Harold Bloom's theories of poets engaged in an Oedipal struggle with their 'fathers' work better with epic than with most genres.<sup>1</sup> Humility and tributes are combined with 'going one better' than the model. The imitator aspires to recreate the qualities of the model but also to surpass them. Readers shared these expectations: Propertius eagerly awaited the completion of the *Aeneid*, writing that 'a work *greater than the Iliad* is in the making' (2.34.66).

The special prestige of epic derives from its prominence at the earliest stages of the classical tradition. It is an astonishing fact that Greek literature begins with the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, by any standards among the greatest works of any age. (Obviously there was poetry before Homer, and the epics themselves make reference to other types of song; but these do not survive.) The Homeric poems stand at the fountain-head of classical literature, and although parodists or pedagogues might find fault with some aspects, in antiquity their rank was never seriously questioned. Aristophanes called Homer 'divine'; others simply refer to him as 'the poet' – no confusion was possible. These poems were often compared with the Ocean surrounding the whole world, the source on which, in early geographic conceptions, all lesser rivers were dependent.<sup>2</sup> Similarly epic could be seen as the source for other later genres, notably tragedy, comedy, and historiography: the last in particular shared the concern to commemorate glorious deeds. In turn, later epic extended its scope and absorbed or incorporated material from other genres which had developed independently: oratory, ethnography, aetiology. Virgil drew on Cato and Varro for his picture of early Italy; Lucan quarried Nicander on horrific snake-bites.

But epic remained central and stood at the peak of the generic hierarchy. In the Roman period it became an expectation that a poet would not

attempt this form until he had reached full maturity. Thus Virgil began with the brief but exquisite pastoral *Eclogues*, progressed through the didactic *Georgics*, and only in his fifth decade embarked on his climactic work, a pattern which was noted and imitated by Ovid and later by Spenser and Milton (Lucan, who died at 26, broke this rule along with many others). This special prestige made epic the natural form in which to compose the National Poem: the *Aeneid*, whatever else it embraces, is clearly conceived as a patriotic poem that celebrates the history and character of Rome, composed at a time which was perhaps already perceived as a key moment in her history. Although few poems have been enjoyed more for their sheer storytelling than the *Odyssey*, for serious-minded readers, to be entertaining was not enough. Didactic import was soon attached to Homer's poems: they showed examples of virtue and vice, illustrated the perils of the passions. Ingenious reading could interpret monsters as symbols. Horace was familiar with moralizing readings of Homer; they may well have influenced Virgil's conception of the *Aeneid*, and certainly influenced later readers who saw Virgil as a philosophic mystic and the *Aeneid* as an allegorical 'voyage of life'. The history of epic is of a constantly adapting and expanding form, in which traditional elements are put to new uses, new elements boldly imported, and in which the epic poet's own voice, barely audible in Homer, becomes more conspicuous, sometimes mischievously intrusive (Ovid), sometimes polemically strident (Lucan).

One feature which has not so far been mentioned explicitly is the role of myth. But although the most famous ancient epics use plots set in the mythical past, there was also a strong tradition of historical epic. Our surviving examples are Roman (Lucan, Silius), but it is clear that the line went back to the Greek world. A few early Greek poets seem to have written in epic form about their communities and about the weird places they travelled to in the colonizing period. Later, the panegyric epics composed for Alexander and his successors became notorious. Interestingly, the line between myth and history was not always firmly drawn. Ennius told of the sack of Troy, of Aeneas and Romulus, but went on to bring his *Annales* down to the historical wars of Rome and his own day, including praise of individual leaders. Virgil's technique in the *Aeneid* was more subtle: while treating the relatively brief episode of Aeneas' journey and victory in war, he celebrated the future history of Rome through explicit prophecy and by complex techniques of foreshadowing. Aeneas prefigures Augustus in a number of ways: myth provides the paradigm for history. The influence of myth on history in antiquity was potent: passages from the Homeric catalogue of forces could be invoked (some said forged) to back up claims to territory, and Alexander the Great seems to have seen himself as a new Achilles.<sup>3</sup> The influence worked both ways: myths were naturally reshaped or even invented to reflect historical

developments. The conquest of India by Dionysus, described at gargantuan length in the epic of Nonnus, seems to have been invented as a mythic analogue to the historical campaigns of Alexander in 326.

## II

It is time to give a fuller idea of the most important ancient epics one by one: other general considerations will be noted en route, but what follows is intended to bring out more clearly the diversity of the genre.

‘Homer’ is the name traditionally given to the poet who composed the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. In fact other poems were ascribed to him in the classical period, including the surviving parody *Battle of Frogs and Mice*, which is certainly a much later work, and various other epics which do not survive. It is in any case clear that nothing was known about Homer in later times: his date and place of origin were disputed, and he never refers to himself or his career in the poems themselves. Moderns tend to place him in the period around 700, but the dating and much else are affected by the so-called ‘Homeric question’, an expression which refers to the disputes over the authorship and composition of the two epics.<sup>4</sup> This debate is too complex to treat in detail here: briefly, it is well established that the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* draw on and probably form part of a long tradition of oral poetry, an inherited body of material repeatedly reworked and reperformed over many generations, so that the precise date of ‘composition’ is theoretically difficult and practically impossible to define. (The proof is partly linguistic, partly based on the references to archaeological or other material evidence of diverse periods.) We cannot identify ‘Homer’s’ own contribution: for some, he is the master poet who drew together a variety of legends and created a massive super-epic (the stimulus of writing may have played a part here, encouraging a more ambitious work because the means now existed to preserve it); others have held that the name of Homer should be attached to the author of the core narrative of the work, to be distinguished from later additions (though the different strata are not easily identified). Some ancient scholars already wondered whether the *Odyssey* was by the same poet as the *Iliad*, and the ‘separatist’ view which sees it as a work by a later hand has much support today. It remains convenient to use the name ‘Homer’ as shorthand for the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. Even if their composers were different, they belong to the same tradition and are most unlikely to be independent of each other: the *Odyssey* is surely conceived with a view to completing or complementing the *Iliad*. Indeed, in many ways the poems are thematic opposites: war versus peace, glorious death versus hard-won survival, heroic individual versus father, husband and ruler.

Two major plots dominate virtually all the ancient epics, war and the quest or journey: the *Iliad* provides the prototype for the former, the *Odyssey* for the latter. Often they are combined, though one may predominate: the *Aeneid* uses the journey-theme in the first half, war in the second. The *Iliad* describes an episode near the end of the Greeks' 10-year war against Troy. Its hero, Achilles, slighted by the arrogant King Agamemnon, withdraws from the conflict with disastrous results for his fellow Greeks. In the end, having rejected the desperate appeals of his comrades, he concedes to Patroclus, his closest friend, that he may take the field in his place, wearing his armour, and so drive off the Trojans. But Patroclus, advancing too far, is slain by the Trojan champion Hector, and Achilles' anger, far fiercer than before, is turned against the slayer of his friend. In the climactic combat Achilles kills Hector, and maltreats his body: in the days which follow, he persists in his awe-inspiring grief and wrath. But in the final book of the poem Hector's father, the aged Priam, travels to the Greek camp by night and throws himself at Achilles' feet, begging the hero to return his son's body for burial.

'Reverence the gods, Achilles, and pity me,  
remembering your own father; yet I am still more pitiable.  
I have endured such things as no mortal on this earth has endured,  
Drawing to my lips the hands of the man who has slain my son.'  
These were his words, and in Achilles he roused a deep longing to  
weep for his own father . . . (24.503–7: see Appendix 1.1)

Achilles' anger gives way to pity, and he makes this concession, although both men know that death is hanging over them and that this moment of magnanimity will achieve nothing permanent. The poem ends with the burial of Hector: the Trojans mourn their lost defender and are left waiting for the imminent destruction of their city and society, which Hector had already foreseen. 'For I know this well, in my mind and my heart: there will come a day when holy Ilium will perish, and with it Priam and the host of Priam of the good ashen spear' (6.447–9).

This summary cannot give any adequate idea of the richness of texture with which the *Iliad* presents the narrative and characters. Even minor characters are unforgettably portrayed: Helen, the adulteress who caused the war, appears only rarely, but every occasion is memorable. The handling of Helen, indeed, is representative of the poem's humane spirit. She is not villainous or shameless, but in some ways a victim herself – while partly responsible for the war, she never ceases to blame herself and long for her former husband, watching the combat that she cannot halt, and despising the adulterer Paris, her Trojan spouse. She mentions more than once the

hostility of the Trojans, especially the women; but their king Priam treats her with generous affection, and Hector too, she recalls, has always shown her kindness and courtesy. Although later ages took the *Iliad* as a panhellenic poem, commemorating the victory of Western heroes over Eastern barbarians,<sup>5</sup> this is not Homer's perspective. The Trojans may be inferior in numbers and prowess, but they are sympathetically treated throughout. We are left in no doubt that the fall of Troy is a tragic and horrific event. This perception that victory can be terrible, that one's enemy deserves compassion in art even if not receiving it in life, is a crucial part of Homer's legacy. These lessons were not lost on Euripides (*Hecuba*, *Trojan Women*).

No less remarkable is the construction of the poem. Rather than recounting the Trojan war from start to finish, Homer narrates a short episode, a matter of days, but deepens our understanding by extensive forward and backward glances. Minor sub-plots and lesser characters are also frequent. This highlights an important feature of epic narrative technique. The focus on a central plot and a few key personalities calls for intensity of emotion, whereas the sheer length of most epics encourages diversity and variety. There is a constant fluctuation between linear development of the main plot and a more episodic structure. While in general there is a firm control over the epic's coherence and development, inset stories and subordinate episodes are sometimes loosely connected with the whole. (In Ovid, diversity and centrifugal structures are the norm.) The same technique is used in the *Odyssey*.

The action of the *Iliad* is overseen by the Olympian gods, as vividly characterized as the human principals. The opening lines of the poem anticipate the action to come, declaring 'and so the plan of Zeus was brought to fulfilment'. The first event of the poem, Agamemnon's insult to the priest Chryses, brings down divine wrath in the form of Apollo's plague. The war of Troy must continue, so that the anger of Hera and Athena may be appeased. The slow progress of the war is partly explained by the fact that powerful gods are involved as supporters of each side, and the most powerful of all, Zeus, is slow to impose his will. The heroes are formidable warriors, but still more deadly when they are inspired and given added strength by divine allies, as Diomedes and Achilles are inspired by Athena. The divine involvement raises the stakes and increases the significance of the action. The gods can often foresee but seldom avert the tragic outcome: Zeus weeps tears of blood for his beloved son Sarpedon, who must die despite his father's longing to save him. Yet although the gods give grandeur and dignity to the heroic conflict, Homer can also use them as foils to the human action. Gods, being immortal, cannot die or suffer lasting pain; their lives of eternal feasting and security are contrasted with the misery and death of their human favourites. Both the seriousness and

the frivolity of the Homeric gods serve to bring out in different ways the human cost of the Trojan war. Describing Apollo's attack on the Greek defensive wall, Homer uses a simile, as he often does in order to make divine intervention comprehensible: between them narrative and simile show both the awesome power and the light-heartedness of the god's assault.

He hurled down the wall of the Achaeans  
 With great ease, just like a child with sand by the sea shore,  
 A child who has made a plaything of sand in his childish way  
 And then, still playing, confounds it with his hands and feet.  
 Just so did you, Phoebus whom we invoke,  
 confound the work of the Argives, their long toil and pain,  
 and in them you stirred up panicking fear. (15.361–6)

What was 'long toil and pain' for the Greeks to construct is shattered by the god at a stroke, 'with great ease'.<sup>6</sup>

Even one who is favoured by the gods does not find happiness as a result. Although Achilles is the 'hero' of the *Iliad*, heroism is made problematic, to himself as well as to the audience. By insisting on his own honour as all-important, he brings about the deaths of many other Greeks, culminating in that of Patroclus, his dearest friend and in later versions his lover. The other Greeks find him hard to understand or to live with. Achilles is special because he is close to the gods (son of the sea-nymph Thetis) but denied immortality: instead he has foreknowledge of his own mortality. This awareness of his early death overshadows all that he does: it drives him to insist on his rightful recognition while he lives; it drives him, in his lonely brooding, to question the purpose of the war and perhaps even the value of heroic prowess. A greater fighter than the other Greeks, he is also a more eloquent orator. In book 9 he makes an unforgettable speech in which denunciation of Agamemnon is combined with a powerful though confusing statement of his own dilemma;<sup>7</sup> in book 24 he transcends his former selfishness and speaks gently to Priam of the fragility of the human lot. Knowing that he himself will not live to see the doom of Troy, he regards that goal with greater detachment than Agamemnon and the rest. The *Iliad* is not a poem of pacifism: it constantly celebrates the zest and excitement of the battlefield, and the glory won through fighting is no mere illusion. But the poem also repeatedly stresses the losses and the fate of the losers. For every dead warrior there is a grieving father: Hector's father Priam is the mirror image of Achilles' own.

The *Iliad* is the poem of Ilium, another name for Troy. The *Odyssey*, set in the aftermath of the war, is much more focused on the experience of the

hero who gives the poem its name. It narrates his homecoming after ten years of wandering in strange lands, and his reunion with his wife, son and household, his reassertion of authority in his kingdom. Whereas the *Iliad* is a poem of disintegration, the *Odyssey* tells of reintegration. In other ways too it seems to be intended as a response, perhaps even a sequel. Several of the heroes of the *Iliad* reappear in cameo roles; the events since the end of the earlier poem are filled in, often narrated by participants. Even the dead may reappear: Odysseus' wanderings take him to the underworld, where he converses with the ghosts of Agamemnon and Achilles. Although Odysseus speaks admiringly to Achilles, the dead hero's response is one of bleak disillusion: 'I would rather be a serf on the land, in service to another, to a poor man of no great substance, than be king among all the corpses of the dead.' (11.489–91) Odysseus the canny survivor is contrasted with the younger Achilles, whose passionate temper led him to throw away his life in battle. The *Odyssey* gives much more space to the things that make life worth living – home, family, friends, affection. Odysseus is 'much-enduring', but his suffering is for a purpose. Though Dante and Tennyson cast Ulysses as the eternal wanderer, in Homer he does not lose sight of the ultimate goal of homecoming.<sup>8</sup>

The adventures of Odysseus overseas, told by the hero himself, have always been the most popular part of the poem. Later pedants tried to plot them on the map, but the hero is wandering in a fantasy world, at a time when even the Mediterranean was not well known. The Sirens, the bag of winds, the enchantress Circe who turns his men into pigs, the Lotus-eaters, are all deliciously exotic and perilous. Best of all is the encounter with Polyphemus, the monstrous Cyclops, a giant with one eye who devours several of Odysseus' companions raw. The episode highlights the creature's barbarism and Odysseus' cunning. Trapped in the monster's cave, he befuddles his captor with strong wine and then puts out his eye with a stake. Earlier the Cyclops has asked him his name, and Odysseus answered 'Nobody'. When the other Cyclopes hear their friend screaming with pain, they run to his cave and call out, asking him what is the matter. He replies: 'Friends, Nobody is killing me by guile not /nor by force.' Misunderstanding, they depart in annoyance at being disturbed. 'And my heart laughed within me,' says Odysseus, 'as my name and my excellent wit had deceived them' (9.413–4). There is cunning in the expression here too, as the word for 'wit' in Greek also punningly means 'nobody', alluding to the pseudonym Odysseus has used. This fast-moving adventure has deeper implications: names and identity are important in the *Odyssey*, in which the hero and others are often disguised or concealing the truth. The open conflicts of the *Iliad* have given way to a more subtle and ironic narrative of deception and delayed revelation.

These themes are especially prominent once Odysseus returns to Ithaca, where he adopts the guise of an aged beggar and tests the loyalty and mettle of his swineherd, his other servants, his son and even his wife Penelope (she is being wooed by aristocratic suitors who believe he is dead). Intense pathos is achieved by the device of having Odysseus questioned by his wife, who wishes to know if he can give her any news of her husband. Despite their proximity and the opportunity for self-revelation, Odysseus maintains his self-discipline.

Thus her lovely cheeks were wasted as she shed tears, weeping for her husband who sat there beside her. As for Odysseus, in his heart he pitied his wife as she wept, but his own eyes remained steady, as though made of horn or iron. Through guile he masked his distress. (19.208–12)

Penelope is a deeply sympathetic figure, but also an intelligent woman, a wife worthy of Odysseus. It is a satisfying moment in book 23 when she tests him, and he falls into her trap, losing his self-control at last and confirming his own identity. In the *Iliad* the archetypal marriage of Hector and Andromache is doomed: he is killed by Achilles, she foresees slavery for herself and death for her infant son. The *Odyssey* allows a happier outcome, though achieved after many struggles and after deadly slaughter (the killing of the suitors):

He wept as he held the true-hearted wife so dear to him. As land is welcome to shipwrecked sailors swimming, when out at sea Poseidon has struck their well-built vessel, as it was driven by wind and massed waves, and only a few have escaped to land from the grey sea by swimming, their bodies encrusted with thick brine – and gratefully they welcome their first step on the land, after escaping from misfortune – so welcome to her was the husband she kept gazing upon, and even now her white arms around his neck would not let him go. (23.232–40)

The extended simile here begins as a comparison applying to Odysseus, but ends with Penelope; it also alludes to the experiences of Odysseus himself in his voyages. Now that husband and wife are reunited, we see that their sufferings have been parallel, and both are now rewarded for their years of endurance.

‘Compare and contrast’ is a stock formula in examination papers. It was already a recognized method in ancient scholarship, and we often find critics comparing Homer and Virgil, Demosthenes and Cicero. In one distinguished work of ancient criticism the procedure soars above pedantry: in chapter 9 of *On the Sublime*, the enthusiasm of Longinus for Homer leads him to set out a finely worded argument for the superiority of the

*Iliad* over the *Odyssey*. He does not escape the lure of biographical explanation, assuming that the *Odyssey* is the product of Homer's later and less creative old age. He stresses the greater amount of dramatic action and greater intensity of emotions in the *Iliad*, as opposed to the predominance of romance, reminiscence and storytelling in the *Odyssey*. He also criticizes the impossible or magical tales, such as Aeolus imprisoning the winds in a bag: these almost naive fantasies offended later readers. Most important is his observation that 'with the decline of their emotional power (*pathos*) great writers and poets give way to character study (*ethos*).'<sup>9</sup> His character-sketches of daily life in Odysseus' household are like a kind of comedy of manners.' One may dissent from Longinus' verdict, but his comments have been hugely influential, and much that he says is extremely suggestive, both for Homer's poems and by implication for other works which draw on one or the other of them or which gravitate to one end or the other of this comparative scale.

Hesiod is regularly paired with Homer as one of the foundational figures of Greek poetry. The poems certainly his are the *Theogony* ('birth of the gods'), an account of the creation and the genealogies of the gods, focusing especially on the rise of Zeus as supreme ruler, and the *Works and Days*, which also has sections on the mythological origins of the world (here viewed from the perspective of man), but passes on to advice on morality and on the life of the hard-working farmer. Central to the *Works and Days* are the necessity of labour and of a prudential piety: the gods reward the work ethic. Both poems are labelled 'didactic' poetry by modern critics, but in ancient times Hesiod was usually classed as epic, and he is close to Homer in date and language, though both poems are much shorter than the Homeric epics, and his poetic style is less fluent ('hobnailed hexameters', in M. L. West's phrase) The pairing with Homer is partly explained in a famous comment by Herodotus: 'It is they [Hesiod and Homer] who by their poetry gave the Greeks a theogony and gave the gods their titles, who assigned to them their statuses and skills, and gave an idea of their appearance' (2.53). It is not literally true that Homer and Hesiod invented the whole elaborate pantheon of Olympus, but it is likely that they both made a substantial contribution. Homer anthropomorphizes the gods and presents them in action; Hesiod makes sense of their relationships, setting out for instance the succession myth by which the kingship of heaven passes from Uranus to Cronos to Zeus. The 1,000 lines of the *Theogony* include hundreds of names (50 daughters of the sea-god Nereus), many of which were doubtless Hesiod's invention. In some of his genealogies we can see a kind of mythical logic: Sleep and Death are the offspring of Night, while Themis ('Order') is the mother of Lawfulness, Justice and Peace. Neither allegory nor personification, these family structures associate related abstract ideas

and indicate their divine origin and authorization. Although he often seems artless to us, the solemnity and self-righteousness of Hesiod charmed more sophisticated generations of readers.

Hesiod also fascinates as a poet who tells us something of himself, even his name. Homer is anonymous and withdrawn, unless we choose to see hints about his way of life in the bards who figure in the *Odyssey*. Hesiod by contrast tells us where he lives (Ascra in Boeotia – ‘bad in winter, sultry in summer, and no good at any time’ is his grumpy verdict), a little about his father and a good deal, much of it negative, about his brother. Some see the dispute between them as a fiction, used as a springboard to introduce the moral rebukes and exhortations of the *Works and Days*. This may be right, but Hesiod still gives us a vivid sense of the vindictiveness that could arise from small-time inheritance quarrels in small-town communities. More influential is the opening of the *Theogony*, in which he describes his poetic initiation – an encounter on the mountainside with the Muses, who gave him a staff of laurel and ‘breathed wondrous song into me’. Poets in many early societies conceive their talent as the gods’ gift (Homer also refers to these ideas), and this belief in inspiration brings them respect from society, as the poetic craft comes close to that of prophet or priest. The Muses’ words as quoted are enigmatic enough: ‘Rustic shepherds, vile disgraces, mere bellies as you are, we know how to tell many lies that are like the truth, but we also know, when we wish, how to tell the truth.’ (*Th.* 26–8) Hesiod presumably wants us to accept his own poetry as truth, but the lines show an awareness that poetry is sometimes fiction, and point the way toward many a later criticism of poetic and mythical ‘lies’. Hesiod’s meeting with the Muses was much imitated, eventually becoming a literary cliché. In the *Theogony* it still has something of the freshness and mystery of a time when the hills were lonely places and a god might not be far away.

Hesiod was also believed to be the author of the *Catalogue of Women*, a poem which survives only in short fragments. In fact it was probably composed rather later than Hesiod, but shared some of his interests. This poem seems to have presented genealogies of human families, tracing the mythical heroes’ descent from divine ancestry and to some extent relating descent-lines to one another. Founders of cities and of larger communities were prominent: the poem reflects political concerns of the author’s own time without bringing the genealogies all the way down to the present day.<sup>10</sup> Whereas the *Theogony* gave order to the generations of the gods, the *Catalogue* performed a similar service for the generations of heroic humanity.

There were many other early poems, some on the wars of Thebes and the Argonautic expedition, others filling out the parts of the Trojan war which Homer had ignored; all are lost, though we know something of them from later summaries.<sup>11</sup> What matters is that a rich and varied range of myths and

characters, divine and human, was established, though not without variations in detail, and that this entire range was available to later poets for development and ingenious modification. The myths were common property, and poets could embark on them at almost any point with the confidence that audiences would know where they were. Even in Homer the characters appeal to earlier events for illustration, as Phoenix reminds Achilles of the tale of Meleager ('it is not a new story' (*Iliad* 9.527)). In that specific case, however, there is good reason to suppose that Homer is introducing a new version: inspiration does not rule out (perhaps indeed it authorizes) invention. As the accumulated literature became more bulky and poets became scholars, the audience might be in doubt whether a particular version had prior authority: Callimachus knowingly comments 'I sing nothing that is not attested' (fr.612), but the game is to spot the out-of-the-way source.

These considerations become relevant when we turn to the later period (for between Homer and Apollonius, a gap of over 400 years, we have no complete epic). Much had changed by the third century BC, when Apollonius was writing in Hellenistic Alexandria; but the modern idea that epic had become unfashionable or obsolescent is not well-founded in the evidence. Apollonius' *Argonautica* is in four books, totalling less than 6,000 lines (less than half the length of the *Odyssey*). It narrates the expedition of Jason and his followers in quest of the Golden Fleece, the precious relic of a magical ram, which is guarded by a monstrous serpent at the court of the sinister King Aetes in Colchis, at the far end of the Black Sea. Jason achieves his goal with the aid of the king's daughter Medea, who falls in love with him and joins him on the homeward voyage. Books 1 and 2 describe the journey to Colchis, book 3 focuses on Jason and Medea, and in book 4, having accomplished the task, the *Argo* returns to the West by a very different route, even travelling through Italian waters and transported by the crew across the Libyan desert. The *Odyssey* is the prime model, and above all the books describing Odysseus' travels and the supernatural adventures. Apollonius sets none of the poem in Greece: throughout, his heroes are involved with the exotic and the unknown. The Argonauts encounter many new dangers (such as the Harpies, who do not figure in Homer), but also find themselves facing Odyssean characters: Circe, the Sirens, the king and queen of Phaeacia. In all these cases, however, Apollonius changes mood and alters characterization or relationships. In the *Odyssey* Circe is an amoral witch-woman; in the *Argonautica*, a severe moral authority who must purify Jason and Medea of their crimes but still condemns their actions. This reworking with variation and innovation of Homer's model is Apollonius' regular practice on every level, including the verbal texture of the poem.<sup>12</sup>

From the start the poem is a mythographic paradise. The opening catalogue of Jason's companions gives the poet opportunity to allude to many strands of legend, either naming their origins, their ancestors or their prior exploits, in some cases anticipating their deaths (1.77ff.). Throughout the poem he is ready to allude, by passing reference or full digression, to tales which are tangentially connected to the main narrative, or to other stories associated with the regions through which the *Argo* passes. Sometimes these allusions are eerie and haunting, as when they pass the Caucasus and observe in mid-flight the great eagle that perpetually torments the Titan Prometheus: moments later they hear the dreadful screams of the victim (2.1242–59). At another stage they are granted a brief but majestic epiphany of the god Apollo, far away, journeying to the realm of the Hyperboreans (2.674–82). Other references have more the quality of learned footnotes (Apollonius was a scholar-poet, at one stage the head of the great Alexandrian Library). A good example comes when the poet gives a mythical explanation for the drops of amber that seep from poplar trees. He even offers variant versions: some say these are the tears of the sisters of Phaethon, others those of Apollo at a time when he was in exile from heaven (4.603–18, attributing the second story to 'the Celts'). His learning extends beyond mythology to ethnography and (sometimes fanciful) geography, drawing on a wide range of prose and poetic sources (e.g. 2.1002–29). Above all we find repeated aetiologies (explanations for why things came about, whether features of nature or human rituals and customs): the influence of his contemporary Callimachus, author of the *Actia*, is evident.<sup>13</sup>

The most popular part of the poem has always been the sequence in Colchis, involving Medea's gradual succumbing to love for Jason. For the history of epic this is a major novelty: the erotic had played no such major role in Homer and is unlikely to have been as prominent in his successors; but Apollonius' narrative powerfully influenced Virgil's Dido. Magic and the supernatural are conspicuous. In a delightful opening, Hera and Athena persuade Aphrodite to bribe her disobedient son Eros to shoot an arrow at Medea, making her fall in love: the whole episode is witty and charming, carrying to an extreme the Homeric divine comedy (3.6–166, 275–98). The light-heartedness of this introduction contrasts with the agonies of Medea throughout much of the book, expressed through similes, soliloquies, wish-fulfilment dreams and tearful colloquy with her sister (above all 3.449–71, 616–824). The meeting of Jason and Medea is a subtle scene in which successive exchanges show each testing the ground, neither speaking their full mind at first. Jason, initially prepared to make use of Medea, himself falls in love with her (1078). But deception and half-truths characterize their dialogue, and we have already seen in book 1 that Jason, an adaptable lover, is prepared to leave his women. When he appeals for Medea's

help invoking the example of Ariadne, who readily assisted Theseus (a mythical anachronism of the kind that delights the poets of this period), Jason wisely omits the crucial point that Theseus later abandoned her, and maintains his discretion on this point even when Medea presses to know more of the story (3.997ff., 1074–6). No reader would have been unaware of the eventual disastrous end of Jason and Medea's relationship: the classic tragedy of Euripides is a major forerunner of Apollonius' poem, and although he does not take the tale that far, there are signs enough that their union is imperfect and ill-starred (4.1161–9).

One other major contribution of Apollonius deserves emphasis: his readiness to intervene as commentator in his own poem. Traditionally the epic narrator had been invisible, detached though not impersonal. In Homer the exceptions are rare and hence particularly powerful: most notable is the device of 'apostrophe' by which the poet addresses a character, normally a sympathetic or favourite figure at a turning-point in the action. In the *Iliad* this is used with special force in the case of Patroclus, whom the poet addresses several times (esp. 16.692–3: 'now whom first, whom last, Patroclus, did you slay at that time when the gods called you to your death?', 787). But Apollonius thrusts himself and his poetic activity on the audience's attention far more frequently, sometimes with boldly bizarre effect. At times he expresses his astonishment, bafflement or dismay at the turn the story is taking, or draws back with mannered piety from uttering something blasphemous (1.919–21, 4.984–6). Elsewhere he expresses foreboding or anticipates subsequent events (in this too he has Homeric precedent, but carries the device further). Sombre moralizing strikes an appropriate note at the night when, under unhappy circumstances, Medea and Jason become man and wife: 'so we tribes of suffering men never tread firmly on the path of delight, but always there is some bitter pain accompanying our joy' (4.1165–7). Most striking is the famous denunciation of Love itself – a darker and more potent figure, now, than the whimsical child of the scene that opens book 3. As Jason and Medea prepare to ambush and murder her brother Apsyrtus, the poet suspends the action and declares:

Ruthless Love, great hurt, great curse to mankind, from you come deadly strifes and laments and groans, and countless pains as well have their stormy birth from you. Arise, power divine, and arm yourself against the sons of our foes after the same fashion as when you filled Medea's heart with deadly madness. How then, by evil doom, did she slay Apsyrtus when he came to meet her? For this is what comes next in my song. (4.445–51)

The involvement of the poet in his poem produces a complex effect: emotional heightening, certainly, but this is also countered by the editorial

glossing and self-conscious reference to the sequence of his own epic; and given the overt criticism of Medea's killing, the appeal to Eros to strike down the poet's own enemies' sons is morally disorienting. The *Argonautica* sets a precedent which will be followed with caution by Virgil, and carried to still more startling extremes by Ovid and above all by Lucan, whose comments on the action often threaten to displace the narrative proper. Though often disparaged or patronized (Longinus damned it as a work of the second rank – too perfect, as opposed to the bolder spirit of sublime Homer), Apollonius' poem is a key work in the epic succession.

Epic was always long, but it was possible to tell shorter tales in hexameters and using many of the customary devices of epic style. Moderns use the term 'epyllion' or 'mini-epic' to describe a group of poems, not all surviving, of which the best known is Catullus' *Peleus and Thetis*, a work of 400-odd lines.<sup>14</sup> The form seems to have originated in Hellenistic times: Moschus' *Europa*, a short but delightful work, survives from that period, as do fragments of Callimachus' *Hecale*. Though myth provided the material, the emphasis was often significantly different from that of full-scale epic: more emphasis on personal emotions, and especially on the erotic; sometimes greater interest in rural life or unheroic activities; always intense refinement of style and exquisite composition. Narrative technique was often boldly unconventional, avoiding the apparent core of the tale: thus Callimachus seems to have made Theseus' visit to the humble home of an old countrywoman Hecale the main focus of his epyllion (he stayed there en route to kill the Marathonian bull). Homely detail and personal reminiscence were more prominent than heroic action. This example and others show that epyllion is almost epic turned inside out. Moschus' poem lingers on Europa's dream, her visit to the seaside, her games with her maidens: the model is the Princess Nausicaa in book 6 of the *Odyssey*, but what was a brief episode in Homer's massive epic becomes the main focus in Moschus.

Catullus' epyllion is at least as bizarre: it begins with the Argo but swiftly moves to the marriage of Peleus and Thetis, then spends half the poem describing the scenes on a coverlet adorning their marriage-couch, scenes from the independent tale of Theseus and Ariadne. Theseus deserted Ariadne, Thetis will in due course abandon Peleus; other correspondences and resonances have been sought, and the whole poem, its verbal texture as rich as its structure is complex, seems to be devised as an entrancing riddle. This device of including a separate but subtly related tale (also used on a smaller scale in Moschus) seems to have become fashionable, and is developed in larger works: thus the end of Virgil's *Georgics* tells the story of Aristaeus, which encloses the story of Orpheus and Eurydice, with which it was surely not previously linked. These Russian-doll structures particularly delighted Ovid, who in one passage achieves a four-level *tour de force* (*Met.* 5.577ff.),

with direct speech in the innermost tale by Arethusa, as narrated by Calliope, herself being quoted by another Muse, and the poet's own narrative voice embracing all of these. The other feature which Catullus' poem highlights is the so-called *ecphrasis*, a word signifying digression, but frequently applied to a special type, the description of a work of art (here, the coverlet's images). Achilles' shield in the *Iliad* is the ultimate model: Jason's cloak, Europa's beach-bag, and the images on Juno's temple in *Aeneid* I are other famous instances. The image always has more than decorative purpose, but the interpretation is rarely straightforward, thus cautioning the critic against complacency in 'reading' the larger meaning of the poem as a whole.

### III

Roman culture was more militaristic than Greek: the very name of Rome was sometimes etymologized as meaning 'Might', and the image of a she-wolf suckling the twins Romulus and Remus suggests a certain pride in the primitive violence with which their society had begun. Roman epic is more concerned with concepts of empire and conquest than with exploration and adventure for its own sake. We also see a deep fascination with *civil* wars: Virgil represents the war in Italy as a civil war, as Aeneas is returning to his ancestral roots, and Lucan constantly brings kinsmen, even fathers and sons, into conflict. The climax of Statius' *Thebaid* is fratricide: again, we remember the founding fathers and how Romulus killed his brother Remus for daring to cross the civic boundary. Prowess leads to excess, and excess to self-destruction.

As in Greek, so in Latin we find epic at the very origins of the nation's literary tradition, with Livius Andronicus' version of the *Odyssey* in Latin. Although often referred to as a translation, the scanty fragments do show some adjustments and an effort to give the Homeric language a Latin flavouring. This went further than alterations of names to their Latin forms. A clever instance of creative adaptation is the line 'when the day arrives which Morta has foretold' (F 10 Morel), in which Morta, an Italian god of death, replaces the similar but unrelated word *moira* ('fate') in the Greek (*Odyssey* 3.238), and 'foretold' is an addition. Livius used the saturnian metre, a shorter line than the hexameter: so did Naevius, another figure of the third century, in his seven-book epic about the first Carthaginian war. Naevius seems to have dealt with the origins of Rome: he certainly included the tale of Aeneas in a long digression and probably also covered the origins of Carthage. This makes him an intriguing predecessor of Virgil, who evidently knew his work. But Naevius' work was overshadowed by that of a greater poet, Ennius, who adopted the hexameter. He was a poet of immense range and diversity – not only epic but tragedy, satire, epigram,

even a Latin version of the comical poem about the pleasures of the table by Archestratus of Gela, the doyen of Greek foodies.

But his epic, the 18-book *Annals*, was clearly his masterpiece.<sup>15</sup> We have some 600 lines, but many of these are short phrases or single verses. This was a chronological account of Roman history beginning in mythic times and coming down to his own day (like Ovid in the *Metamorphoses*, but in grander and more patriotic vein). Its structure is not wholly beyond reconstruction. By the end of book 3 he had reached the founding of the Republic; the wars against the Greek states bulked large from book 7 onwards. Originally the poem (again like Ovid's) consisted of 15 books, the last three being added later: book 15 reached a climax with the events of 189 BC and the successes of his patron Fulvius Nobilior. Some books (1, 7 and 16) included prologues in which he stated his poetic programme: in one important passage he describes himself as initiated by the Muses in a dream (the Hesiodic allusion is patent; Ennius evidently also knew Callimachus' imitation). In another he declares himself the first true scholar writing in Latin: the phrasing, 'dicti studiosus', echoes the Greek word *philologos*. Ennius thus proclaims himself the successor of the Greek masters, even the reincarnation of Homer. The overall quality of the *Annals* is hard to judge. On the one hand we find lumpy Latin and thumping metre, on the other passages of remarkable energy and beauty (notably a 10-line passage concerning Ilia, the mother of Romulus and Remus, describing a dream which prefigures her rape by the god Mars). His impact on later poetry was immense, though sophisticates such as Ovid might dismiss him as artless.<sup>16</sup>

With the *Aeneid* of Virgil, left unfinished at the poet's death in 19 BC, we reach one of the real landmarks of ancient literature. Virgil clearly conceived it as *the* Roman national epic, an attempt to match Homer. In his earlier works he refers to his own poetic ambitions, and he is conscious of composing it at a key period in his country's history. The triumph of Octavian over Antony in 31 had brought the civil wars to (as it proved) a lasting conclusion, and the victor, styling himself as a benevolent constitutional ruler or first citizen, was bringing peace, prosperity and order to a war-weary nation. Whatever he may at one time have contemplated, however, Virgil did not compose an epic about Octavian/Augustus. The *Aeneid* views recent history through a mythical perspective. In 12 books it narrates the fall of Troy (book 2, one of the finest parts of the poem) and the journey of Trojan refugees to the west, where they are destined to settle in Italy and where the descendants of Aeneas, their leader, will found Rome and build a worldwide empire. The opening words, 'arma virumque cano' ('my song is of arms [warfare] and of a man') echo the themes of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* (*andra*, 'a man', being the first word of the *Odyssey*). In a single poem Virgil imitates both the canonical Homeric epics, though reversing the order. The

first half of the *Aeneid* (describing the wanderings of Aeneas and his followers) owes more to the *Odyssey*, the second (focusing on war in Italy) to the *Iliad*. Major episodes are reworked with complex variations: the funeral games, the visit to the underworld, the catalogues of forces and the forging of divine armour for the hero. The compression of the material is evident, with 48 Homeric books being transformed into 12. Although imitation of Homeric scenes, language and personalities is constantly visible, the process involves a rethinking of the model, not mere reproduction. Above all, the heroic vision is adapted to Roman contexts and values.

Most important, Virgil's very theme involves a long historical perspective. This is absent from Homer, who does not attempt to relate his narrative to the world of his own time: at most, there is an occasional statement that one of the heroes can achieve feats of strength 'such as two men on the earth today could not perform'. Virgil by contrast is constantly seeing the future (his own present) in the past: the actions of Aeneas will determine the destiny of generations yet unborn. The Hellenistic interest in *aetia* or origins is influential: mythical origins are given for many place names, cults, institutions (the Gates of War, the recently revived 'Trojan games'); Aeneas' son Iulus will be the ancestor of the Julian dynasty, to which both Julius Caesar and Augustus belonged, and other Roman families are also traced to Trojan prototypes (as was fashionable in the period). The origins of future conflicts are shown, with Greece and above all with Carthage, which Rome will eventually destroy. The whole poem is, indeed, the foundation-myth or *action* of Rome, although we do not reach that actual point. The Romans had two conflicting foundation-myths, that which concerned Aeneas and the story of Romulus and Remus; various ways of reconciling them were found. Ennius had made Romulus Aeneas' grandson, but Virgil, influenced by contemporary research in early chronology, extends the time-line drastically. Aeneas will reign in Italy for three years, his son for 30 (founding Alba Longa), and another 300 years must pass before the founding of Rome itself. (The number 3 has semi-magical resonances.) But Aeneas is granted glimpses of the distant future, and even visits the site of Rome, still a mere village of primitive huts, but fraught with a mighty destiny.

The fiery sun had mounted the middle of the sky's curve when they observed walls, a citadel and scattered houses: now the power of Rome has raised them to heaven's height, but in those days Evander inhabited them, a paltry domain. (8.97–100)

The expansion of historical perspective is one way in which Virgil develops the Homeric forms in new directions: another is the Romanizing of the genre. Ennius in a much-quoted line had said that 'the Roman state stands upon its ancient customs and men' (467 W). Following Ennius, Virgil set

Roman virtues and values at the centre of the work. The first extended simile of the poem is a fine example. It was conventional for similes to reflect a more everyday world than the main narrative (thus making it more intelligible); anachronisms sometimes also figured. Virgil inverts the normal simile-narrative pattern: instead of using nature to illuminate man, he does the opposite. The calming of the storm at sea by Neptune and his entourage is compared with a civic riot which is pacified by the moral authority of a virtuous statesman – a simile which has no precedent in Homer.

Just as has often happened among a great people, when a rebellious spirit emerges, and the ignoble mob grows savage at heart: now they fling fire and stones, as madness supplies them with weapons; but then, should they catch sight of some figure who claims authority through his sense of duty and his past good deeds, they fall silent and stand attentive; he governs their hearts with his words and soothes their passions. Even so the clamour of the sea subsided . . . (1.148–54)

The hero of the *Aeneid* must be a governor and a lawgiver, not an egocentric warrior.

The divine pantheon is also modified. Homer had presented the Olympian gods as a family of quick-tempered individualists, frequently ordered or bullied into line by Zeus. Although fate and foreknowledge play a part in reinforcing suspense, there is little suggestion in the *Iliad* that ‘the plan of Zeus’ involves more than fulfilling Thetis’ request: at most, it extends to the destruction of Troy. In the *Aeneid* the stakes are higher, and the gods more formidable. It is the will of Jupiter that Rome shall be founded and conquer the world: by a bold stride of imagination, Virgil makes the Roman dominion analogous to, and a central part of, the cosmic world order.<sup>17</sup> Fate, seemingly identical with Jupiter’s ordinance, can be delayed but not averted. The opponents of fate are formidable, however: whereas in the *Iliad* Hera in some scenes was hardly more than an indignant wife, in the *Aeneid* Juno, her Roman equivalent, is a vengeful and daemonic figure, ready to defy the will of fate and prepared to call on forces of chaos and disorder, even to unleash the powers of the underworld (‘If I cannot sway heaven, I shall let hell loose’, 7.312). It is naturally tempting to see the poem in polar terms of good versus evil, fate versus counter-fate, but Virgil denies us any such simplicity. At the end of the poem Jupiter and Juno come to terms, but only (it seems) temporarily: Juno will oppose Rome again in the future, by supporting Carthage in her wars, and Jupiter settles the combat between Aeneas and Turnus by unleashing a Fury, a horrific creature disturbingly reminiscent of Allecto, Juno’s emissary earlier in the poem.<sup>18</sup>

The structure of the *Aeneid* is designed to emphasize the progress of Aeneas and his followers. From the nadir of their fortunes, homeless and

wretched, they must make their way to a new land and re-establish themselves. At first constantly looking backward to the home they have lost, they gradually become more conscious of the purpose of their journey: Aeneas in particular gains in maturity and confidence to face the further obstacles and achieve his mission. It is made clear that there must be no compromises with destiny: the new city cannot be a mere recreation of Troy, nor can Aeneas be allowed to divert to the promising new foundation of Carthage, where Dido welcomes them and offers them a partnership in her city. Aeneas' affair with Dido, and his subsequent desertion of her, has outraged countless readers (book 4). Many Romans would have read it differently: although Dido is an attractive and sympathetic figure, her role as queen of Carthage makes her an ancestral enemy, and her passionate emotions must be rejected by the resolute hero. Uncontrolled passion leads to violence, and is always suspect in Virgil. The equally emotional Turnus, Aeneas' chief foe and foil in the second half, shows this still more clearly. Although humanly sympathetic, these opponents of Rome must be resisted; but the poet does not deny that their deaths are cause for sorrow. The development of Aeneas involves self-sacrifice, even a kind of dehumanization. That the hero seems less accessible, less of a 'well-rounded character', in the second half of the poem is surely part of Virgil's design: Aeneas has made the transition from being an individual to his true role as leader of a people. Characterization is here shaped by ideology.

The *Aeneid* foretells the future triumphs of Rome and foreshadows the achievements of Augustus in numerous ways. Aeneas holds funeral games in memory of his father, not only because Homer's Achilles held them in honour of Patroclus, but because Augustus similarly commemorated his adopted father Julius Caesar: the *Aeneid* looks both ways, to the epic past and the historical future. Most obvious are the prophetic passages in which Jupiter and Anchises predict later events; on the same scale is the description of Aeneas' shield, forged by Vulcan, on which are set images of future Roman victories. Central is the battle of Actium, glorified as a divinely ordained victory of Western civilization over the barbaric gods and deadly queen of Egypt. The reign of Augustus is envisaged as a golden age of peace and civilizing government. The patriotic note, however, is less strident than this sounds. Virgil often hints at suffering and loss, even failure, along the path to greatness. Even Aeneas is a figure who performs his duty rather than achieving contentment. He has lost his former home, his father, wife and lover; he will live only three years after the poem ends, wedded to a wife whose mother has just hung herself in despair at the impending triumph of the Trojans, and whose suitor, Turnus, he has violently killed; he will not see the greatness that is to come. Although he admires the images on the shield, he does not grasp their meaning as Virgil's reader

can: 'ignorant of the matter, he delights in the image, as he hoists on his shoulder the renown and the destiny of his grandchildren' (8.730–1). The symbolism is unmistakable: Aeneas is the vehicle of destiny, but its full interpretation is beyond his reach.

Long critical wars have raged over the degree to which Virgil was or was not an 'Augustan' poet, whether he did or did not wholeheartedly support the new regime. The debate has often been insufficiently nuanced: talk of Virgil as 'anti-Augustan' or 'subversive' is crude and implausible. But the *Aeneid* does not present a simple picture, and its narrative allows for conflicts that end in loss and tragedy.<sup>19</sup> The arrival of the Trojans brings war to a land of seemingly pastoral tranquillity (7.46). The pet deer of the Italian girl Silvia is slain in a hunting expedition by Iulus (7.475–510). Aeneas performs human sacrifice, executing eight Italian youths in recompense for a dead friend (11.81). The Trojans hack down indiscriminately a tree sacred to the Italian country god Faunus, 'so that they might fight on an open plain' (12.771). Perhaps most memorable, together with the abrupt and disturbing close of the poem (where Aeneas kills Turnus in a vengeful fit of rage), is the earlier scene in which the hero faces the youthful Lausus. This young warrior is fighting in defence of his father, but in a frenzy of battle-rage Aeneas sneers at his pious devotion ('it will be your undoing' 10.812) and runs the boy through without hesitation. Yet piety is Aeneas' own supreme quality: his most famous mythical act is to rescue his aged father from the destruction of Troy, bearing him to safety on his shoulders. In this scene his mood alters in the moment after the killing:

when the son of Anchises saw the visage of the dying lad, saw the face, that face growing miraculously pale, he moaned deeply with pity, stretching forth his hand, and the picture of devotion to a father filled his thoughts. 'Pitiable boy, what shall the pious Aeneas give you now, a fitting reward for your praiseworthy acts, for so noble a character?' (10.821–6)

Too late he sees that the piety which he mocked should have created a bond between them. The winning side does not have a monopoly on Roman virtues.

The *Aeneid* celebrates the greatness of Rome and her people, but that does not exclude compassion for those who have been swept aside or annihilated in her imperial advance. The public achievement outshines but does not wholly mask personal griefs. In general the poem seems to endorse imperialism but deplore the tragedies of war, a difficult position to sustain. Subsequent epic, above all Lucan, widens the faultlines in the *Aeneid's* outlook.

Virgil was a famous figure in his own lifetime and the *Aeneid* became immediately established as a classic, a position it has never lost, though

occasionally overshadowed by the periodic rediscovery of Homer. The beauty of his style and his mastery of language made him central to the Latin curriculum; because he was prescribed as the standard to emulate, it has not always been clear to readers how individual and startling his style actually is (it was not admired by all contemporaries). His reputation was raised further by the belief that he was in some sense a Christian poet before his time, a notion partly supported by the spiritual vision of *Aeneid* 6, in which the Homeric underworld is enriched with Platonic and mystical doctrines of reincarnation, but still more by the so-called ‘Messianic’ *Eclogue* 4 of around 40 BC, a poem which predicts a new era associated with the birth of a marvellous child (possibly the expected son of Antony and Octavia). This was read as signifying that Virgil, best of the pagans, had been granted a vision of the coming Christ (the idea is first found in a speech ascribed to the Emperor Constantine).<sup>20</sup> Hence the medieval idea of Virgil as a magician or sage, and the role of the poet as Dante’s guide through the Inferno and Purgatory. Because Virgil was not himself a Christian, he cannot go further, and Dante’s beloved Beatrice must take over the task in Paradise. The idea of Virgil as in some way a proto-Christian was given a fresh lease on life in two puzzling but influential essays by Eliot;<sup>21</sup> Pound and Graves vigorously dissented from his high evaluation of the Roman poet. But whatever value is set on his work and whatever the upshot of the perpetual comparison with Homer (a topic which already bored Juvenal in the salons of learned ladies), Virgil is one of the indispensable figures in European literary history.

#### IV

In a famous autobiographical poem written late in life, Ovid tells us that he knew and heard Horace and Propertius, but ‘Virgil I only saw’ (*Tristia* 4.10). He was nearly 30 years Virgil’s junior, and would have been in his early 20s when the *Aeneid* was published. His own poetry was profoundly influenced by Virgil from the start, but in his epic he deliberately produced a work as unlike the *Aeneid* as possible. The *Metamorphoses*, an extravaganza of mythology in 15 books, is his only hexameter work, and shows the mentality of an elegist (which at this date meant principally a love poet). Well over 200 mythical tales are narrated, and there are allusions to many more. Some are told at considerable length – the story of Phaethon is one of the longest, at over 400 lines – but many others are disposed of more swiftly (the grim tale of Marsyas is over in less than 20 lines). Ovid does not allow us to become too preoccupied with a single situation: there is no ‘hero’ to the *Metamorphoses*. No poem is so readily anthologized. The

structure is ostensibly chronological: he claims that he will bring his continuous verse from the origins of the cosmos down to his own day, and indeed the last three books do bring us from the Greek world to Italy. The last book culminates in the deification of Caesar and (anticipated) Augustus, with Ovid's own immortality providing the coping-stone. This design is however frequently disrupted by devices such as digression or the narration of unrelated events by a character, or a series of characters: dinner-party conversation in book 8 produces several narratives, and the whole of book 10 consists of Orpheus' lament for his dead wife, in which he recounts numerous other erotic tales, mostly tragic.

The tone of the *Metamorphoses* is no less erratic. Only gradually is the novelty of the poem revealed, for the opening lines give little away other than referring to the theme of transformation and the broad time scheme. The first episodes describe the initial forming of the world from chaos, the creation of living things, the early history of the gods: these sections have a more traditional epic flavour, mingled with Lucretian language. A council of the gods introduces Jupiter in judgemental mood, calling for the punishment of the evil King Lycaon: his metamorphosis into a wolf is deserved and appropriate (233ff.), and this creates an expectation of moral deities and punishment that will suit the crime. Similarly the story of the flood, from which the virtuous Deucalion and Pyrrha are saved, shows righteousness rewarded. But after Apollo has slain the monstrous Python, we are told that 'the first love of Phoebus was Daphne, daughter of the river god' (452), and the poet embarks on a more light-hearted erotic tale of pursuit and loss through metamorphosis (a recurring story-type in the poem); a lively narrative style, a more indulgent moral outlook, and a more extensive and ingenious use of speeches appear. The lighter treatment of the Olympians is also characteristic. A great German critic has remarked that Homer's gods display 'sublime frivolity':<sup>22</sup> Virgil chose to enhance the sublime side, while Ovid puts the emphasis on frivolity. The gods cannot serve as moral authorities in this epic. Nor can the poet. Ovid declines to allow us either moral or narrative stability: the shifting subject and tone of the *Metamorphoses* are as fluid as the physical forms the poem transmogrifies.

The subject of metamorphosis has some background in Hellenistic literature. For Ovid, it provided a convenient way of combining a variety of colourful and vividly imagined tales from countless sources. For many of these, his is the best or most famous version: Daphne, Phaethon, Actaeon, Callisto, Cephalus and Procris, Midas' golden touch, Perseus and Andromeda. Shakespeare is only his most distinguished debtor.<sup>23</sup> Metamorphosis offers ample scope for humorous grotesquerie, and Ovid relishes the opportunity to describe human flesh and limbs morphing into wings and feathers, branches and leaves, flower and stem. His hapless characters may become spiders,

magpies, frogs, ants, bats, snakes or streams, while mischievous aetiologies are provided for the hyacinth and the partridge. In most cases the story ends with the alteration of form. Few recover their former shape, although they may continue to perform their characteristic functions (as Arachne, punished for rivalling Minerva's art at embroidery, continues to weave patterns in spider-web form). Seldom is the change a positive one, though happy endings do occur: the change of Pygmalion's statue into a living woman who becomes his wife is one case; another is the tale of Ianche, a girl who has been raised as a boy but fortunately undergoes a sex change on the eve of her marriage to a woman (10.243–97, 9.666–797). More often the change of form is used as a means to defuse a horrific situation and dissipate the tragic pathos which the poet has generated (as when Acis, slain by the jealous Cyclops, is magically restored to life as a river-deity, 13.885ff.). In some stories the metamorphosis is an afterthought, justifying the inclusion of the tale at all (as in the story of Meleager, where it is his sisters, not the youth himself, who are transformed, 8. 533–46). In others a kind of pseudo-metamorphosis occurs, as in the opening book when chaos is shaped into order, or in the tale of Daedalus and Icarus, when the two humans only mimic birds, or *seem* to be gods to an amazed observer (8.220).

How seriously are we meant to take the fantastic events that Ovid narrates? We can be fairly sure that his audience would not have been credulous; elsewhere he himself calls these stories unbelievable.<sup>24</sup> Skilful technique and ingenious modification of literary models matter much more than putting across any kind of message, whether moral or metaphysical. The great qualities of the *Metamorphoses* are wit, pathos and rhetoric, together with abundant gifts for visual description (fortunately Ovid found his ideal illustrator in Rubens). For the duration of a given tale we may suspend our disbelief and respond fully to the force of the character's situation, but the poet's clever editorializing often complicates the effect. Ovid may intervene parenthetically to express shock – or scepticism (1.400 'who would believe it, if ancient tradition did not stand witness?'; 8.721 'this is what the old men told (there was no reason they should wish to lie about it)'). Macabre and horrific episodes are common, though our capacity to empathize may be diminished by the flashes of humour or paradox. The flaying of Marsyas at the command of angry Apollo is potentially a horrendous scene, but Ovid gives him an outrageously clever line: 'why do you tear me from myself?' 6.385). The 'pointed' style (p. 215) is characteristic of his work, and is not confined to the speeches. But although many scenes are played for laughs, there is still beauty and often intense pathos in Ovid's treatment of innocence violated, painful dilemmas, agonies of indecision, fear and desire. In the disturbing story of Myrrha, who lusts for her own father, he skates jauntily over dark waters: the soliloquy of the girl as she

struggles with her passion is typically ingenious, but the scenes in which her nurse acts as pander, makes her father drunk and entices him to sleep with a young girl in his wife's absence show a keen insight into human weakness (esp. 10.463–71). Ovid is not simply a wit and a cynic, but in many passages it is clear that a smile is the appropriate response.

Although Ovid undertook to bring the epic down to his own time, the Roman dimension of the poem is less than wholeheartedly patriotic. In the sections which run parallel with his predecessor, his flirtation with the *Aeneid* is deliberately provocative: he fills in gaps left by Virgil, while avoiding the high points. Virgil's detailed narrative of the fall of Troy is among his greatest achievements; Ovid disposes of the city in four words (13. 404, 'Troy fell, Priam too'), and then moves on to the metamorphosis of Hecuba. Dido dominates two books of the *Aeneid*, a mere four lines of Ovid (14.78–81). Aeneas is viewed from a distance, and utters no word in Ovid's version. The wooing of the wood-nymph Pomona by the rural god Vertumnus gets much more attention than the career of Romulus (14.622–771). Throughout, Ovid frustrates the reader's expectations; even in patriotic mode, he does not deny himself sly witticisms and irreverent paradoxes. Julius Caesar and his adoptive son Augustus must both be praised: Ovid does so by declaring that Julius, now divine, observes Augustus' deeds and admits that they are superior to his own: 'he rejoices to be surpassed by him. Yet the son forbids his own deeds to be set above his father's; nevertheless, fame, unfettered and obedient to no man, exalts him in spite of his desire, and in this one thing opposes his commands.' (15.850–4). This is a compliment, but a typically ingenious and perhaps, to Augustus, a faintly annoying one. Hellenistic wit displaces Augustan propriety.

The *Aeneid*, as we have seen, was a work which instantly dominated the literary scene; it could not be ignored. Ovid reacted to it by turning to the romantic, the exotic, the supernatural and the erotic. The response of Lucan in his poem *On the Civil War* (between Pompey and Caesar) was more radical, in both political and generic terms: far more than Ovid he may be said to have composed an 'anti-*Aeneid*'. Left unfinished at his death, his poem is one of the most extraordinary works in ancient literature. In originality of conception and style it surpasses any of the other late epics (his contemporary Statius comes closest). The poem breaks off in the tenth book: presumably it would have run to 12, like the *Aeneid*. It is a historical account of the campaigns leading up to the battle of Pharsalus (book 7), which ended with Caesar victorious and Pompey in flight: in book 8 Pompey is murdered in Egypt. In book 9 much attention is focused on the Republican leader Cato, who figures only rarely earlier but now takes on the role of Caesar's chief opponent. It may be guessed that the poem would have ended with Cato's heroic last stand and Stoic suicide at Utica in Africa,

an iconic moment. Lucan's history (drawn mainly from the now-lost books of Livy) is often selective or distorted; he neglects important episodes, exaggerates trivial ones, alters places and personalities to suit his needs (thus Cicero, unhistorically, is present at the field of Pharsalus). Historical precision was never his aim. What he presents is an apocalyptic vision of the dying Republic, as the Roman people first commit themselves to fratricidal civil war and then are plunged into slavery (his repeated term) as subjects of the tyrannical empire inaugurated by Caesar. Whereas Virgil had celebrated Rome's new golden age under Augustus, Lucan laments the loss of liberty and the virtual immolation of the Roman people. He is a powerful reminder that epic, like history, need not be simply the story as told by the victorious side.<sup>25</sup>

Lucan is strongly influenced not only by Ovidian wit and point but by the even sharper theatrical style (and the Stoic outlook) of his uncle Seneca. Like Senecan tragedy, Lucan's epic cultivates the rhetorical and the macabre. Although he deliberately excludes the gods in the sense of not introducing scenes in which deities observe or intervene in the human drama, he relishes episodes involving ecstatic prophecy or consultation of oracular sources: but the insights provided are either ignored or useless. A major set piece is the scene in book 6 where one of Pompey's sons tries to discover the future. In some respects this scene inverts the central underworld episode in the equivalent book of Virgil. Whereas Aeneas had sought the aid of the austere Sibyl, Apollo's prophetess, Sextus Pompeius consults the loathsome witch Erichtho, who, in a scene which Lucan deliberately makes as repulsive as possible, reanimates a corpse on the nearby battlefield and forces it to reveal what the shades of the underworld know of the future. Where Aeneas was consoled and reassured by Anchises' positive vision of future Roman greatness, the dead man demoralizes Pompeius by describing how all the virtuous Roman dead are in despair, while past villains such as Catiline and the Cethegi are exulting at the prospect of Caesar's victory. Sextus is assured that places are being kept in Hades for him and his father: 'be not troubled by the glory of a short life; . . . make haste to die' (6.805–7).

The manic energy of Lucan's verse reflects the dynamism of the anti-hero Caesar: although driven by ambition and malice, he is a better fighter than the older and ineffective Pompey. A superb passage early in the poem characterizes the opponents at length:

The two rivals were ill-matched. The one was tamed by declining years; for long he had worn the toga and forgotten in peace the leader's part; . . . the mere shadow of a mighty name he stood. Just as an oak-tree, laden with the ancient trophies of a nation, the consecrated gifts of conquerors, towers in a fertile field; but the roots it clings by have lost their toughness and it stands by

its weight alone . . . though it totters doomed to fall at the first gale, while many trees with sound timber rise beside it, yet it alone is revered. But Caesar had more than a mere name and fame as a commander; his energy could never rest, and his one disgrace was to conquer without war. Alert and headstrong, he answered with arms any summons of ambition or resentment; he never shrank from using the sword, followed up every success, and snatched at the favour of fortune, overthrowing everything that blocked his path to supreme power, and rejoicing to clear the way by destruction. Even so the lightning is driven forth by wind through the clouds . . . it flashes out and cracks the daylight sky, striking fear and terror into mankind and dazzling the eye with slanting flame; . . . falling and returning it spreads destruction far and wide, and gathers again its scattered fires. (1.129–57, extracts; Duff's tr., modified)

Even those who are doubtful of the value of biography-based criticism find it hard to deny the relevance of Lucan's career, since he was executed (or rather, forced to commit suicide, in the manner of the day) for treason against Nero, having been implicated in the conspiracy of Piso in 65; in the subsequent purge his father and his uncle Seneca were also forced to kill themselves (Tacitus, *Annals* 15.70). Other traditions, if reliable, are also interesting – that the conspiracy had a Stoic side to it, that the corrupt emperor was to be replaced by the philosopher Seneca, that Lucan and Nero had already fallen out, or that the emperor was jealous of the young man's poetic talent. It is a perennial puzzle that the poem opens with hyperbolic praise of Nero as Lucan's inspirational genius: the high-flown imagery recalls the prologue to Virgil's *Georgics*. Some read the passage as ironic, while others think it pre-dates the quarrel with Nero. Whatever the truth, there are small grounds for seeing the rest of the poem as holding back in any way from indictment of tyranny. Lucan constantly intrudes on the narrative, protesting at the events he is forced to narrate, underlining the significance of the action, denouncing the agents and the consequences. Apostrophe, used sparingly by his predecessors, now figures on every page: the poet thrusts himself into the action. Addressing Caesar, he even refers to Pharsalia as 'our' battle – that is, 'fought by you and recounted by me' (9.985). In this as in other stylistic techniques (metre, vocabulary, profuseness with epigram) he is anti-Virgilian.

In Homer and Virgil it is common for the poet to linger on the death of even a minor figure, reminding us that each individual has dependants, a wife, a home, something they have lost. A Homeric example is the following:

He went after Xanthus and Thoon, sons of Phaenops, both late-born. Their father was worn out by cruel age, and he had no other sons for his possessions after him. Then Diomedes slew them and robbed them of their lives, both of them; to their father he left lamentation and bitter sorrow, for he did not

welcome them home returning from battle, and distant kinsmen divided the estate. (5.152ff.)

Precisely this individual attention is rejected by Lucan in a memorable passage which also illustrates his love of the gruesome, his emphatic, demanding rhetoric, and the stark simplemindedness of his historical perspective.

When the world is dying I feel shame to spend my tears  
 on the innumerable deaths and to follow individuals' destinies  
 questioning, whose guts did the fatal wound  
 pass through? who trampled on his vitals spilling on the ground?  
 . . . who strikes his brother's  
 breast, cuts off the head, and throws it far away  
 so he can plunder the familiar corpse? who mangles  
 his father's face and proves to those who watch by his excessive wrath  
 that the man he slaughters is not his father? No death deserves  
 its own lament; we have no space to grieve for individuals.  
 . . . From this battle the people received a mightier wound  
 than their own time could bear; more was lost than life  
 and safety: for all the world's eternity we are prostrated.  
 Every age which will suffer slavery is conquered by these swords.  
 How did the next generation and the next deserve  
 to be born into tyranny? Did we wield weapons or shield  
 our throats in fear and trembling? The punishment of others' fear  
 sits heavy on our necks. If, Fortune, you intended to give a master  
 to those born after battle, you should also have given us a chance to fight.  
 (7.617–46, with omissions; tr. Braund)

Lucan loves digressions, is addicted to curious learning, and constantly indulges the age's devotion to paradox, sometimes to the point of perversity. The reader needs as far as possible to adopt the poet's own extravagant mind-set in order to reap the rewards that the poem has to offer – but they are considerable.

Lucan's was the most iconoclastic of the Latin epics. His younger but longer-lived contemporary Statius paid tribute to him in an admiring commemoration (*Silvae* 2.7), but his own epic the *Thebaid* (probably published about AD 91) took a step or two back towards epic orthodoxy. In particular, Statius reverted to mythical subject matter and fully reinstated the gods as overseers and participants in the poem (Lucan's bold exclusion of the Olympians clearly raised critical eyebrows).<sup>26</sup> In other ways he was certainly much influenced by Lucan (and by Seneca's dark tragedies, some of which covered material related to his own). The influence is discernible in his choice of the theme of civil war culminating in fratricide, his extravagantly rhetorical style, full of pathos and passion, his fondness for scenes involving

macabre or spine-chilling effects (ecstatic prophecy, supernatural apparitions, gruesomely described wounds), and his penchant for Stoic-flavoured moralizing. His subject is the conflict between the sons of Oedipus, tyrannical Eteocles and jealous exile Polynices, following Eteocles' seizure of the Theban throne, which leads to war between Argos and Thebes. The conflict is slow to begin: Statius paints the mythological background and brings in other heroes to swell the colourful cast of characters. After many delays and the deaths of most of Polynices' companions (the Seven against Thebes), ultimately the two brothers kill each other in single combat (book 11). The kingship is claimed by Creon, who denies the invading dead burial; this impious act is condemned by Theseus of Athens, and his intervention on the side of right finally brings the tragic events to a dramatic close. The poem is rich in melodramatic climaxes and vicious acts of revenge. High points include the opening of the earth to engulf the prophet Amphiarus, who is carried down chariot and all, still alive, into Hades, never to return; the noble self-sacrifice of the Theban Menoeceus, whose death ensures that Thebes will be saved (there are echoes here of Roman myths of *devotio* or self-immolation); the blasphemous defiance of the gods by Capaneus, who is struck down from the battlements of Thebes by Jupiter's thunderbolt. Most horrific of all is the mad hatred of Tydeus, whose anger at the man who has mortally wounded him is such that he begins to gnaw the head and brains of his enemy, a cannibalistic act which deprives him of the immortality which Minerva, his patroness, had been about to bestow; when she sees the bestial depths to which he has sunk, she turns away in disgust. One needs a strong stomach to relish Statius, but once read he is unforgettable.

Quite different is the other epic which Statius only began, a poem on the career of Achilles. (The conventional length of the epic form made it an occupational hazard for poets to die without finishing their works: besides Lucan and Virgil himself, Valerius Flaccus and Claudian also left truncated efforts.) The thousand-odd lines which he wrote show a surprisingly light touch; there is humour and a playful imagination in his picture of Achilles as a boy hunting in the hills, then reluctantly being dressed in girl's clothes by his anxious mother, only to find unexpected advantages in the disguise, as it enables him to get close to the beautiful princess of Scyros, with whom his youthful romance swiftly blossoms. When the text breaks off Achilles is en route for Troy and manlier pursuits.

The remaining poets of the first century AD require a brief word. Valerius Flaccus' unfinished *Argonautica* reworks the story of Jason: as in Apollonius, the scenes between the hero and Medea are bound to interest most, though the careful reader can appreciate the ingenuity with which the poet has reworked or altered traditional matter by setting the poem alongside Apollonius, whose work the writer knew intimately. Comparative criticism

also has much scope with Silius Italicus, whose *Punica* (17 books!) narrates the Hannibalic war and can therefore be set alongside Livy's account, which survives in full and was evidently Silius' main source. There is much to be gained from seeing how the same events are transformed from historical to epic mode, but the comparison often leaves one questioning Silius' taste and judgement (even Feeney, who rehabilitates everything he touches, cannot bring himself to defend Silius with any real enthusiasm).<sup>27</sup> The constant presence of the gods in his account makes one see Lucan's wisdom in exiling them from historical epic. It is one thing in the world of exotic and primeval myth to accept that a Fury may inspire Turnus to oppose Aeneas, or even that two Furies may be involved in forcing Eteocles and Polyneices into madness; it is less easy to take seriously such a being's involvement in the historical misfortunes of the beleaguered town of Saguntum in 219 BC.

From this point onward the pre-eminence of epic is on the wane. There are later works extant, mainly in Greek (some of them seemingly ignorant of their more imaginative Roman predecessors). But although this poetic peak might still be the chief ambition of a poet such as Camoens or Milton, the great days of the genre were numbered. In modern times the rise of the novel as the main narrative form, and more recently the critical hostility towards the public, the patriotic or the rhetorical, have all contributed to the decline of epic in its traditional guise. But any reader with the imagination and enthusiasm to suspend prejudice will be astonished at the richness, the diversity and the sophistication of these masterworks of antiquity.