

The Henry L. Janssen Last Lecture Series

E. Nicholas Genovese

**FATE AND FORTUNE,
LOVE AND DEATH
OUR CLASSICAL HERITAGE**

**UNIVERSITY HONORS PROGRAM
AND HONORS COUNCIL
SAN DIEGO STATE UNIVERSITY**

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Fate and Fortune, Love and Death: Our Classical Heritage



I want to express my appreciation to the University Honors Program and to the Honors Council for this singular and unexpected honor. Professor Henry Janssen has been my friend, colleague, and coconspirator for many years, and being chosen to follow him in this series of lectures happily reminds me of our shared efforts to promote the liberal arts and sciences, to seek the highest standards, and to keep the academic kettle stirred. Public lectures such as this demonstrate that in an institution of higher learning a vital intellectual pulse beats beneath the thousands of classroom courses. But also they remind students that their own papers are not mere exercises for grades but their share in the process of search, discovery, perspective, and expression that we call scholarship. I hope that my meager attempt this evening to stitch together some thoughts about a very old topic will merit your patience.

FOR THIS OCCASION how could I not draw upon the three greatest poems of classical antiquity—Homer’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey* and Vergil’s *Aeneid*—and upon the world’s first novel, Apuleius’ *Metamorphoses*, famously known as the *Golden Ass*? Throughout these four monumental works runs the theme of a journey over land and sea, but also an inward journey of the self, a search for meaning and identity. This is the stuff of which any worthy literature is made, but here we have it in its prototypical incarnations. Furthermore, the course of this journey is steered and shaped by a cosmic energy or force or divine entity variously called Fate or Fortune, linked inextricably with love and death.

How often have we heard the following? Someone in the throes of a horrible event resolves the apparent injustice of it all with a resigned “If that is how it must be, so be it.” We use the term “stoic” to characterize this acceptance of a world in which events seem destined to be, no

matter how we may try to avoid them: The careful driver ventures forth only for short trips, observing the speed limit and all rules of road, but is blind-sided by a truck careening out of control after its breaks have failed. Or the health-foods devotee robustly exercises every day, avoids hectic and toxic environments, but succumbs to a long-hidden hereditary ailment. Most of us recall the legendary King Laïus of Thebes who tries to avoid death at the hands of his son, who himself in turn vainly tries to avoid the murder of his father and incest with his mother—all foretold by Apollo’s Delphic oracle and all wretchedly come to pass. A frustrated Oedipus blames Apollo, but the god merely predicted that it would happen.

The Greek verb for “happen” derives from *tukhê* (or *tychê*), the word that Oedipus uses when he confidently pursues the information that will undo him. He calls himself “the child of *tukhê*” (line 1080), referring to the good fortune he has thus far enjoyed. *Tukhê* means “fortune, luck, chance”—how things turn out unpredictably, like our little-used word “hap.” Oedipus’ reliance on *tukhê* is an example of Sophocles’ renowned irony, because though Oedipus fancies himself happy, his *tukhê* will turn out to be bad luck rather than good. But *how* things turn out or happen is different from *why* things happen. What causes them to happen in ways that cannot be foreseen? Many immured in a persistent Christian tradition say, “It’s God’s will.” How did this happen to others and not to me? Why have I survived three months of retirement to be here? The luck of the Italians? Let’s hear what the ancients have to say.

TUKHÊ IS A WORD UNKNOWN on Homer’s Trojan plain of battle. Strange, don’t you think? After all, what soldier returning from war these days doesn’t have a tale about a close call, about the shrapnel that grazed his helmet, about the buddy who relieved his watch and fell to a sniper’s bullet? What of the very phrase “the fortunes of war”? In the *Iliad*, there is no luck; instead, someone is rescued by a usually invisible god, such as in book 3, when Spartan Menelaus and Trojan Paris are dueling for Helen: Dragging Paris by the chin strap of his helmet, Menelaus is about to do him in when Aphrodite snaps the leather, leaving Menelaus tugging only an empty helmet (lines 369–76); or in book 5, when Diomedes is the target of the war god Ares, and Athene catches his spear and deflects its path (853–54). Nothing in these moments occurs by human or natural accident, always by extrahuman intention.

But more significantly, nothing occurs in the long run by accident;

in the *Iliad* all is planned. Homer uses three words for this intention—*potmos*, *aisa*, and *moira*—and we render them all by “destiny” or “fate.” The first, *potmos*, means literally what “befalls” us; it is one’s doom, as in the old warrior Nestor’s wish for any Greek who would abandon the Trojan War: “May he go find death and doom before the eyes of all the rest” (*Iliad*, bk. 2, line 359). *Aisa* and *moira* both mean one’s “share” or “allotment,” that is, one’s portion of life. *Aisa* carries a sense of what has been divinely decreed as one’s lot from Zeus, but the more prominent *moira* applies more generally throughout Homer as the amount and manner of life granted each of us at birth.

The *Iliad* is a poem about the Greek hero Achilles, but to many readers the most attractive character is his Trojan counterpart Hector. In book 6 Hector has decided to go forth from Troy into combat against Achilles. At the city walls his wife Andromache voices her certainty that her husband will shortly die, but that to him is less disturbing than her own destiny. Foreseeing the dreadful fall of Troy, he prays: “But may earth be heaped to cover me before your scream tells me that you are being dragged away [a captive]” (464–65). Then, gently amused by his tiny son’s cries of alarm at the bobbing horsehair crest of his helmet, Hector places the helmet on the ground and wistfully looks to an alternate future when men will mark Astyanax, grown to a youth, as his father’s son. Handing the bawling child back to Andromache, now smiling through her tears, Hector strokes her hand and says this soldier’s farewell:

Poor thing! Do not grieve for me so much in your heart, for no man will hurl me forth to Hades beyond my destiny; and as for fate, I say that not a man has yet escaped it, either cowardly or brave, since when first he was born. Now you go home and busy yourself with your tasks, the loom and the distaff, and bid your maids to go to their work, for war will be the job for every native man of Ilium, and most of all for me. (486–93)

Hector then scoops up the helmet, and Andromache, “shedding big tears and often looking back,” returns to their home, where she stirs all the women within to lament for Hector, still alive but never to return (494–502).

Because Hector recognizes the limits of “destiny” (*aisa*) and the ineluctable universality of “fate” (*moira*), he resolutely marches forth to execute his duty; what will be, will be. From his perspective, he may indeed die at the hands of Achilles, but only because his time is up. This grimly rationalized disregard for danger, here succinctly expressed,

has been adopted by soldiers from time immemorial, and we can’t but compare it to the military psychological discipline that today sends men into mortal combat: You’ll die only if the bullet has your name on it.

Hector’s fatal duel with Achilles is delayed for most of the remaining poem. This is because, since book 1, Achilles has withdrawn from battle, having been dishonored by his commander Agamemnon, who robbed him of the young woman who was his battle prize, and until Agamemnon should recant, Zeus will grant the Trojans advantage (*Il.* 1.348–427, 498–530). But the sea nymph Thetis alludes to her son’s brief destiny, saying that her “swift-footed” (*ḗkypodeus*) offspring is “swift-fated” (*ḗkumoros*) as well and has been born to an “evil destiny” (*kakēi aisēi*; 417–19). How his swift and evil fate unfolds is central to the meaning and worth of the poem, and it begins when Hector threatens the Greeks’ ships with fire, forcing Achilles to allow his comrade Patroclus to impersonate him in his armor. But when Patroclus, flushed with success, exceeds his friend’s orders and engages Hector, he is struck down with the aid of Apollo. Thus dying, Patroclus blames the god and “destructive fate” (*moira olōē*), but also because he is on the brink of eternity, he has a prophet’s power to foretell Hector’s imminent demise: “Indeed you yourself will not live long, but already standing by are death and a mighty fate (*moira*) that you be struck down at the hands of faultless Achilles” (16.849–54).

Achilles’ anger is the great theme of this poem, and now one anger replaces another: He will dismiss Agamemnon’s insult in favor of avenging the death of his beloved comrade, and he declares that he is ready for death, ready to accept the *moira* fashioned for him (18.78–126). Newly armed, Achilles finally re-enters the fray (20.158), and amid stupendous slaughter he even challenges Apollo, who reminds him that unlike the scattered Trojans, an immortal god is not subject to fatal *moira*. Meanwhile, Hector, apparently having forgotten his resignation to fate, flees Achilles, and because Homer well knows the sympathies that generations would attach to this otherwise dutiful hero, he has Zeus contemplate saving the overmatched Hector. Athene, however, responds incredulously: “Do you wish to deliver from ill-sounding death a man who is mortal, long since doomed by *aisa*? Do it—but do it without the gods’ approval” (22.179–81). Here it would seem that Zeus has the power to adjust a mortal’s fate, but to coin a phrase, that would be wrong—and in this case, cosmically wrong—and so he refrains, just as he refrained from altering the *moira* of his mortal son Sarpedon in his duel with Patroclus (16.440–43). Likewise will Hector fall, after Zeus lifts high his balance scales and sets upon them

Hector's and Achilles' opposing "death spirits" (*kêre*), that is, the fulfillments of their fates: "Down slowly sank Hector's destined (*aisimon*) day, then off it made for Hades" (22.212–13). The maddened Achilles, spearing Hektor through the neck, promises to leave his body for the dogs and birds. Then Hector, like Patroclus before him, prophesies his victor's death at Troy at the hands of Paris and Apollo.

And so, as he spoke, the end of death covered him, and his soul, flying from his limbs, went off to Hades, mourning its doom (*potmos*), forsaking manliness and youth. Yet brilliant Achilles addressed him even in death: "Lie there dead; I'll accept my own death whenever Zeus and the other gods should will it come to pass." (361–66)

But what of Achilles' death? Because it will not occur within the *Iliad*, where does that leave the poem? Insane with grief and still feeding his vengeance, Achilles true to his word savages Hector's corpse before the Trojans, drags it back to his hut, then proceeds to conduct a huge funeral for Patroclus. In the final book of the *Iliad*, after Achilles' twelve days of pitiless, shameless abuse of the unburied Hector, Zeus extracts Achilles' promise to yield the body to King Priam. But Achilles' decision involves more than dismissing his anger as he did toward Agamemnon; it is acutely complex, and it takes us back to the first half of the poem.

When in book 9 Agamemnon sees the havoc he has wrought, he sends a delegation to Achilles to offer amends. Achilles angrily refuses his commander's overtures and apologies; however, to these his comrades-in-arms he discloses the dilemma hidden in his mother's reference to his swift fate:

Twofold spirits of doom (*kêres*) carry me to my death's end: If I should stay here and wage war about the Trojans' city, my return home would be lost, but my renown will be undying; but if I should go home to the dear land of my fathers, although my life will be long, my glorious renown would be lost. (9.409–15)

This explains why Achilles' decision to comply with Priam's request is so painful and why this is the most dramatic and indeed the most important event of the *Iliad*. When Priam reminds Achilles of his own father whom he will never see again, we know that by defeating the greatest defender of Troy, Achilles has fulfilled only half of his glorious destiny. For to be truly the greatest hero he must also show the greatest humanity. Returning Hector's body for burial now fulfills his obliga-

tions both to the gods and to his fellow mortals. The magnitude of the war and the excellence of its participants make Achilles' actions glorious, and thus they ensure, as destined, his imminent death. He has chosen his *moira*, and he will die shortly but with heroic honor and lasting glory.

THE HERO OF HOMER'S second great work has no such privileged choice of fate. In fact, he is forced into all his exploits, having been willing neither to leave his wife and infant son for Troy nor to delay his return home to face a desperate crisis. Although Odysseus seeks his kingly identity and rightful credit for his heroic deeds, he never openly seeks Achillean renown and is a less-than-glorious habitual dissembler. Ironically, then, he seals his fate, as we say, when he indulges his vengeance by declaring his full identity to the blinded Cyclops Polyphemus. Promptly the Cyclops invokes his father Poseidon's vengeance so that in order for Odysseus to find his way back home to Ithaca, he must seek the dead prophet Teiresias at the rim of the Underworld (*Od.* 9.502–35).

The soul of blind Teiresias is able to prophesy Odysseus' future not only because he has the divinely granted ability to "see" where others cannot but also because there actually *is* a future: a span of life predetermined by fate and therefore now accessible to extraordinary persons in extraordinary situations. Because the future is no less real than the present, it can be described, and because it is no less factual than the past, it can be told. Odysseus has his life laid before him as though it exists in an eternal now. He will arrive in Ithaca, Teiresias tells him "having lost all your comrades, in a someone else's ship, and you will find woes in your house: arrogant men who devour your livelihood, wooing your goddesslike wife and offering suitors' gifts" (11.114–17). He foretells the slaying of these suitors but adds precisely how Odysseus will finally perform his purging penance for his sin against Poseidon:

Then afterwards take a well-fitted oar and go until you should reach those men who neither know the sea nor eat their food mingled with salt nor, I say, do they know of purple-cheeked ships or well-fitted oars that are like wings for ships. And . . . when a passer-by should remark that you have on your sturdy shoulder a paddle to winnow grain—that is when you fix your well-fitted oar in the earth and make handsome offerings to lord Poseidon. (121–30)

All things right with the gods, the end of Odysseus' thread of life will pay out: "And death will come to you out of the salt sea, without wounds but such as to lay you low in fine old age, surrounded by your prospering people" (134–37).

Before leaving the land of the dead, Odysseus encounters none other than the soul of the man of two fates: Achilles. But rather than enjoying his renown in Hades, Achilles clearly regrets his choice of a short, glorious life, confessing that instead of ruling all the dead, he would rather still be living, even if it meant being hired to work a plow for some poor tenant farmer (489–91). Thus does Homer allow us to contemplate the ironies of fate. And I ask, How many of us would exchange a guaranteed long life of obscurity for a brief life of worldwide fame?

Just before Odysseus finally arrives in Ithaca, his host King Alcinöus guarantees his safety till he reaches his own land, "but thereafter he will suffer whatever destiny (*aisa*) that the solemn spinners (*barēiai klôthēs*) spun for him with his birth thread when his mother bore him" (7.196–98). Homer here identifies or at least associates one's *aisa* with the goddesses who produce the length of thread that will represent a mortal's share or portion (*moira*) of life. *Aisa* and *moira* are themselves personified by Homer as the allegorical goddesses Destiny and Fate who suit his audience's need for palpable personalities behind their deeds (*Il.* 20.127, 24.209). They were pluralized into the iconic old women, like those whom we see even today (perhaps mainly for touristic color) sitting outside their whitewashed cottages, hand spinning wool into yarn. (Recall Andromache's task to hand twist thread from a ball of fibers at the top of a pole called a distaff.) To these spinster Moirai "to whom all-wise Zeus gave the most honor" Homer's successor Hesiod (*Theogony* 904–05) gives names that suggest their cooperative division of labor: Clotho, Lachesis, Atropos; literally, Spinster, Allotment, No Turning. A little imagination will have old Clotho industriously spinning thread from her distaff, auntie Lachesis meticulously—or perhaps carelessly?—measuring out a length, and a dutiful sister Atropos snipping forever the thread at the mark pinched between her sister's bony thumb and finger. The Romans called them the Parcae, euphemistically relating them to the Latin *parcere*, "to spare"; whereas, originally midwives, they take their name from the same word as "parent" (*parere*, "to give birth").

Homer's eighth-century BC mythology reflected and shaped the religious attitudes and convictions of the classical world. But with the rise of philosophy in the sixth century BC, notions of human depend-

ence on the gods for the quantity and quality of life were tested by speculation about the world around us. If philosophers' fresh conclusions happened to match ancient poetic traditions, they would at least now be reasoned rather than unquestioningly accepted. That is, the world order that the poets attributed to inscrutable divinities had to be confirmed or at least prompted by experience, that is, by questioning or looking for order in a world of apparent chaos. Nature can be brutally destructive and unpredictable, but philosophers inferred over the longer span of time and in our wider experience a repetitive regularity. But is this world order actual or is it only coincidental, apparent—a mindless chaos?

IN THE LATE FOURTH CENTURY BC, a Levantine slave named Zeno lectured in Athens' Stoa Poikilê, or "Painted Portico," and so his followers became known as Stoics. In Zeno's philosophy the world is entirely, perfectly ordered (in fact, the Greek word *kosmos* means both "world" and "order"). For Zeno, virtue lies in bravely conforming to the laws of ever-changing nature as it returns in a great cycle to its fiery source. Creating and guiding these events is the work of a unique mind that long ago extracted itself from the physical fire into a spiritual individuality. As physical and spiritual entities ourselves, we must discover the cosmic laws and willingly live by them, for the divine mind has beneficently balanced and predetermined all existence in due portion. And so, this is the best of all possible worlds, and by accepting it as it is, we practice wisdom, which leads to happiness.

An ultimate, personal source of cosmic order was especially attractive to the first-century BC Romans, who saw themselves evolving as the predetermined successors to Greek civilization, but not merely as a nation nor even an empire but as the greatest empire of many nations ruled by a single people guided by an august leader. The Romans were the destined beneficiaries of fate, the same divine measure meted out to Homeric heroes. "Fate" itself comes from Latin *fatum*, "what has been spoken" (cf. Greek *aisa*, one's "decreed share" of life). The word is related to the likes of "fame," "fable," "infant" (someone who doesn't talk), but our dislike of its deadly derivative "fatal" suggests our invariably evil sense of a miserable end; for Rome, however, in the age of Augustus, *fatum* meant the road to greatness and glory.

Gaius Julius Caesar Octavianus, Julius' great-nephew and adopted son, later titled Augustus, achieved *imperium* ("command") of the Roman world in 31 BC. One year later at his behest, Publius Vergilius Maro, the foremost poet of the age, began to compose an epic poem to

confirm to the Romans and their empire that they were witnessing the return of the fabled Golden Age. Vergil would tell of the origins of Rome—not the founding of the city seven centuries before but the ancestral origins that began much earlier with Homer’s Troy. He would base his narrative on the theme of *fatum*, demonstrating that from the heroic struggles at Troy a divinely founded family was destined to extend its line down to his present era in the person of Caesar himself. Vergil authenticates his story with a passage in the *Iliad* in which Achilles is about to slay Aeneas, second only to Hector among the Trojans. Aeneas is the son of Aphrodite by Anchises, who, like Priam, is descended from Zeus-born Dardanus. Foreseeing the fate of Troy, Poseidon sensibly urges the gods to save Aeneas, “for it is fated (*morimon*) for him to escape lest the race of Dardanus be without seed, perish, and vanish. . . . But as it is, truly the might of Aeneas will rule, as will the offspring of his offspring who may be born hereafter” (20.302–08). Thus, here in Homer is the key to Vergil’s *Aeneid*: a people bound for greatness by fate.

Like the Greek *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, the Latin *Aeneid* deals with war and wanderings: “Arma virumque cano” it begins: “Arms and the man I sing, who from the coasts of Troy first came to Italy, fate’s fugitive—*fato profugus*” (1.1–2). But though Jupiter (Zeus) oversees and ensures the hero’s *fatum*, Vergil brings a new twist: Juno, the Greek Hera whose beauty was spurned by Prince Paris, is not satisfied with the utter destruction of Troy; she wants to prevent the fulfillment of Aeneas’ destiny to settle in Italy the remnant refugees whose descendants will centuries later become the first Romans. But when Aeneas’ goddess mother Venus (Aphrodite) begins to doubt whether there is a reward for Aeneas’ *pietas*—devotion to the gods and adherence to fate—Jupiter reassures his daughter that despite his wife’s efforts, “the fates of your people remain undisturbed,” and he foretells the stages of the Trojan-Roman saga culminating in Aeneas’ descendant Octavian, “a Trojan Caesar, the limits of whose empire shall be the ocean and of whose fame shall be the stars” (1.257–88). By drawing a continuum from legend into history to serve political as well as cultural ends, Vergil shows that the journey to Rome’s greatness has not only has been long and complex but has at last reached a cosmic goal and fulfilled its cosmic purpose. Octavian has ended a century of civil wars, and so at last a single unchallenged savior has united the Roman people, just as Aeneas once saved his Trojans. And just as Aeneas struggled for the sake of a distant but lasting prize, so too the Romans, for whom that prize is now at hand, must devote themselves to *fatum*.

As in Homer, prophecy clarifies the way and the destination, but one must learn to distinguish between true and false prophecy. For example: Because of the violent death of the Trojan priest Laocoön, his warnings about the huge wooden horse are rejected. Because Aeneas’ father Anchises mistakes Apollo’s oracle, the fugitive Trojans suffer plague and famine in Crete before gods tell Aeneas in a dream to move on to Hesperia, the “Evening” land—Italy—whence their ancestor Dardanus came to Asia (2.40–56, 228–33; 3.90–118, 132–41). Fate is revealed to the willing, and fate will lead them. But among the obstacles for Aeneas is a love affair divinely but mistakenly expected to thwart fate.

Juno hopes to halt Aeneas in North Africa, where the Phoenician queen Dido is herself establishing a city. Carthage will be her refuge from a horrid past in which she, like her guest Aeneas, lost her spouse. Confident in Jupiter’s promise, Venus pretends to be accomplice to Juno’s plan, knowing that the love affair is not fated to last (1.335–64, 4.90–128). We expect Juno—a goddess—to know better, but she is blinded with rage (*furor*) for the Trojans, and so she cannot see that her delay or perversion of fate is actually, ironically part of the fatal plan (cf. Oedipus). Just as Carthage is destined to be great but also to fall to Rome a thousand years later, Dido is likewise destined to fall to Aeneas. When he reluctantly, resolutely leaves for Italy, as commanded by Jupiter the executor of fate, Dido falls tragically upon his sword (4.259–93, 663–92).

At Sicily, the ghost of Anchises bids Aeneas to visit him in the Underworld, guided by Apollo’s prophetic Sibyl (5.722–37). There the rest of Aeneas’ and his people’s fate will be revealed as more profound than merely finding a refuge. And so, when in book 6 Aeneas descends to find Anchises, now a celebrity among the dead in the Elysian Fields, he learns of the marvelous workings of the cosmos that allow him to foresee Rome’s greatness. Borrowing from Pythagorean and Platonic notions of metempsychosis—the transmigration of souls from one body and life to the next—Vergil has Anchises explain a cyclic purification (6.703–846): As mortals die, their souls travel to the Underworld to be cleansed of their earthly lives by wind, water, and fire for the remainder of a thousand-year life-and-death cycle. The souls then take on new bodies to repeat the cycle. Anchises points out the souls who are fated to be the future heroes of Rome, and though Aeneas is ignorant of their names and deeds, Vergil’s Romans knew them. Then abruptly Trojan Anchises turns to Trojan Aeneas and speaks in terms that identify the hero with the fate of Rome:

Yes, others will more deftly carve out breathing bronzes . . . will lead forth faces from the marble, will better plead their causes, will trace the heavens' paths. . . . But you, Roman, remember to rule peoples with empire—for these will be your arts—and to establish peace as a way of life, sparing the conquered and warring down the proud. (847–53)

No longer is Aeneas a hero of the past. His knowledge of fate has now transformed him into a godlike hero of the future and for all time.

But presently the near future awaits. When the exiles reach the Tiber River, fate has thrown an Italian prince in their way: Young Turnus is determined to retain his claim to King Latinus' daughter. But Latinus has realized that this Aeneas is “that one who by the fates set out from a foreign home to be my foretold son-in-law and be called to rule with equal powers and that this man's progeny will be outstanding in valor and will seize upon the whole world with might” (7.255–58). And so, with Juno bent on hostilities to delay the inevitable (310–16), war begins, ultimately to be decided by single combat. For when Turnus kills Pallas, the son of Aeneas' Greek ally King Evander, Aeneas is honor bound to vengeance (10.479–500, 11.176–81). In the epic's final moments, Jupiter prevails upon Juno to cease her machinations and admit that Aeneas “is meant for heaven to be raised by the fates to the stars” (12.794–95). Armed with the shield of Vulcan that depicts future Roman glories, Aeneas pursues and downs Turnus, who begs Aeneas to spare him for the sake of his aged father and relinquishes his claim to Lavinia. For a moment Aeneas hesitates, but when he spies the sword belt that Turnus has torn from the slain Pallas, he is shocked back to his duty and with his blade sends the soul of Turnus to the shades below (910–52).

Fatal inevitability informs both Stoic philosophy and Vergil's epic, just as *moira-aisa* controls human affairs in Homer. But we have also seen how, once introduced to the Greeks, the notion of fortune (*tukhê*) became synonymous with fate in Greek tragedy. And so this loose synonymy persisted among the Romans, as in Dido's suicide, when she addresses the souvenirs that are all she has left of Aeneas:

O plunder—sweet as long as the fates (*fata*) and the god allowed—receive my soul and release me from these cares. I have lived, and I have finished the course that fortune (*fortuna*) has given me. . . . (4.651–54)

Likewise, the Sibyl's instruction identifies accidental fortune with

controlling fate: “Yield not to troubles, but go against them more boldly wherever your fortune will allow” (6.95–96). Despite, however, this confusion of fate and fortune, there is a subtle distinction that we can pursue in the last of our four great classical works, Apuleius' *Golden Ass*.

A GENERATION BEFORE VERGIL, the Roman philosopher Lucretius published a long poem, the *De rerum natura* (*On the Nature of Things*). Lucretius espoused the philosophy of Zeno's contemporary Epicurus, who had enhanced earlier theories of a completely material universe composed of atoms. These “uncut” particles (*atoma*), each too small to be observed, are limited in kind but infinite in number in an infinite void. Moving at various speeds and swerving of their own accord, they aggregate to form things and events, observable and unobservable, of varying durations. The only constants are the atoms and their movements, that is, matter and change. Compare that to Zeno's changing universe in which all is eventually transformed from and into fire. But whereas the Stoic single divine mind programs everything, Lucretius' Epicurean universe comprises countless independent, colliding wills. Thus, were it not for the finite kinds of infinite atoms, Lucretius' universe would be infinitely different from one moment to the next: in a word, chaos. And so, amid and despite near or apparent regularity, we and the world undergo random, unpredicted events. Call them fortune.

As much as Stoicism would seem to be settling and reassuring—for everything there is a reasoned cause—Epicureanism would seem the exact opposite: What does anything mean if there is no overall purpose beyond mere existence? But Lucretius argues that to be really free, we must be free of fear, and that the ultimate fear is of death and of the gods—who do exist but are atoms as well and have no concern for us. Death, then, is literally a nothingness simultaneous with the scattering of the atoms that only temporarily make up both our body and our soul. And so, with only this life to live, we should strive for an Epicurean “untroubledness,” *ataraxia*, because though our former atoms persist after our demise, they will have dispersed into other aggregations. As you might expect, this theory found few adherents in a Greco-Roman world of striving to live according to codes ultimately enforced by the gods or even by a supreme mind, a world of events and deeds ordered by reward and punishment, a world of fated shares of life and death.

Long believing in divine power, most Greeks and Romans rejected a philosophy that rendered Dido's and Aeneas' fates as fictions and the

gods as irrelevant. But because the ancients lacked the prophetic advantages of a Sibyl, they expected to be surprised by the succession and confluence of events that they called fortune, either in the abstract or in a divine personage. In short, fate does exist, but because it is usually beyond our prediction and always beyond our control and because its effects seem random and capricious, we call it fortune.

Two centuries after Vergil, a North African named Apuleius wrote in Latin a fictional narrative about a youth's strange travels of enlightenment (the precursor to the European Romantics' *Bildungsroman* and of our contemporary "road trip"). Our earliest example of what we today call a novel, it is not cast in the mythological or legendary past but in the present; nor is its central character a classical hero but, rather, an antihero who tells his story in first-person prose.

Eager for postgraduate field experience in magic, Lucius the scholar heads for Greece's Thessaly, witchcraft central in the ancient world. He promises us an amazing tale about "men's shapes and fortunes changed into other forms and then restored" (bk. 1, ch. 1); hence the Greek title *Metamorphoses*. The principal transformation is his, not only physically but also spiritually, inasmuch as this is a journey of the soul. In a chance encounter, a traveling salesman tells him about a friend's unfortunate, horrible death at the hands of witches, and transfixed, Lucius can't get to his destination soon enough. When he does, he becomes infatuated with a comely slave girl in the home of his hosts, one of whom is, of course, a witch. The girl gives him access to her mistress's magic ointment, but instead of being transformed into a winged owl, he becomes a long-eared ass. An inelegant beast without but still very much Lucius within, he is turned out into the vicious world, where he overhears a tale about a princess named Psyche with whom Cupid himself falls in love (bks. 4–6):

Psyche is well named, for her "soul" is pure and naïve. Resigned to an oracle that she will marry a monster, she is unaware that her husband in the darkness is Cupid himself. He tells her to reveal nothing of her experience, lest now pregnant, she deprive her child of immortality: "Fortune is now attacking from afar," he warns, "but if you don't steadfastly stand your guard, she will soon engage at close quarters" (5.11). Goaded, however, by her sisters to satisfy her curiosity, Psyche exposes with a lamp her sleeping husband in all his beauty, but in her excitement she pricks her thumb on his arrow and falls hopelessly in love with Love. The enraged Cupid flies away, and Psyche is sentenced by Venus to virtually impossible tasks. Meanwhile, however, Cupid relents and secures from grandpa Jupiter a pardon for the wayward

princess. Jupiter decrees a wedding and grants Psyche immortality, and soon a daughter is born, called Voluptas (Pleasure).

Set within the larger narrative, the Cupid and Psyche tale is analogous to the brutal adventures hurled at Lucius by fortune. In the cycle of spring to spring, he is degraded and appalled by his fellow human beings who, ironically, behave more like beasts than the man beneath the ass's hide. Lucius—his name a pun on Latin *lux*, "light"—has sought enlightenment by feeding his curiosity for the dark arts and so brings torment on himself. He thinks that he has found love's utter pleasure in the slave girl Fotis—her Greek name also a pun on "light" (*phôt-*)—but at the climax of this tortuous narrative, he finds himself threatened by the darkest, basest human depravity: In a public arena he will be forced into sexual intercourse with a multiple murderess, after which he will likely share her violent death at the jaws and claws of wild animals. Desperately, he bolts from the arena and gallops to the sea, where he collapses asleep on the shore. He awakes at moonrise, and with "fate . . . now satiated with the number and mass of [his] disasters" (11.1), he prays to the goddess of the moon for release. In a dream she comes to him as Egyptian Isis, the prototype of all goddesses, and assures him that his salvation is at hand. He awakes to her springtime celebration, and devouring a crown of roses—the elusive antidote—Lucius at long last resumes his former shape (10.24–11.13).

In relating the murderess's heinous crimes, Lucius remarks that her victims "could not hide from the deadly nod of fortune" (10.24). Fortune is everywhere because, in the manner of magic, things turn out not what they appeared to be, and no one can predict what will happen next, as the priest of Isis explains:

Hard-driven by many and various sufferings and by the greatest tempests and storms of Fortune, at last, Lucius, you have reached the harbor of Tranquillity and the altar of Mercy. Neither your birth nor your status nor even your excellent learning have been any good to you, but in your slippery green youth you lapsed into slavish pleasures and reaped a troublesome reward for your unpromising curiosity. Still, blind Fortune, as long as she kept tormenting you with the worst of perils, has by her unforeseeing perversity brought you to this holy state of happiness. Now let her go and rage in all her fury and seek other objects for her cruelty. . . . [For] now you've been welcomed under the aegis of sighted Fortune, who by the splendor of her light illumines all the other gods. (11.15)

Apuleius concludes his novel with Lucius dying, as it were, to his former self and being reborn into true, joyful happiness as a devotee of Isis and Osiris. In his formerly wretched condition, he heard how Desire enabled Soul to bring forth Pleasure: Pleasure was to be immortal, but only if Soul did not betray Desire. Does that mean, then, that Pleasure's curtailed life was a warning to Lucius to direct his curiosity beyond base witchcraft to sublime enlightenment? Or, considering how Lucius' penance for having delved beyond our natural limits earns him forgiveness and heavenly joy, may we conclude that Pleasure born from immortal Desire and the newly immortal Soul was herself born into eternal life, immune to fate and fortune?

All in all, the substance and verity of fate and fortune are more our perceptions than they are cosmic or divine forces. What is called fate, or Fate, can be known only through a window into eternity where there is no division of present from past or past from future. Without prophetic powers, we discover our fate only *after* the fact. It is what *would* be, simply because it *has been*. As the Greeks put it, it is *anankê*, "necessity," what has to be. Although Homer alludes to the gods' own limitations or deserts, these do not include death (*Il.* 15.117–18); the gods are, after all, "undying" (Gk. *athanatoi*, Lat. *immortales*). And so, our fate is, in a word, dying; it is our life's path to its inexorable end beyond our control. And as for fortune: It is simply how fate unfolds, how life happens—again, beyond our control but viewed as the inevitable and unexpected, which gives the world the look of chaos. The priest of Isis tells Lucius that his sufferings were due to blind Fortune and that his joys will come from sighted Fortune. But we, not Fortune, are the blind ones, because if we knew what troubles lay ahead, we would avoid them. And when we see that nothing can harm us if we accept that life is not our possession but fate's temporary allotment, then we, not Fortune, will fully see. For fate is merely the appearance of order amid fortune's apparent chaos.

And so let us yield not to troubles but, rather, go against them more boldly—dare I say it?—*no matter what* our fortune, or fate, will allow.

