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To Julie, with love and appreciation

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PREFACE

Most of my historical work has been archive-based, so it was both a change and a shock to operate in an historical field where the primary sources, apart from the classical authors, tended to be in the fields of archaeology, numismatics and epigraphy. Nevertheless, the change proved both refreshing and interesting. Since it is nearly fifty years since I went to Oxford as a classical scholar, it was a particular pleasure to renew acquaintance with many old friends (Tacitus, Cicero, Juvenal, Pliny the Younger, etc) and to read for the first time others who, from the standpoint of classical literature, had always been considered below the salt (Pliny the Elder, Aurelius Victor, Cassius Dio, Strabo, etc). At first bewildered and bemused by the plethora of learned journals devoted to ancient history - and the vast numbers of academics still engaged in this 'esoteric' pursuit - I soon learned that a thorough knowledge of German was almost more important than a command of Latin and Greek. Fortunately I had my daughter Julie, an expert in the German tongue, to guide me through some of the more taxing scholarly articles.

The literary sources for a life and times of Marcus Aurelius must always centre on the emperor's own *Meditations*, his correspondence with his tutor Fronto, the invaluable history of Rome by Cassius Dio and the controversial *Historia Augusta*, a series of biographies of Roman emperors by different ancient hands. I am aware of the massive scholarly debates still conducted about the authenticity of the *Historia Augusta* but can only report that, by the technique of 'compare and contrast' and what J.S. Mill would call 'the method of difference', I have found it reliable enough for the reign of Marcus Aurelius. The later sources, such as Eutropius, Aurelius Victor and Orosius, are best cited only as back-up to contemporary accounts. Much valuable, but often maddeningly incomplete, information comes from the work of Marcus's great contemporaries, such as Lucian, Apuleius, Tertullian, Justin Martyr and, above all, Galen. Scepticism is sometimes expressed as to whether one can write a biography of figures in the ancient world but I would rate Marcus as fourth in terms of such plausible candidates, behind Julius Caesar, Cicero and Julian the Apostate but well ahead of the Julio-Claudian emperors,

Hannibal or Alexander the Great. If I convince the reader of the historical importance and enduring significance of this singular personality, I will not have written in vain. My especial thanks for helping me to write the book go to Julie (as mentioned), to my wife Pauline for listening to reams of Marcusiana, to Tony Whittome at Random House and to Will Sulkin at the Bodley Head, who remains an author's dream editor.

Frank McLynn, Farnham 2008

INTRODUCTION

Why should we be interested in a Roman emperor who lived 2,000 years ago? We can scarcely summon up any interest in the presidents, prime ministers and rulers of yesteryear unless they were political giants or monsters of evil. There can be many answers to this question, and not just in terms of the validity of studying history in general. Marcus Aurelius is the one figure of antiquity who still speaks to us today. We may thrill to the exploits of Alexander the Great, Hannibal or Caesar, and historical novelists may beguile us for a while with their reconstructions of Cicero or Julian (the only other figures from ancient history, apart from Caesar and Marcus Aurelius whose mental processes we know well), but the only voice from the Greco-Roman world that still seems to have contemporary relevance is that of the man who ruled the Roman empire from 161 to 180 A.D. The continuing sales of his book of reflections - the *Meditations* - alone prove that, but other evidence is not hard to find. We continue to use the tag 'Marcus Aurelius' for a ruler who is wise. A reviewer surveying a series of interviews with King Juan Carlos of Spain remarked that he was very far from being Marcus Aurelius; the radical right-wing U.S. commentator and politician Pat Buchanan famously remarked that George W. Bush was 'no Marcus Aurelius'. Meanwhile Bush's predecessor in the White House, Bill Clinton, claimed to have read and reread Marcus's book during his presidency. The nineteenth-century writer Samuel Butler claimed that no one is really dead if they are still widely remembered, and on this basis Marcus Aurelius is more alive than most people living. His survival as a major influence has puzzled and even embarrassed some people, who have attempted to deal with the phenomenon by facetiousness.¹

Another exit avenue for those irritated or perplexed by Marcus's fame and immortality has been to claim that Marcus is of interest only to philosophers and contemplatives, and that the other famous Stoic, Epictetus, is the one who appeals to men of action. James Stockdale, an American fighter pilot shot down over Vietnam and then held by the Vietcong as a prisoner of war for seven and a half years, during which time he endured torture and four years' solitary confinement, later explained that it was the inspiration of Epictetus that enabled him to

survive.² Epictetus was for a while taken up as the new hero, and the model for self-help books; he gained extra kudos for having been an influence on the black Haitian revolutionary of the nineteenth century, Toussaint L'Ouverture, who is increasingly coming to the fore as a patron saint of Third World revolutionary movements.³ But the attempt to ghettoise Marcus Aurelius as a 'mere' influence on thought, but irrelevant to action, immediately breaks down when we contemplate the number of adventurers who have testified to the Stoic emperor's influence. We shall have much more to say about Marcus's impact down the ages later, but for now we will rest content with just two examples. Captain John Smith, he of Pocahontas fame, was deeply impressed by the example of a ruler who was both a thinker and a warrior, albeit a reluctant one. He carried with him on his adventures in Virginia just two books: the works of Machiavelli and the *Meditations* of Marcus Aurelius.⁴ In some ways even more impressive is the example of Cecil Rhodes, multimillionaire, politician and would-be empire builder. As his biographer writes: 'He carried a well-thumbed, personally marked-up copy of this last book with him everywhere, favouring such aphorisms as 'Can any man think he lives for pleasure and not for action or execution?' 'Go to the ant, thou sluggard, consider her ways and be wise.' There were exactly one hundred and one passages in his copy of the book heavily underlined by Rhodes, with four propositions especially prominent. These were: Death is an aspect of life, so live the latter as if the former is imminent; the intellect should always prevail over the emotions; do what is serious, not frivolous, do what is right, not popular, do what you do for others first and yourself second; be self-reliant but also tolerant, flexible and prepared to change your views.⁵

Marcus Aurelius's widespread popularity today can be seen at a number of levels, some apparently trivial, others deadly serious. He is the only Roman emperor the movies have taken seriously and also the best represented on the screen. Roman emperors usually function as 'footnotes' in films set in imperial Rome (one thinks of Ivan Triesault as Nero in *Barabbas* or George Relph as Tiberius in *Ben-Hur*) or are presented in melodramatic turns, as with Jay Robinson as Caligula in *The Robe* or Peter Ustinov's famous comico-tyrannic turn as Nero in *Quo Vadis*. Yet in *Gladiator* and *The Fall of the Roman Empire*, (played respectively by Richard Harris and Alec Guinness), Marcus Aurelius appears as a serious figure in all senses. But it is not just through celluloid presentations that Marcus has lived

on. I would like to suggest that his current eminence has five main sources. In the first place, he satisfies the thirst for philosophical guidance which ancient philosophers thought they had a duty to perform but which their modern counterparts have largely abandoned. With the exception of a handful of lone wolves like Karl Jaspers, Jean-Paul Sartre and George Santayana, modern philosophy has retreated from the hurly-burly of everyday life to concern itself with technical issues of ever more esoteric import. In Europe the taste was for logical positivism and phenomenology, in the United States for symbolic logic, pragmatism or abstruse philosophy of science, while Britain retreated into the inane and scholastic cul-de-sac of linguistic philosophy. Faced with this abdication of responsibility from professional philosophers, the man and woman in the street turned either to Oriental mysticism or to the ancients. Academic specialists and desiccated pedants sneer that ordinary people use the *Meditations* as 'a bran-tub of aphorisms for all seasons' and object that wisdom should not be obtained from tea-chest mottoes and that no philosophy worthy of the name should be of the cracker-barrel variety. Yet those who can find no consolation in organised religion are deeply attracted to Marcus's oracular utterances, of which dozens have attained popularity.

It is worth reminding ourselves of some of them. 'The universe is change; or life is what our thoughts make it.' 'Nothing happens to anyone that he is not fitted by Nature to bear.' 'Do not despise death, for even death is one of the things that Nature wills.' 'By a tranquil mind I mean a well-ordered one.' 'It is the act of a madman to pursue impossibilities.' 'How much more grievous are the consequences of anger than the cause of it.' 'How ridiculous and unrealistic is the man who is astonished at anything that happens in life.' 'Loss is nothing else but change, and change is Nature's delight.' 'Life is warfare, and the sojourn of a stranger, and after fame comes oblivion.' 'To the wise, life is a problem; to the fool a solution.' 'If you are distressed by anything, the pain is not due to the thing itself but to your own estimate of it; and this you have power to revoke at any moment.' 'Remember that there is a proper dignity and proportion to be observed in the performance of every act in life.' 'The object in life is not to be on the side of the majority but to escape finding oneself in the ranks of the insane.' 'You will get relief from vain fancies if you perform every act in life as though it were your last.' 'What is beautiful has the source of beauty in itself; praise forms no part of it. So it

is none the worse or the better for being praised.' 'The happiness of your life depends on the quality of your thoughts. Therefore guard accordingly and take care you entertain no notions unsuitable to virtue and reason.' 'Never esteem anything as an advantage to yourself that will make you break your word or lose your self-respect.' 'How much time he saves who does not look to see what his neighbour says or does or thinks.' 'Get into yourself; there is a source of strength that will always spring up if you look there.' 'Waste no more time talking about great souls and how they should be. Become one yourself.' 'Never let the future disturb you. You will meet it, if you have to, with the same weapons of reason which today arm you against the present.'⁶

A second reason for Marcus's continuing prominence could be that his embrace of Stoicism when a ruler chimes with a similar embrace by Americans of the philosophy of pragmatism, the ideas of judging truth by its consequences. Just as Stoicism was the Roman philosophy *par excellence*, could anything be more American than a creed one of whose leading practitioners (William James) could speak of the 'cash value' of an idea? There is also a ternary motif at work, and we shall see that triads were an obsession of Marcus. The three chief Stoics of the Roman era, Seneca, Epictetus and Marcus Aurelius, find an echo in the three American pragmatists: C.S. Pierce, William James and John Dewey. Students of philosophy, incidentally, will be able to link Dewey's quasi-Hegelian holism with similar ideas in Marcus's thought. Pragmatism is one of the hidden factors behind the dominance of the law and lawyers in U.S. society, because of the tendency to dissolve all philosophical and ethical issues into legal ones, or the indeterminate into the determinate. If there is a conflict between two equal and opposite values, as there often is in liberal and 'open' societies, the Supreme Court will solve the dilemma for you. Naturally, this will always be done in a rough-and-ready *ad hoc* manner, since the Supreme Court is composed of individuals, each with his her own political principles, prejudices and predilections; the idea of a supra-human Chief Justice, totally 'objective', may be a necessary political and social myth but it is an illusion for all that. The beauty of pragmatism is that it enables one to make judgements based on supposed consequences, which always lie in the future and are thus immediately unverifiable. In its own way, then, pragmatism in the U.S.A. functions as an ideological 'support' for the social and political system, just as Stoicism did in Roman society. Stoicism was a primitive form of pragmatism, in

that one knew in advance that the value of duty would always overrule that of pleasure, and strenuous virtue that of lazy idleness or apathy. It is tempting to push the analogy farther than it will really go, by arguing that Stoicism and pragmatism are both 'imperial' ideologies, both suited to world powers at the moment of their greatest dominance. It is even more tempting to link the similarities between the Roman and American work with the well-known enthusiasm of Bill Clinton for Marcus Aurelius, though this has triggered a host of 'backlash' commentators, led by the Catholic right-wing commentator Gary Wills, sceptical that Clinton could ever have derived anything of value from Stoicism. As one critic wrote: 'If Bill Clinton ever read from the man who praised virtuous behaviour over political outcomes, he cannot have been concentrating too hard. Marcus Aurelius preached the irrationality of sexual passion. Bill Clinton practised it.'⁷

A third reason for Marcus's favourable reception in the modern world is his feeling for Nature, which at times comes close to Wordsworth's position in the *Prelude* and the ode *Intimations of Immortality* - a deep appreciation of sensuousness tinged with melancholy. Here is Marcus's paean to the beauties of Nature: 'The way loaves of bread split open on top in the oven, with the ridges just by-products of the baking but nonetheless mysteriously pleasing, arousing our appetites without our knowing why. The way ripe figs begin to burst or when olives are on the point of falling, when the shadow of decay gives them a special beauty. Or when stalks of wheat bend under their own weight. Or the furrowed brow of a lion, or the flecks of foam on a boar's mouth . . . If you look at things in isolation there's nothing particularly beautiful about them, yet by adding to Nature they enrich us and draw us in. And anyone with a feeling for Nature - anyone with deep sensitivity - will find it all gives pleasure, even when it is inadvertent. You will find the jaws of animals as beautiful as painted ones or sculptures . . . And other things like that will call out to the observer constantly, things unnoticed by others, but things available to those who are at home with Nature and its works.'⁸ The sentiments, albeit expressed in a kind of oracular prose and lacking metrical poetry, are not very dissimilar from those of Wordsworth, especially when we place them in their proper context of overall melancholia.⁹ As Matthew Arnold, himself a fine poet, pointed out, Marcus's appreciation of Nature has 'a delicate penetration, a sympathetic tenderness, worthy of Wordsworth.'¹⁰

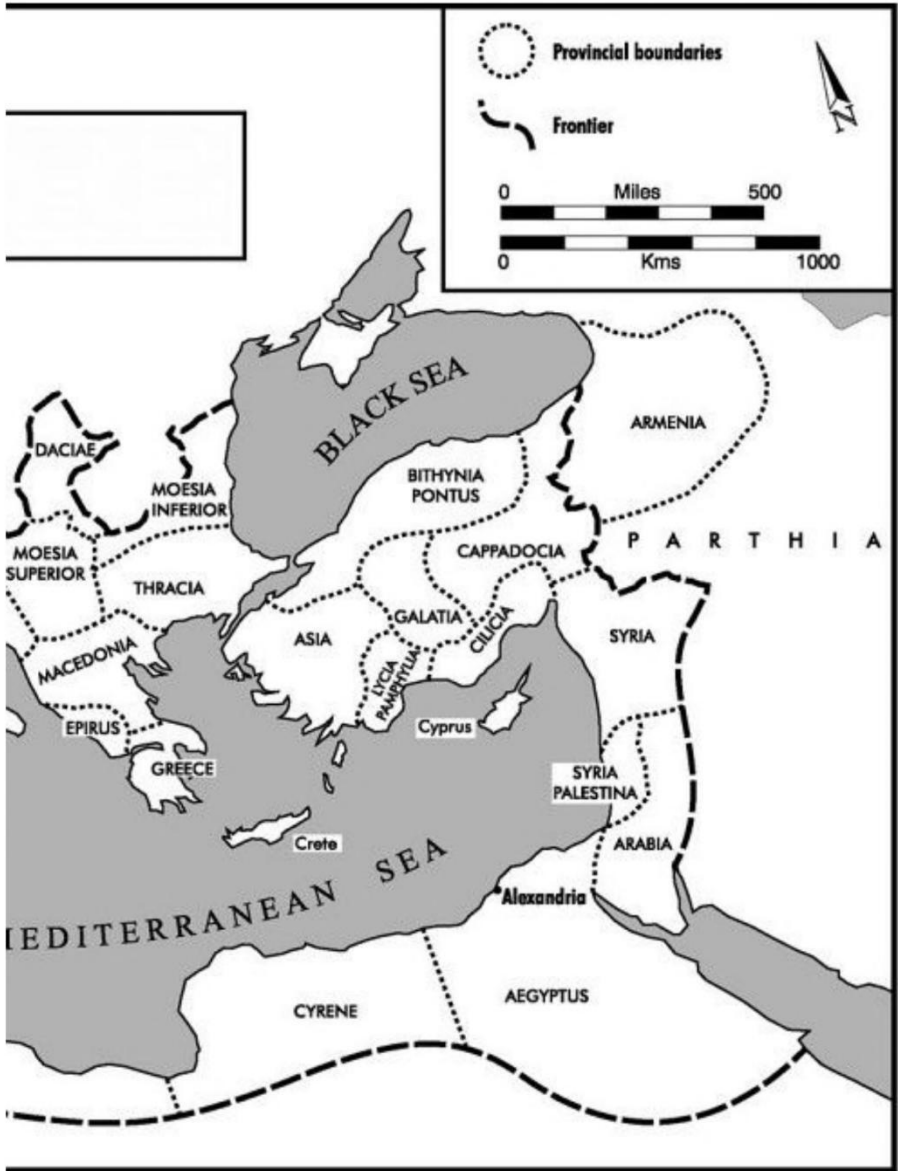
Perhaps linked with this is a fourth main reason for Marcus's favourable reception in the modern world. The decline of organised religion in the West has led to a massive upsurge of interest in New Age ideas and the thought and philosophy of the Orient, with which Marcus's *Meditations* have an obvious affinity. The classic doctrines of Hinduism in the *Upanishads* (dating from the 6th century B.C.) similarly stress the inferiority of pleasure to 'the good', the illusion of selfishness, the desirability of self-knowledge and the holistic interpenetration of all things in the universe, in short, pantheism. The texts share Marcus's contempt for the body and stress that he who finds spirit becomes spirit and becomes, in a sense, everything. 'I am this world and I eat this world. Who knows this, truly has knowledge.' And: 'Death said, "The good is one thing, the pleasant another; these two, having different objects, chain a man. It is well with him who clings to the good; he who chooses the pleasant misses his end."' ¹¹ Buddha, in the following century, while retaining most of this, broke away from Hinduism through his 'heresy' of Karma and Nirvana and proposed an eightfold way to wisdom. This consists of the following: Right View, or understanding the origins of suffering; Right Resolve, or choosing to avoid self-indulgence; Right Speech, or refraining from gossip; Right Action, not murdering or (which in Buddha's view was the same thing) soldiering; Right Livelihood, or not making money in socially harmful ways; Right Effort, avoiding unwholesome thoughts; Right Mindfulness, or achieving control of mental states; and Right Concentration, the attainment of inner serenity.¹² The third great source of Eastern philosophy, apart from the *Upanishads* and Buddha's 'bible' the *Dhammapada*, is the *Bhagavad-Gita* or 'Song of God', itself part of the Hindu epic (analogous to the *Iliad*), the *Mahabharata*.¹³ Probably composed in the second century B.C., this offers a head-on challenge to Buddha's doctrines, stressing the immortality of the soul, a personal God and the fallacy of pacifism. Again, there are many pre-echoes of Marcus, as in the following: 'For that which is born, death is certain, and for the dead, birth is certain. Therefore grieve not over that which is unavoidable.'¹⁴ It is easy to understand why Marcus has sometimes been called 'the Roman Buddha.' Not until Schopenhauer and C.G. Jung were there personalities in Western thought who were so much in sympathy with the wisdom of the East.¹⁵

The Wordsworthian feeling for Nature and the affinities with Oriental thought come together in the final Aurelian theme, explaining Marcus's perennial

popularity: his role as an apostle of solitude. This notion alone links him strongly with doyens of the Romantic movement, most notably Rousseau, Byron and Wordsworth.¹⁶ The Elizabethan thinker Francis Bacon stated that: 'Whosoever is delighted in solitude is either a wild beast, or a god.'¹⁷ Marcus was in no doubt that the solitude he sometimes felt even in palaces engendered godlike thoughts, and the perception that to be alone can trigger the numinous insight and the mystical inspiration is widespread in literature. It is more than just curious that the great solitaries of history have always entertained thoughts not unlike those in the *Meditations*, and that such feelings can be precipitated even by artificial solitude.¹⁸ What all this shows is that, despite his huge influence, Marcus is a hard act to follow. His actual lesson was that one has a duty to involve oneself in everyday life while seeing it for what it is and holding it at bay with mental reservations; this is not the same thing at all as reclusive withdrawal or the life of the artificial solitary. Marcus will probably never be hugely popular with committed Christians, if only because he persecuted them. But for others he holds out the prospect of spirituality for atheists, happiness without God, joy without heaven and morality without religion. As we shall have occasion to say over and over again, he truly was a man for all seasons, and those seasons include the twenty-first century. Marcus's career was beset with ironies and contradictions. There was the conflict between what reason and Stoic doctrine told him the world should be like (which necessarily entailed Panglossian optimism) and how he instinctively perceived it (which engendered pessimism). There was the obvious contradiction between his philosophical stance on the unreality of evil and his jaundiced comments on the world which showed that he thought it only too real. And there was that between his contempt for the external world and the duty he owed it as a Roman emperor, between his desire to be a philosopher/hermit and his destiny as a warrior. Yet perhaps the greatest irony is that Marcus despised fame and the opinion of posterity - he often speaks of the absurdity of posthumous fame - but has survived as an influence, an example and an inspiration for two millennia.

The Roman Empire During the Lifetime of Marcus Aurelius.





1

Just as we refer to, say, John F. Kennedy as the thirty-fifth president of the United States, so we may call Marcus Aurelius the sixteenth ruler of the Roman empire (that is, if we include the three short-lived incumbents of the 'year of the four emperors' in AD 68-9).¹ Conventionally the emperors from AD 14 to 69 are called the Julio-Claudian dynasty, Vespasian and his sons Titus and Domitian are the Flavians, the childless Trajan and Hadrian are usually termed the Spanish emperors, and then Antoninus Pius initiated the era of the Antonines, which ended with Marcus Aurelius's son Commodus. The story of Marcus Aurelius ideally requires a knowledge of all the emperors who preceded him, but the biographer would then be involved in an endless quasi-Hegelian task, since an understanding of Augustus in turn requires an understanding of Julius Caesar, and he can be understood only in terms of the class war under the Roman republic stretching back at least as far as the Gracchus brothers in the second century BC. The obvious temptation is to start Marcus Aurelius's life at his birth in 121 without any preamble, but such an approach would be severely one-dimensional. Self-contained biographies are fine in eras we know well, but to understand a Roman emperor, of all people, we need to know something of the wider world in which he operated, his historical context and milieu, as well as the scope and limitations of his power.

When Marcus Aurelius was born, Rome was approaching the 900th anniversary of its founding (traditionally in 753 BC). For centuries this undistinguished town on the Tiber had warred with its Etruscan neighbours, principally the city of Veii. Some time in the sixth century BC the Romans threw out the last of their kings and declared themselves a republic, ruled by a body of oligarchs known as the Senate. Rome became an expansionist military power from the late fourth century (around the time Alexander the Great was completing his conquests in the East). The Romans' first target was the powerful Samnite confederacy of central Italy, but the Samnites proved almost a match for them and succumbed only in the decade of the 290s. Next Rome came into collision with the Greek colonies of southern Italy, which famously called in one of Alexander the Great's descendants,

Pyrrhus of Epirus, to help them, but in vain. Rome went on to vanquish Syracuse, the great power in Italy, and then became involved in a titanic struggle for mastery in the western Mediterranean with the North African state of Carthage (in modern Tunisia). The so-called Punic Wars, lasting sixty years, were the result. Rome nearly went under to the brilliant generalship of the Carthaginian general Hannibal, but its superior resources eventually ground the Carthaginians down at the beginning of the second century BC. From the western Mediterranean, Rome expanded east, sweeping into its maw Greece, North Africa, Spain, France, Egypt and the whole of the modern Middle East. Britain, vanquished in AD 43, was the last significant conquest. But by the first century BC victorious Rome had become the victim of endemic civil strife, internal rebellions by its Italian allies, slave revolts and a vicious class war within the city itself, which threatened to destabilise the entire Roman state. In these circumstances salvation was sought in the 'man on horseback'. Julius Caesar, conqueror of Gaul and victor in a bloody civil war, became a one-man ruler. Suspected of wishing to make himself king, he was assassinated by a senatorial conspiracy on the Ides of March in 44 BC. But the Senate had merely gained a breathing space. Caesar's nephew Octavian took a mere dozen years to make himself ruler of the Roman world, and in 27 BC proclaimed himself a new kind of autocrat, an emperor.

The Roman emperors ruled a vast stretch of territory, from Scotland to the Sahara Desert and from the Atlantic to the River Euphrates in present-day Iraq; the total land area has been estimated as 3.5 million square miles in the reign of the emperor Trajan, or about half the size of the United States. The northern border in Europe followed the course of the Rhine and Danube rivers all the way to the Black Sea. Outside the empire were Scotland, Ireland, the Baltic countries, Germany, Poland and the former Czechoslovakia. Inside the magic cordon of empire were the present-day England, France, Spain, Portugal, Greece, the former Yugoslavia, Romania, Turkey, Israel, Lebanon, Syria, Egypt and the northerly parts of what are today the nation-states of Morocco, Tunisia, Algeria and Libya. Today's Switzerland, Austria and Hungary lay on either side of disputed territory, a kind of no-man's-land between the Roman empire and the ferocious German tribes to the north. Most importantly for transport and communication, the entire coastline of the Mediterranean lay within the Roman empire; truly it was, as the Romans said, *mare nostrum* (our sea). Since demography is an esoteric science, where inexact or

incomplete data have to be 'guesstimated', using sometimes controversial models, it is not surprising to find that the exact population of the Roman empire has always been a subject of intense academic debate. But the most likely estimate for the reign of Marcus Aurelius is somewhere between seventy and eighty million.² There is little justification for histories that insinuate a 'quantum jump' in population between the reigns of Augustus and Marcus Aurelius, for over these 150 years the population grew at a fairly constant rate of about 0.15 per cent a year. It can at least be stated with confidence that the Roman empire contained the highest level of population in the Mediterranean until the sixteenth century. By the time of Marcus's accession the empire embraced about one-fifth of the entire population of the then world, acting as a kind of mirror image to the Han empire in distant China, where a census of AD 156 registered nearly sixty million people.³

At least one million of the Roman empire's population lived in Rome itself. There is a fairly general consensus that Rome's population was 750,000 in AD 14 and rose to one million by the year 100, although some observers would put the figure as high as 1,250,000 by the reign of Antoninus Pius; as always, the demography of the ancient world is an inexact science, and full certainty is precluded by our ignorance of such key variables as the extent of the slave population, the size of households, the average number of people residing in each house, what extrapolations we should make from the free corn issue (the *annona*), and so on.⁴ The slave population of the empire is estimated at somewhere between seven and ten million, though it is thought that about half the population of the city of Rome - or at least 500,000 - were slaves; in general, the proportion of slaves to free-born was always much higher in Italy than in Egypt or North Africa. The population of Italy itself has been estimated at anywhere between seven and fourteen million, though the smaller figure is the more probable. The Italian peninsula contained between 430 and 450 cities, depending on the exact definition of 'city', and this urban population accounted for about one-third of Italy's people.⁵ In the empire as a whole the total urban population has been estimated at anywhere between six and nineteen million, with the most likely scenario being that cities accounted for about 20 per cent of the population, or fifteen million if we assume that the total figure of 70-80 million is correct. Outside Rome, the largest city in the empire was Alexandria, with more than 300,000 inhabitants,

closely followed by Carthage with almost the same number and Antioch close up in third place. Ephesus and Pergamum may each have contained 180,000 inhabitants.⁶ Yet in general, apart from North Africa, which was more densely populated in antiquity than it is today, the Roman empire was sparsely peopled by modern standards. All large pre-industrial urban populations were incapable of reproducing themselves and required constant immigration from the more thinly peopled but more healthy rural areas.

The Roman economy was underdeveloped. The mass of the people lived in poverty, technology was backward, agricultural labour was predominant and land was *the* source of wealth and power; the associated ethos, ideology and values of a landed aristocracy were therefore paramount. Since the Mediterranean area is not suited for pastoralism in the way that areas of vast rich plains are (only sheep and goats can deal with the summer water shortage), agriculture was the single most important item in the Roman economy.⁷ Vines, olives and cereals - the so-called 'Mediterranean triad' - were by far the most important product, and Cato the Elder, the most famous agronomist of the Roman republic, went to great lengths to show that they were also the most profitable. Dry legumes - broad beans, peas, chick-peas and lentils - came a poor fourth, while poultry farming and the rearing of pigs and sheep were worthwhile only if the farmer lived near a large town.⁸ Mining of gold, silver, lead and other minerals was also important, but perhaps the most dynamic feature of Roman economics was long-distance trade and commerce. Very similar in its structure and limitations to the trade of early modern Europe c. 1400-1750, Rome's riverine and seaborne commerce linked the Mediterranean with the Black and Red Seas and with the Indian Ocean. The importance of the Rivers Nile, Rhône, Rhine, Tiber, Ebro and Guadalquivir, to say nothing of lesser Italian streams like the Anio, Nera, Topino and Chiani, can hardly be overstated.⁹ Although the Mediterranean was considered supremely dangerous in winter (November-February), and the cautious avoided it also in March-April and September-October, greed made people willing to risk storm and shipwreck even in the depths of winter. To some extent the risk was a calculated one, since Roman trading ships were large and comparable to European vessels in the period 1550-1750, and the dangers of the Mediterranean were moderate and even picayune compared with those faced by the captains of ocean-going freighters on the Atlantic and Pacific in the Age of Discovery. But the greatest overall

consideration was cost, and profit. It has been calculated that the ratio of land, river and maritime costs in the Roman empire was an astonishing 55:6:1.¹⁰

Rome was not entirely non-industrial, since there were brick, marble, pottery, glass and textile industries (the last-named estimated on its own to have employed 4 per cent of the population), not to mention primitive lumber mills. Banks, such as they were, were local and there were no empire-wide credit-granting facilities. Because of the aristocratic prejudice against trade, much commerce was ostensibly in the hands of slaves and former slaves (freedmen), though it is usually considered that this was largely a front behind which the Roman upper classes conducted profitable enterprises.¹¹ The most sober view is that the Roman empire resembled a Third World economy today. Technology was primitive, largely because of the institution of slavery, and agriculture predominated, absorbing the labour of three-quarters of the population. Meanwhile the contribution of commerce and industry to the overall wealth of the economy amounted to no more than 5 per cent. The Gross National Product was low for such a vast empire: it has been estimated at 17 billion sesterces by the end of Augustus's reign, or the equivalent of 1,400 tonnes of gold.¹² Productivity was poor: having risen in the era of the Punic Wars in the third century BC, it peaked under the Julio-Claudian emperors and began to decline around the time of Marcus Aurelius's principate. The growth rate of the economy was only about 0.1 per cent a year. Nevertheless, the view that the Roman empire was a primitive economy has recently been challenged by a group of economists seeking to show that it was really a proto-capitalist enterprise. It is true that the 'pro-marketeers' can identify many distinct market exchanges that seem unlike the features of a slave or command economy. Roman economic transactions are indeed unique, resembling neither the trade of a modern or even an early modern economy, nor the simple exchange system of a primitive society. The empire had a large market for food, textiles and metals and the social and institutional mechanisms to sustain such a system. The question remains: how many market exchanges does it take to make a genuine market economy? And the Roman economy cannot have been truly commercial because most people were engaged in agriculture, lived at subsistence level and had no surplus for consumer goods; in a word, the economy was bedevilled by a low level of *effective demand*.¹³ Fortunately, perhaps, the exact nature of the Roman economy is not an issue that need detain any longer a

biographer of Marcus Aurelius.

The Roman empire was above all an empire of conquest, and this simple fact had profound consequences for society at every level. The main sources of income for the empire were tribute paid by the conquered, indirect taxes on the sale of slaves, customs duties, and revenue from estates, mines and other properties. The level of Roman taxation was always relatively low, partly because taxation was levied mainly to recover the costs of war and defence and partly because the taxpayers were the defeated. From 167 BC until the fourth century AD the citizen inhabitants of Italy paid no land tax.¹⁴ The system was inherently unfair, as taxpayers in the provinces received peace and security as their only return from their taxes, whereas Italians got a proper system of law and order, justice and good roads (to say nothing of the special privileges enjoyed by the citizens of Rome, to be discussed later). Since Rome was an empire of conquest, it is not surprising to find the tax yields rising astronomically during the classic era of conquest under the republic. In 250 BC Roman tax revenues were between four and eight million sesterces a year, but by 150 BC this figure was 50-60 million, by 50 BC 340 million and by AD 50 at the end of Claudius's reign 800 million.¹⁵ Tax revenues rose one hundredfold in 300 years, but then remained at roughly the same level until the third century AD. Low as a proportion of Gross National Product (perhaps 5 per cent), per capita taxation has been estimated at thirteen sesterces per head of population, or 11 per cent of minimum subsistence. To put this in a historical context, the tax load was more than the French and English governments raised in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, but much less than they levied in the eighteenth.¹⁶

The truly distinctive thing about the Roman economy was that it rested on slavery, which is seen by many historians as the principal barrier to technological breakthrough: in short, the Romans did not innovate technically because they could derive an economic surplus from slaves. Depending on the figures we adduce for the overall population and slaves, maybe one in six of the inhabitants of the Roman empire was a slave. They were particularly numerous in Italy, where the ratio of slave to free may have been as high as 1:3; and in certain cities scattered throughout the empire, such as Pergamum, where every third person was a slave.¹⁷ Although very few advanced societies in history have depended on

slavery as an economic base (obvious examples being nineteenth-century Brazil and the American South before 1861), Roman slavery had little in common with these other models and in some ways is best understood by the tribal slavery of Africa as discovered by the Victorian explorers; both systems were bewilderingly complex. To simplify, one might say that Roman slaves were of three main kinds: those in urban households, those who worked in the fields in the country, and the chained slaves employed on great estates (*latifundiae*) and in the mines.¹⁸ The lot of domestic slaves, as might be expected, was more privileged and pampered than that of their unfortunate counterparts involved in heavy manual labour, and this was not just because of the lighter duties. The more slaves a wealthy Roman possessed, the greater his prestige; some had 400 or more in their household.¹⁹ There were thus more slaves than jobs for them to do, and to compensate a ludicrous division of labour arose, whereby one slave would buy groceries, another would cook, another put on his master's shoes, another dress him, another massage him, and another follow him around to attend to his every need. The Stoic philosopher Epictetus, *the* great intellectual influence on Marcus Aurelius, pointed out the absurdity of all this - and he knew, because he had been a slave himself.²⁰

In Rome slaves could be found in a bewildering variety of occupations: as street cleaners, builders of baths and temples, factory workers, navvies on roads and aqueducts; as shop workers, cooks, barbers, hairdressers, nurses, tutors, secretaries, butlers, laundry women, house cleaners, seamstresses and schoolteachers.²¹ Roman patricians were often in a kind of competition with their wealthy neighbours to see if they could buy better-looking or more accomplished slaves, and the oversupply of labour thus generated meant that male slaves were often found doing household chores that females could easily do.²² It will be clear, then, how different Roman slavery was from that of the antebellum American South, quite apart from the consideration that American slaves were always black and those in the Roman empire could be any colour. Roman slaves were often talented, clever and educated, occupying positions of responsibility and with a real prospect of freedom. Some slaves in large households had *de facto* control of great wealth, supervised other workers (both free and slave) and (and here the similarity to African tribal slavery is most marked) were themselves served by

other slaves.²³ Yet despite their managerial powers and often sumptuous lifestyle, they owned nothing legally and were subject to the arbitrary whim of their masters. There were severe penalties for running away, including branding on the forehead. Intense hostility of owners to slaves, and vice versa, lay only just under the surface and is a pervasive motif in instructive literature like the life of Aesop.²⁴

Under the Roman republic, slaves were acquired largely by war and piracy. The slave population thus consisted of conquered and defeated people, the children of slaves and the products of the slave trade. In addition there were abandoned children, and in some provinces destitute peasants sold their offspring into slavery; there were even some races, like the Phrygians, who did not consider slavery dishonourable.²⁵ But with the coming of the famous Roman peace (*pax Romana*) the question arose: how were the Romans to acquire fresh slaves? Here we encounter one of the perennial problems of ancient Rome: that an empire based on conquest has a built-in momentum that cannot be arrested without system failure. One answer might be that the slave population could constantly reproduce itself, but this did not happen. Certainly slaves were encouraged to propagate and even procreate within the sacred confines of marriage,²⁶ but, as in imperial Brazil in the nineteenth century, the slave population failed to keep up its numbers. Many of the reasons are obvious. Three-quarters even of the household slaves were male. Only household slaves (*vilici*) were allowed female partners; those employed in agriculture, mining, dock work, portage, transport, and so on, were not. On the other hand, many female slaves were set free (manumitted) so as to be marriageable and bear free children; emancipation of these nubile slaves removed the very individuals who were essential for the maintenance of numbers. Moreover, all the evidence is that female slaves were not particularly prolific. Finally, even free people found it hard to keep up their population levels, given the menace from war, famine, plague and poor diet, medicine and obstetrics. The average life expectancy of Romans at birth is a much-disputed subject, but even if we allow an optimistic figure of twenty-five to thirty years, the corresponding figure for slaves was at most twenty.²⁷

By the time Marcus Aurelius became emperor, more than half a million new slaves were required annually. Where were they to come from in an era of *pax*

Romana? The occasional large-scale provincial revolt and intermittent new war of conquest provided part of the answer. The historian Josephus estimated that one result of the great Jewish revolt of AD 66-70 was 97,000 Jewish slaves.²⁸ Trajan's conquest of Dacia (modern Romania) in the early second century injected many tens of thousands more, and the great Jewish revolt of Bar-Kochba in Hadrian's reign (see pp. 33-35) was said to have produced another 100,000. Roman forays into Scotland and other outposts of Britain put more slaves on the market. But there were other supplies to satisfy the constant demand. Slaves could be obtained from outside the Roman empire, from Germany or Parthia, most obviously.²⁹ The sale of children by parents and kidnapping was one avenue.³⁰ The use of criminals in the mines released other slaves, while possibly the most important source of all was the enslavement of foundlings or abandoned children—a custom not abandoned until AD 374. Child exposure and infanticide were common in the Roman empire, and females, particularly, were abandoned at birth by poor parents.³¹ In this hideous way supply and demand in slavery remained at equilibrium. The consequence was that there was no serious drop in the number of slaves until the reign of Marcus Aurelius. It was his misfortune, as we shall see, to confront a general manpower shortage caused largely by plague.

Society in the Roman empire was one of the most rigidly stratified there has ever been, with grotesque levels of inequality. At the top of the steep social pyramid was the senatorial class, its membership determined solely by wealth and limited in number to 600. To be a senator it was a necessary condition to be worth at least one million sesterces.³² The next class down was the equestrian, and again membership was determined by wealth, with the minimum figure this time being 400,000 sesterces; there were perhaps 2,000 knights or equestrians in Rome and some 30,000 empire-wide. Below them again would be members of the bourgeoisie, mainly landowners; their role was measured financially by possession of 200,000 sesterces and socially by the status of juryman, to which such wealth entitled them. At 100,000 sesterces one qualified to be a town councillor: in short, property qualifications determined one's entry into every single social sphere. Below the bourgeoisie in the pyramid would come the shop-owners, retail traders, money-changers, artisans, doctors, teachers and other members of the liberal professions, the salaried classes, minor municipal officers and that vast range of people connoted by the term petty bourgeoisie. Finally there was the proletariat

of free wage earners and below them the slaves. This was a society where heredity was all-important; without the advantages of birth, and in the absence of a business culture, it was impossible to rise through the social ranks through mere money-earning. Moreover, meritocracy was almost totally absent.³³ There was no administrative class of civil servants providing a meritocratic route, as in modern societies, and the dominant ideology was hostile to all such notions: the landed aristocracy who monopolised all the top government positions thought it natural and proper that these should be filled by men of birth. The only real avenue for social mobility was that of the freedman, for the manumitted slave could rise higher in Rome than in any other slave society. It takes an effort of imagination to conceive of a society where vast wealth was concentrated in so few hands; perhaps the nearest modern equivalent would be Saudi Arabia.³⁴

It is worth emphasising that the senatorial class in the Roman empire (to which Marcus Aurelius belonged) literally lived like kings. Private wealth was not subject to progressive taxation and the rates of tax were not heavy. Private property in Italy was exempt from taxation until the end of the third century AD, death duties remained at 5 per cent until the early third century, and in the provinces the basic rates of tribute were only 5-10 per cent. There were few restraints on the accumulation of wealth in the case of those who already had capital, and the large aristocratic fortunes were furthermore the result of surpluses maintained over the generations and concentrated in fewer and fewer hands because of a declining elite birthrate,³⁵ not to mention slavery itself - slaves retained only that portion of what they produced that would keep them alive. The wealthy lived a charmed life, for economic policy was framed around them. Public taxes were set so low precisely so that the private incomes of the rich (mainly rent from estates) could be higher. The route to wealth was invariably investment in land and agriculture, which was a cornucopia, since the vast population of Rome created a huge demand for products such as wheat, olive oil, wine, meat and cloth.³⁶ Three main types of landowner can be identified: local gentry with land in their region of origin; middle-ranking senators and equestrians of municipal background with properties additional to their local estates; and the elite, with a complex of properties in Italy and abroad. In the second century AD they were usually required to own one-third (later reduced to one-quarter) of their estates in Italy.³⁷

The incomes of the landed aristocracy probably doubled or trebled in the first century AD and rose sixfold in the years 100-400. Meanwhile the plight of the mass of the people was desperate.³⁸ Since the state quite literally fulfilled the Marxist definition of an institution for the benefit of the ruling classes, the only possible route upwards for an ambitious free man was a career in the army, since the aristocracy had perforce to share the benefits of empire with its military protectors. The generally low level of income made a legionary's life look attractive since, after the emperor Domitian's 33 per cent pay rise, the common soldier received 1,200 sesterces a year, plus a big retirement bonus and occasional *ex gratia* payments or donatives; retired veterans were usually prosperous members of their local community. Yet of the thousands of hopefuls recruited into the army each year, only a handful was ever heard from again, not surprisingly, since mathematical probability was against them. Only one or two of the thousands of retiring veterans each year made it to the coveted rank of procurator.³⁹ And even within the army the Roman mania for glaring inequality manifested itself. A cavalryman had a salary twenty times greater than an infantryman. Pay scales varied by a factor of sixty-seven, with elite troops (*primi pili*) receiving 90,000 sesterces a year.⁴⁰

How wealthy were the members of the senatorial elite? Pliny the Younger, living at the beginning of the second century AD, had a fortune of twenty million sesterces - twenty times the wealth needed to be a senator - but regarded himself as only moderately rich. In his time the wealthiest man was estimated to have a fortune ten times greater than Pliny's, with an income equivalent to that of 25,000 subsistence farmers. In the last days of the republic, Cicero reckoned that a rich Roman needed an annual income of 100,000-600,000 sesterces - an era when the wealth of the richest, such as Marcus Crassus, was legendary.⁴¹ A middling senator, defined as one who had the capital necessary for maximisation of his estates, had by Marcus Aurelius's era an income of between six and nine million sesterces a year. The largest ever fortunes were seen in the first century AD, when a handful of men had wealth estimated at 400 million sesterces each - the equivalent of between 750,000 and 1,500,000 tonnes of wheat. The emperor Nero confiscated the fortunes of six men who between them owned all Tunisia. By contrast, the largest private fortunes in Tudor and Stuart England c. 1550-1650 were worth roughly 21,000-42,000 tonnes of wheat. With a population at least

twenty times as great, the biggest fortunes in the Roman empire exceeded those of Tudor and Stuart England by a factor of 18-72.⁴²

Roman aristocrats believed in conspicuous consumption and flaunting their wealth; the notion of the rich miser would have been incomprehensible to them. A freedman named C. Caecilius Isidorus left, at his death in 8 BC, 3,600 pairs of oxen, 257,000 other stock, 4,116 slaves and sixty million sesterces in cash.⁴³ One of Augustus's admirals lost 100 million sesterces through risky investment in viticulture.⁴⁴ By the time of Marcus Aurelius the great fortunes were declining in sheer size. Apuleius, author of *The Golden Ass*, writing in 158-9 (just before Marcus's accession), recorded that his father's fortune was two million sesterces, but that, on his own marriage to Pudentilla of Oea, he had added another four million to the family portfolio.⁴⁵ He also wrote that Pudentilla had 600 slaves - which seems slightly above average in the light of a persuasive hypothesis that the normal ratio of slaves to wealth was 400 slaves to three million sesterces of wealth.⁴⁶ Slaves were an important item in the wealth ledger. Although for legal purposes they were often assumed to have a value of 2,000 sesterces, one would normally expect to pay in the hundreds rather than thousands of sesterces.⁴⁷ Figures of 100,000 and more, which are sometimes mentioned in ancient literature, would be considered extravagant, but the highest known price paid for a slave was an astonishing 700,000 sesterces.⁴⁸

Aristocrats liked to compete in the wealth stakes and agonise about the proper definition of the truly rich man: was it, as was often said, the man who could afford to keep an entire legion of 6,000 men on his yearly income; or was it, as Seneca thought, one who farmed land in every single province of the empire (Seneca himself was worth 300 million sesterces)?⁴⁹ By the time of Marcus Aurelius, the largest private fortune was less than 288 million sesterces, as compared with the 400 million of men like Cornelius Lentulus (d. AD 25) and others in the first century. A moderate fortune in Marcus's time was around twenty million sesterces.⁵⁰ But the figures were still staggeringly high, given that average wages were just four sesterces a day. Naturally the issue of wages was determined by the brute facts of a slave economy, where the cost of free labour was inevitably driven down to the point of bare subsistence and reproduction, where it would be no more expensive than hiring a slave. In Cicero's time a

moderately wealthy man had an income 714 times that of a pauper - Cicero, with his annual earnings from legal work of about 555,555 sesterces, was in this former class - while the very rich had an income 10,476 times greater. Yet in the early empire the super-rich were 17,142 times wealthier. To put this in proportion, the ratio for rich and poor in Victorian England - where the gulf between the two was considered obscenely wide - was 'only' 1:6,000: a gap just one-third the size of that in the Roman empire.⁵¹

Such was the world into which the future emperor Marcus Aurelius was born on 26 April in the year AD 121. It was, with hindsight, an auspicious birthday, shared with a number of other notable thinkers: Shakespeare, David Hume, Ludwig Wittgenstein, the Scots 'common-sense' philosopher Thomas Reid and (at least according to the Shia branch of Islam) Mohammed. From his earliest moments he was the recipient and heir of immense wealth and privilege for, next to the obvious factor of wealth, kinship decided life chances in the Roman empire. Marcus was supremely well connected. He was a member of the influential Annii clan, or *gens*, which originated in Spain. The Annii first appear in the historical record during the civil war between Pompey and Julius Caesar, domiciled in the town of Ucubi, south-west of modern Córdoba in what was then the province of Baetica in Roman Spain, but it was with Marcus's great-grandfather that the family early emerged into clear daylight.⁵² The great-grandfather grew rich from the trade in olive oil and achieved senatorial rank, but it was only in the career of his ambitious and go-getting son Marcus Annii Verus (Marcus's grandfather) that real consolidation occurred: Vespasian recognised him as a patrician. He went on to become prefect of the city of Rome and to hold three consulships (AD 97, 121, 126) - a rare honour.⁵³ Perhaps even more importantly, he married well, to Rupilia Faustina, daughter of Libo Rupilius Frugi, a man of consular rank. It did him no harm that he thereby became linked by kinship to a future emperor - for his mother-in-law Matidia was the mother (by another husband) of Vibia Sabina, wife of the emperor Hadrian.⁵⁴ Annii Verus had four children with Rupilia - Verus, Libo, Anna Galeria Faustina and a fourth child, a girl of unknown name - and remarkably all survived, but then the Annii clan had a reputation both for being fertile and prolific and for producing healthy issue. The eldest son Verus married Domitia Lucilla, and thus came into untold riches. His mother-in-law (Marcus Aurelius's maternal grandmother) was an immensely wealthy woman also

called Domitia Lucilla, and she bequeathed most of her fortune to her namesake daughter.⁵⁵ One of the items in the portfolio was a vast brickworks on the outskirts of Rome, which generated super-profits during the building boom that had gone on almost continuously since the reign of Nero.

The union of Verus with Domitia Lucilla produced two children: Marcus (b. 121) and Anna Cornificia Faustina (b. 123). The boy Marcus had dozens of wealthy and influential relatives, for on his mother's side he was descended from the famous orator Cnaeus Domitius Afer (d. 59). Unfortunately Marcus's father Verus died when the boy was three; it was a young death by the standards of the Roman aristocracy, because he was not yet a consul, a rank usually reached by the age of thirty-two, and Verus was only a praetor, the second of the great offices (quaestor, praetor, consul) that a Roman oligarch habitually filled as part of a traditional senatorial career structure (the so-called *cursus honorum*). Marcus had no clear memory of his father, but later referred to his 'integrity and manliness' - which he admitted were nouns derived mainly from his father's general reputation.⁵⁶ Perhaps in tribute to Verus's memory, or perhaps because she had no real interest in men, Marcus's mother did not remarry. She seems to have been a somewhat puritanical lady, but was evidently a person of some importance and attracted envy because of her influence. The future emperor Didius Julianus was her protégé, as was the wealthy Greek orator Herodes Atticus, who was a guest at her house near the present site of St John Lateran on one of his visits to Rome.⁵⁷ It was perhaps from Atticus that she got her well-known love of all things Greek. She was nearly fifty when she died, some time in the closing years of the reign of Antoninus Pius (155-61), but remained an important factor in her son's life. Marcus referred to 'her reverence for the divine, her generosity, her inability not only to do wrong but even to conceive of doing it. And the simple way she lived - not in the least like the rich.'⁵⁸ This was unusual, for the imperial Romans, while paying lip-service to the spartan austerity of republican Rome, were not notable for their self-denial; they also believed in conspicuous consumption and, by living thus while possessing such a great fortune, Domitia Lucilla was in effect distancing herself from her class's dominant ethos.

The salient influences in Marcus's early life were all male. His grandfather Annius Verus took over the responsibility of bringing him up after the death of

Verus junior, but the greatest day-to-day contact with an adult mentor seems to have been with Lucius Catilius Severus, his maternal great-grandfather or, more likely, his step-great-grandfather (if, as seems probable, he married the widow of Domitius Tullus, whose daughter Domitia Lucilla the elder was Marcus's grandmother). Catilius Severus was from an Italian family living in Bithynia who 'married up'. His career was slow to take off, but he became prominent in the later years of the emperor Trajan and gave crucial support to Hadrian during the controversial accession period, when Severus commanded one of the eastern armies. In the final days of Hadrian's reign, he incurred the displeasure of Hadrian, as did so many, and was demoted from his position as city prefect.⁵⁹ The presence of Catilius Severus, alongside the already complex genealogy of Marcus's father and mother, was not the only complicating factor in the family galaxy of the extended Annii family. A fourth child was born to Annii Verus and Rupilia Faustina, a daughter, and this girl went on to be the wife of C. Ummidius Quadratus, scion of an old Naples family, whose fortunes dated back to the days of Augustus; Quadratus was suffect consul (a kind of deputy) in 118 and governor of Moesia Inferior province early in Hadrian's reign.⁶⁰ Originally a friend of Hadrian's, he inevitably fell foul of him and, in the last years of his reign, was in mortal danger from the wrath of that unpredictable emperor, who saw him as a threat to his succession plans. He probably died in the year 139, but by then Antoninus Pius had become emperor and the storm clouds had passed. In even greater jeopardy in the perilous last years of Hadrian was Quadratus's son (b. 114), Ummidius Quadratus Ammianus Verus, who eventually married Marcus's sister Anna Cornificia; Anna was thus marrying her first cousin.⁶¹

At birth, Marcus's mother immediately handed him over to a wet-nurse. The practice of handing over children to wet-nurses was by now universal among the upper classes, to the disgust of writers like Tacitus and Quintilian, who contrasted the 'decadent' practice with the great tradition of motherhood championed by Roman matrons under the republic.⁶² Wet-nurses cared for the child in slave quarters until it reached school age, when it was returned to the parents. The system had several advantages for the pampered oligarchs: it saved aristocratic women from the chore of breast-feeding, which most saw as inimical to their beauty and well-being; it enabled the parents to be available for the full range of social activities and political engagements; and, most of all, in an era of very high

child mortality, it warded off the worst aspects of grief by diluting the affective and emotional bond between parents and children.⁶³ The psychological effects of wet-nursing are usually thought pernicious by modern experts, but it must be remembered that the Romans had a much more diffuse notion of family than that in the post-Industrial Revolution West. Child-minders were a fact of life in a culture that regarded marrying for love as eccentric, even deviant, and whose kinship boundaries were constantly shifting; divorce and remarriage among aristocratic families may have reached 50 per cent.⁶⁴ Any given marriage might bring together children from several previous unions, each of whom also had ties to the home of their biological mother. The consequence was that children were looked after by a wide range of people: slaves, elderly dependants and nannies of all kinds. Additionally, the relative lack of privacy in a modern sense - Romans habitually copulated in front of slaves - made family bonds looser.⁶⁵ At the same time it would be a mistake to suggest that Romans had no interest in their infants. It is a reasonable inference that after his birth in April 121, Marcus's parents would have indulged in all the usual rituals dear to Roman oligarchs. It was customary for a paterfamilias to acknowledge his son by lifting him from the hearth and then, after nine days, purifying him. It was at this ceremony that the forename of Marcus was bestowed, but Roman superstition necessitated other odd customs. Two presents were given to children: a rattle, and a golden amulet to be worn around the neck until the boy was inducted into the official roll of manhood - supposedly a charm to ward off the evil eye and dark spirits.⁶⁶

Marcus was initially brought up in his parents' villa on the Caelian, one of the seven hills of Rome. Under the empire it was *the* fashionable area of Rome, a sparsely inhabited residential district where the aristocrats had their city mansions. Among the many splendid buildings were the Lateran Palace (later the site of the church of St John Lateran), the temple of Claudius, the barracks of the Imperial Horse Guards and the palace owned by Marcus's grandfather (close to Marcus's parents' house). Standing on the Caelian in those days, one could enjoy an uninterrupted view of the grandeur that was Rome and its great sights: the Forum, the Palatine, the Colosseum (built by Vespasian), the Circus Maximus and the new Baths of Trajan.⁶⁷ Although Marcus had an uncle, Annius Libo (consul in 128 and married into the venerable Fundania family), he was a shadowy figure who does not seem to have impinged greatly on his nephew's life. Grandfather

Annius Verus, however, was a constant presence. In his *Meditations* Marcus mentions that his grandfather taught him the virtue of good character and self-control - not giving vent to bad temper. Yet he appears to have had doubts about the man's moral example. When his wife Rupilia Faustina died, the old man took a mistress with whom he lived openly, and this woman seems to have been at the hub of a raffish social circle that the priggish young Marcus disliked as 'bad company': in the *Meditations* he thanks the gods that he was raised by his grandfather's 'girlfriend' for only a short time.⁶⁸ Possibly the most salient role-model for the lad was the emperor himself. From an early age the boy would have been aware of the presence of Hadrian, who from the start took an interest in him and called him 'verissimus' - a pun on his family name and the superlative adjective meaning 'most truthful'; some observers think that the waspish Hadrian was exercising his vespine humour and insinuating that he thought the lad a prig.⁶⁹

Certainly it was Hadrian who showered favours on the boy. The Roman elite liked to go through the pretence that their sons had ascended to the highest position through merit and, in accordance with this ideology, Hadrian 'promoted' Marcus to the equestrian class at the age of six - rather as some later potentates would make their sons cardinals at a similar age; the idea was that the boy would enter the senatorial order 'by merit' when he officially became a man. It should be stressed that, although not unprecedented, the favours Hadrian showered on him were extremely rare honours for one so young.⁷⁰ Having made his protégé a knight, Hadrian next considered that he should have some training in the Roman priestly classes. Roman religion was an esoteric business and some of its rituals were only partially understood, even by the elite. There was a Commission of Fifteen in charge of the Sibylline books, said to foretell the future of Rome. There was a College of Vesta or the Vestal Virgins, charged with caring for the sacred fire at the temple of Vesta. Girls aged six to ten with both parents living were chosen to serve for thirty years: ten years as apprentices, ten years as fully fledged priestesses and ten years as teachers, training the new intake.⁷¹ There were the Salii Colini, devoted to the worship of Quirinus (the deified Romulus, founder of Rome). And there were the twelve priests of the Salii proper, one of the three top-ranking priestly colleges, among whom Hadrian enrolled young Marcus at the age of eight. The Salii worshipped Mars, and the qualifications for priesthood were that you should hail from patrician stock and have both parents living; clearly the

'divine' Hadrian took it upon himself to waive the latter rule. The Salii were the 'jumping priests' (Latin *salire*, to jump) who purified the sacred trumpets that the Romans carried into battle, and their job was to keep Rome safe in wartime. Their priestly vestments were old-fashioned Italian battle dress or outfits supposedly worn by ancient warriors: an embroidered tunic, a breastplate, a short red cloak, a sword and a very pointed or conical helmet made of felt.⁷²

On their left arm the Salii carried sacred figure-of-eight shields or *ancilia* - or, strictly speaking, they carried the sacred shield that was said to have fallen from heaven in days of yore, sent down from heaven to King Numa by Jupiter himself, and eleven copies: one shield per priest. In its origins a crop fertility rite, the sacred ritual of the Salii was most in evidence in March - the month of Mars when the god of war was especially worshipped. The festival of Mars ran from 1 to 24 March, with red-letter days being the 1st, 9th and 24th.⁷³ During this time the Salii danced through the streets of Rome, carrying poles with the shields mounted on them held in the left hand; with the right hand they banged the shields with a drumstick. Each night they stopped in a different locality, were feasted free of charge and moved on again in the morning. The songs they sang were not understood (probably not even by the singers) and were a frequent source of comment and speculation in the taverns. One thing was understood: that the names of deified emperors were inserted into the 'standards' that the Salii sang, for an emperor was above all an *imperator* or military commander.⁷⁴ The priests received special treatment, for the last nine days of the festival of Mars were meant to be fast-days except for priests; the breaking of the fast on 25 March is thought by some scholars to be the origin of Mardi Gras, instead of the 'fat Tuesday' before Christian Lent. During fast-days, as if by compensation, the feasts laid on for the Salii were more and more lavish: the feast in the temple of Mars on the Palatine Hill at the end of the festival was so opulent that the emperor Claudius, determined to establish himself as a 'heavy grubber', disguised himself as a priest to get in on the trencherman act.⁷⁵ Whatever the exploits of a past emperor, one future emperor certainly made his mark among the Salii. It was reported that when the young priests were casting their crowns on the banqueting couch of Mars, Marcus's happened to fall on the brow of the god's statue - the best possible omen. The suspicion of priggishness and ultra-seriousness seems borne out by the report that young Marcus quickly asserted his

ascendancy in the college, became master and leader of dance and song and even took it upon himself to dismiss priestly veterans and to initiate promising newcomers.⁷⁶

Around the age of seven or eight Marcus also commenced his education in earnest. There are two views on his early childhood so far. One is that it was excessively lonely and cramping, with a distant mother and no obvious parent or parent substitute with whom to bond. On this model, his early years would have been remarkably similar to other famous figures with a quasi-solipsistic childhood, such as Nathaniel Hawthorne; the obvious difference is that Hawthorne's mother was left financially impoverished by the loss of her husband.⁷⁷ The other perspective stresses the over-bonding with older men, especially his grandfather and Catilius Severus; on this view, the later adoption by Antoninus Pius would simply have added a third old man to the pantheon. So, far from being damaged by an unhappy or dysfunctional childhood (like Hawthorne with his half-crazed mother), perhaps Marcus's infancy was *too* serene and mollycoddled, perhaps he was an over-pampered child. These are matters of speculation, but what is hard fact - strengthening the inference of 'autistic' tendencies in young Marcus - is that his family insisted on having him educated at home with private tutors instead of sending him to school. Marcus acknowledged a particular debt to Catilius Severus as follows: 'Avoiding public schools, hiring good teachers, and accepting the resulting costs as money well spent.'⁷⁸

Many oligarchic Roman families, the Annius clan among them, insisted that their children be educated at home rather than at school, and it is worth asking why. In the first place it was thought that schools were likely to corrupt the morals of the young, partly because they would come into contact with rougher, more depraved elements, and partly because there was little effective discipline in the public schools, with teachers either being martinets or pussycats, but seldom striking the right balance, and their charges being idle, ill-behaved, conceited or self-willed.⁷⁹ Upper-class youths (*iuvenes*) were like Oxbridge undergraduates of the 1920s and 1930s in their riotousness. This in turn connected with the lesser levels of parental control and discipline under the Roman empire, as opposed to the strict standards of the republic. Parents both spoiled their children and delegated them to nurses and slaves, where they ran wild. Beyond this,

educational standards in general declined under the empire, and this in turn related to the unresolved tensions in second-century society between the official ethos of spartan discipline associated with Cato the Elder and the great figures of the republic, and the vulgar, decadent moneymindedness and conspicuous consumption that had come in with the emperors. Many parvenu and arriviste families, impressed by the showmanship and fluency of star advocates, who commanded huge fees, wanted their sons to enjoy an accelerated education that would get them to the gravy-trough earlier; there was no place for the liberal education of rhetoric and philosophy in their world view. By educating Marcus at home, his grandparents could ensure that he imbibed the old values of austerity and stoicism.⁸⁰

By the time of the Flavian and Antonine emperors the craze in upper-class circles was for employing tutors from abroad, usually Greeks, for the process of home education.⁸¹ Marcus's first teacher was probably a slave, who encouraged the notion of austerity: 'to put up with discomfort and not make demands'. He taught the boy that only lesser minds supported the factions (Blues, Greens, Whites and Reds) in chariot-racing or had favourite gladiators, and that the wise man was he who got on with his job, minded his own business and did not listen to gossips or slanderers.⁸² Soon there was also a painting master, Diognetus, who exhorted him similarly not to waste time on nonsense and to give up unworthy pastimes like cock-fighting (which the Romans usually did with quails); the objection was not the cruelty involved (it could scarcely be that, in the Roman world of all places), but because it was a pastime indulged in by 'low-lives'. Diognetus also advised him to take with a pinch of salt all maguses, exorcists and others claiming a channel to the supernatural and to turn to philosophy and a self-denying lifestyle.⁸³ Marcus went slightly overboard on this and chose to ape the 'Greek way of life' - which meant sleeping on a camp-bed wrapped only in a cloak or an animal skin. When he was twelve, his mother made a rare appearance in his life. Finding him sleeping on the ground in a philosopher's cloak or *pallium*, she remonstrated with him and finally persuaded him to give up 'this nonsense' and sleep in a bed.⁸⁴ Marcus's spartan sacrifice was all the more remarkable since he always had problems sleeping and was a natural 'owl', where most Romans were 'larks'. One of the advantages to him of home education was that he could lie in and not be up betimes, as most Romans were; the Roman schoolboy making his

bleary-eyed way to school was usually up before dawn.⁸⁵

The names of many of Marcus's early teachers are extant. Andron taught him geometry, Gemimus drama and music, and Euphorion literature. Two teachers of Latin are mentioned: Trosius Aper from Pola in the extreme north-east of Italy, and Tuticius Proculus of Sicca Veneria in Africa. Diognetus seems to have been an unusual pedagogue, for in general the Roman attitude to philosophy was that summed up in a line from one of Ennius's plays: 'We must philosophise a bit but we don't like a lot of it.'⁸⁶ In literature, pupils made their first acquaintance with Greek and Latin poetry by copying out and learning by heart selected passages. Virgil's *Aeneid* was the book every pupil had to know, as it was Rome's own epic; the school textbook par excellence, it held pride of place for several centuries. Of the three famous Greek dramatists, Euripides was the most widely read in the Roman empire, and Marcus soon rote-learned huge chunks; the art of reading aloud and reciting from memory was much prized in antiquity.⁸⁷ Apart from Diognetus, the teacher from this period who seems to have made the most impression on young Marcus was Alexander, a Greek from Cotiaem in Syria, who had other distinguished pupils, such as the future orator Aelius Aristides, and was nicknamed 'the literary critic' to distinguish him from another Alexander in Marcus's life, a Platonist philosopher. Alexander of Cotiaem was an expert in Homer, and moralising interpretations of the blind Greek poet were much in vogue. Marcus summed up Alexander's advice as follows: you should not appear a pedant, constantly correcting people, or jump on them for errors in grammar, syntax or pronunciation, but just answer their question, bring up another example or debate the substantive issue itself, as opposed to its wording; the clever educator moves the discussion away from the error onto another plane, but then subtly and unobtrusively introduces the correct expression (of grammar, syntax or pronunciation), so that the pupil learns his error without being humiliated for having made it.⁸⁸

It was Juvenal, a Roman satirist, who popularised the notion so beloved of Romans (and taken over by the Victorians) that the ideal of education was a sound mind in a healthy body. Since Marcus Aurelius was notably frail as an adult, it has been argued that he was not physically robust as a youth, yet the evidence does not seem to bear this out. He was fond of boxing, wrestling, running, ball games

and fowling, from the last two of which we can infer that he did not always take his tutors' advice on what was seemly for a male of his class; to judge from his later tolerance of religious charlatans and hucksters, neither did he heed Diognetus's warnings about those who dabbled in the occult. Vigorous as a youth, he rode and hunted with gusto. But he was never a natural athlete, and probably forced himself to take part in strenuous physical activity as a point of principle rather than for pleasure, much as he steeled himself to attend chariot races and gladiatorial shows (which he detested) just to show that he was a 'regular guy' and not a prig.⁸⁹ It is possible, therefore, that he enjoyed normal health as a very young man, but later suffered largely psychosomatic complaints resulting from the stress of high office. It would, however, be an exaggeration to say that he was carefree until his late teens. He was always over-serious, even if not gloomy or austere. Never a hedonist in the days of adolescence or early adulthood, he took a positive satisfaction in having largely avoided the tugs of the flesh. Two entries in the *Meditations* are significant. First, he thanks the gods that he didn't lose his virginity too early and didn't enter adulthood until it was due time - he even says that he consciously deferred the passage to manhood. Second, he remarks delphically that he is glad he did not lay a finger on *Benedicta* or *Theodotus* and that, even later, when he was overcome by passion, he soon recovered from it.⁹⁰ *Benedicta* and *Theodotus* were presumably attractive slaves of either sex - Roman mores allowed males up to eighteen a bisexual period. And the tone of Marcus's many asides on sex in the *Meditations* suggests that libido was never a particular problem for him. Like many people who are not highly sexed, Marcus could never really understand what all the fuss was about when it came to Eros.

2

Around the time of his fifteenth birthday Marcus underwent a significant rite of passage when he donned the *toga virilis* - the visible manifestation of a male's enrolment in the ranks of men. Discarded were the striped toga and gold amulet of childhood, and on went the white robe of the Roman citizen. Moreover, hitherto named Marcus Catilius Severus, he reverted to his true family name of Marcus Annii Verus.¹ The old men (including the emperor) who had taken such an interest in the boy's education could be pleased with the results so far, for here was an exemplar of the old Roman virtues, an almost perfect meld of Greek sophistication and Stoic sensibility. The more thoughtful emperors had already become concerned about certain trends in social life, especially the cult of conspicuous consumption and the consequent mass import of luxury goods. Vespasian was one of the first to express such concerns, but all the Flavian and Antonine emperors were unhappy with the rising *nouveau-riche* class, who liked to educate their sons in a narrow money-oriented way, cutting out all liberal studies.² Hadrian, a Spanish emperor himself, saw Marcus as almost the quintessence of Roman Spain, and his partiality for the young man was such that in some quarters it elicited the ludicrous rumour that Marcus was actually his natural son.³ But Marcus was a kind of lodestone with which Hadrian hoped to guide the future of the empire. Almost immediately after Marcus assumed the toga of manhood, Hadrian expressed the wish (that is, the command) that Marcus should be betrothed to the daughter of Ceionius Commodus. The main reason for this was that Ceionius Commodus was Hadrian's choice of successor, but was in poor health and came from a shortlived family. The extended Ceionius clan originated in three marriages made a generation or so earlier by a woman named Plautia, who married Ceionius Commodus, Avidius Nigrinus and Vettuleus Cerialius. By fusing the feeble Ceionius genes with the prolific Annii genes, Hadrian was combining two of the most powerful clans in Rome - the Montagues and Capulets as it were - one Spanish, one Italian, and advancing his own long-term plans for the succession.⁴

In so many ways, then, young Marcus Aurelius lived under the shadow of Hadrian. Three aspects of the emperor impressed everyone who studied his twenty years of the principate (117-38). First, there was his open and predatory homosexuality. Roman culture accepted bisexuality and expected youths to pass through a phase of 'Greek love' - either male-on-male infatuation or actual physical consummation. But it was expected that, after about the age of eighteen, a man would be publicly heterosexual, marry and raise a family; if he continued to take male lovers, well and good, as long as it was done in private and he did not 'debauch' adult males. Hadrian violated this principle in two ways: he did not restrict himself by age in his choice of male partners and he practised his 'deviant' sexuality openly. This may or may not have been the hidden meaning behind the sibylline judgement of the Christian apologist Tertullian when he called Hadrian 'an explorer of all the world's curiosities'.⁵ Hadrian's most famous lover was Antinous, who was twenty at the time of his mysterious death by drowning in the Nile. Some said that Antinous was drowned by Hadrian's agents as a sacrificial victim. Others claimed that he drowned himself, knowing that the ageing Hadrian was concerned about his own health and needed a sacrifice to appease the gods. Yet others think he developed a death wish, feeling that, once an adult, he could no longer honourably be Hadrian's lover, but that the emperor wanted the relationship to continue. In short, Antinous's position had become untenable and intolerable, and he took the only way out.⁶

Controversial as Hadrian's sexual profile was, he alienated even more elite Romans by his peace policy. His predecessor Trajan had won martial glory in Dacia (modern Romania) and Mesopotamia, but immediately on coming to the throne, Hadrian abandoned all these eastern conquests and announced that he intended to consolidate the empire on an 'as is' basis; there would be no more forward policies, no more expansionism. The subterranean murmur of criticism on this score would have been a vociferous rant, had people not feared Hadrian's deadly viciousness so much. Later Roman writers liked to compare his 'cowardly' peace policy with the abandonment of the conquest of Germany by Tiberius and Germanicus. As one cynically remarked: 'Having obtained peace from many kings by means of secret gifts, he used to boast openly that he had achieved more in peacetime than others by warfare.'⁷ It is a common criticism of Hadrian that he failed to grasp that the Roman empire was always a dominion of conquest and,

like the shark, needed to keep swimming continually, and that he had no obvious solutions to the problems that inevitably accrued once Rome stopped expanding. His defenders tend to say two things. One is that his predecessor Trajan had given him an impossible hand to play, since Trajan himself was a 'one-off', the first emperor since Augustus who knew how to harness traditional Roman ideals to his own ends and make his ambitions seem the natural ones of Rome.⁸ This is what the poet Martial meant when he said that if Julius Caesar and his old enemy Cato the Younger could be raised from the dead to live in Antonine Rome, they would no longer be enemies, since the ancient conflicts of the republic had all been resolved.⁹ Trajan had somehow managed to reconcile the reality of war and conquest with an ideology of peace and good faith by his personal charisma as emperor and 'god', instead of using the traditional flummery of the 'just war'. Anyway, said other defenders, Hadrian had not abandoned expansionism, but was going about it in a more subtle way. When he pulled Roman troops back from the Euphrates, he had in mind the withdrawal from Macedonia in the second century BC by Cato the Elder - in other words, he was aiming at indirect rule, not the complete abandonment of Roman ambitions in the East.¹⁰

The third noteworthy aspect of the reign of Hadrian was the emperor's tireless travels through the length and breadth of the empire. In the year 121 (when Marcus was born) he visited Gaul and the Danube frontier (Raetia, Noricum, Upper Germany). In 122 his travels took him to Gaul, Spain, Lower Germany and Britain, where he commissioned the famous wall between the Solway Firth and the North Sea. The year 123 saw him concentrating on the Mediterranean coast of Africa and the Middle East; in a very busy year he swept through the provinces of Africa and Mauretania, taking in Libya and Cyrene, then proceeded to Crete, Asia Minor, Pontus, Bithynia and the frontier as far as the Euphrates. In 124 he began his love affair with Greece, touring the country, spending much time in Athens and also heading north to take in Thrace, Moesia, Pannonia and Dacia. Returning to Greece in 126, he spent a relatively quiet year, heading back to Rome via Sicily and then remaining in the Eternal City until 128, when he made further visits to Africa and his beloved Athens. In 129 he was again in the East, touring successively Asia Minor, Pamphylia, Phrygia, Pisidia, Cilicia, Syria, Samosata, Cappadocia, Pontus and Antioch. 130 was a year for the desert, for the imperial itinerary took him through Judaea, Palestine, Arabia, Egypt, Alexandria and the Nile (where Antinous

drowned). In 131 he was in the Libyan desert and then again in Asia and Syria, before coming to rest again in his favourite city, Athens. Compelling affairs of state forced him back to Rome in 132, but the following year he was on the road again, this time limiting himself to Judaea, Egypt and Antioch. Most of 135 was spent in Syria, but finally ill-health and the need to ensure the imperial succession drove him back in 136 to Rome, where he spent his final miserable two years.¹¹

Although month-by-month details of the reign of Hadrian may elude us because of the paucity of ancient sources, we nonetheless know a great deal about the personality of this enigmatic emperor. According to Julian the Apostate (who is usually ranked alongside Hadrian and Marcus Aurelius as one of three hyper-intellectual emperors), he was an austere-looking man with a long beard, 'an adept in all arts but especially music, one who was always gazing at the heavens and prying into hidden things'.¹² The full beard is confirmed from a number of sources; he pioneered this fashion, which became a staple of the Antonine emperors, although Hadrian originally favoured the hirsute style simply to hide pockmarks and other blemishes on his face. He was tall and elegant in appearance, with bright, piercing eyes, strongly built and wore his hair curled. He originally spoke Latin with a Spanish accent, but corrected this by diligent study. A fitness freak, he rode and walked a great deal, prided himself on his skill in arms, liked hunting and was particularly fond of killing lions with a javelin.¹³ Energy was his most obvious characteristic - not just the globe-trotting kind that took him round and round the perimeter of his empire, but the kind that necessitates constant action and a plethora of fresh projects. And so it was that Hadrian changed the physical face of Rome, rebuilding the Pantheon, adding the Roman Forum and erecting a mausoleum (now the Castel Sant'Angelo).¹⁴ Always impatient and in a hurry, he was the subject of a famous anecdote that conveyed his restlessness. While on his journeys, he passed through a village and a woman approached him with a request. 'I don't have the time,' he replied. 'Then stop being emperor' was the devastating riposte. It is said that Hadrian was so nettled that he turned back and gave the audacious woman a hearing.¹⁵

Hadrian's character and personality can usefully be summed up in a threefold analysis. In the first category are his attitudes and actions, which appear neither good nor evil on the surface (but which can doubtless be worked up either way by

admirers and detractors). He possessed both total recall and a photographic memory, and could remember anyone's face, once glimpsed. He knew as much of the detail of the state's budget as the ordinary person knows of his or her household accounts. He was also what would be called in modern parlance a 'multitasker': he could dictate, listen and converse at the same time and not miss a trick. He could be very witty: when he refused a request to a grey-haired man, the man simply dyed his hair and returned with the same request, thinking the emperor would not recognise him. Hadrian looked at him witheringly and said, 'I have already refused this request to your father.'¹⁶ Many of his actions were simple prudence, but others showed a shrewd insight into the techniques of political management. He wrote off the debt of 900 million sesterces owing to the state treasury, and burned the tax documents in the Forum, to the predictable joy of all debtors; and he kept the army on side by declaring a double donative to the troops.¹⁷ He was fanatically philhellene, besotted with Athens and a devotee of the Eleusinian mysteries - indeed, he liked all things Greek so much that his enemies called him (behind his back) 'Greekling' - but balanced this by painstakingly carrying out his duties as high priest (*pontifex maximus*) and keeping all foreign cults at arm's length in Rome itself. He could affect the common touch when he needed to and rough it with the troops, eating homely fare, but had his gourmet side in private: a favourite dish was tetrpharmacum, a mixture of pheasant, sow's udders, ham and pastry, and he liked to make a laboured joke about it, to the effect that it fulfilled the formula of Epicurus and his 'fourfold medicine'.¹⁸

Second, we must consider the evidence for a 'good' Hadrian. His refusal of the title of 'Father of His Country' offered by the Senate, on the grounds that Augustus had not been voted the honour until late in life, sounds like pleasing humility, but may simply have been a clever ploy to humour the Senate. His handling of it, except at the beginning and end of his reign, was usually astute, and his insistence on traditional standards won him plaudits, especially his requirement that senators and knights should never be seen in public without the togas denoting their rank. Although he differed from Trajan in almost every respect (except the shared Spanish ancestry), he insisted on divine honours for his predecessor - a man who had been a trial to him, not least by insisting that he take part in mammoth drinking sessions. But there seems no arguing the fact that, after his third consulship in 119, he did not hold that office again, in contrast to Trajan, who held

five consulships when emperor; to say nothing of the earlier Flavian emperors, who were notorious for 'hogging' consulships.¹⁹ With all his faults, Hadrian's intellectual talents were undeniable, and he particularly showed his mental calibre in his realisation that the roots of the prosperity of the Roman empire were to be found in the rural areas of Africa and Asia. He tried valiantly to revive agricultural life, attempted to deal with the scandal of the sky-high taxes levied by farmers-general and tax-gatherers (*conductores*) in Africa, and reversed the process of peasant apathy and alienation that had resulted in a switch to pastoralism with consequent decay of the cornfields and vineyards.²⁰ Unfortunately he undid most of the benefit of his economic reforms by spending on his lavish building programmes, by the cost of his ceaseless journeying and by the huge expansion of bureaucracy in his reign. Moreover, in his building programme he alienated the crowd in Rome by destroying the theatre that Trajan built in the Campus Martius, compounding his error by claiming that all his unpopular measures were those enjoined on him by Trajan on his death-bed; this simply won him the accolade of humbug.²¹

But there is much more evidence of a 'bad' Hadrian. His record towards the Senate was patchy. All Roman emperors supposedly ruled on a separation-of-powers system whereby they had to work closely with the Senate, but this was an elaborate fiction. The more brutal emperors simply executed and expropriated as they wished, cowing and terrifying senators. The more intelligent ones liked to obfuscate and camouflage their naked use of power by humouring the Senate, flattering it and even truckling to it. Hadrian was in this tradition.²² He also won over the equestrian class by giving them privileges at the expense of freedmen. Whereas previously court offices had been held by freedmen as private posts, Hadrian changed them into official civil-service positions by stipulating that they had to be occupied by knights. The opening to the equestrian class of a great new career led to the rise of this social sector, to the point where by the end of the third century knights held a virtual monopoly in the civil service. Keen on running a tight ship in the areas of auditing and administration, Hadrian found this easier to do in partnership with the equestrians. Naturally cruel, he affected generosity because he remembered what had happened to the emperor Domitian.²³ He was almost modern in his interest in what we would now call social control, and studied closely the mood both of the mob and of the army.

Concluding that the common people could be kept quiet by lavish shows in the arena, he specialised in providing them with wild-beast shows and sometimes had a hundred lions killed in a single spectacle (Hadrian always had something of an obsession with lions).²⁴ As for the army, he liked to pretend to be one of the men, going on route-marches in full armour, sharing hardships, but at the same time stealthily increasing discipline and identifying possible troublemakers and (among the ranks of generals) pretenders to the purple. He had an efficient spy system, turning the *frumentarii* or secret service into paid agents, and in some ways anticipated modern communist systems by having people inform on each other, even encouraging wives to write to him with complaints about their husbands.²⁵

Overwhelmingly the evidence on Hadrian that has come down to us suggests a very dark character indeed. Superficially austere, dignified, genial, straightforward, generous, decisive and merciful, he slowly revealed to the more perceptive that this was a mere carapace, 'character armour', which masked autocratic and even psychopathic tendencies. A rehearsal of the epithets than can warrantably be applied to him is profoundly disconcerting: unpredictable, irascible, capricious, wilful, changeable, fickle (his critics said he was more volatile than any woman), envious, lustful, ambitious, meddlesome, jealous, micromanaging - all these express only part of a thoroughly dislikeable personality. A lover of display while claiming the Greek virtues of moderation, he feigned the Athenian qualities of self-restraint and mildness and, under a mask of affability, concealed his lust for glory. Here is one estimate of him: 'changeable, manifold, fickle, born as if to be a judge of vices and virtues, controlling his passionate spirit by some kind of artifice, he expertly concealed his envious, unhappy and wanton character, immoderate in his urge for ostentation'.²⁶ Seemingly averse to pomp and national pride, and ostensibly hostile to the claims of wealth, birth and class, favouring only the cultivated urban aristocracy, under his sophisticated veneer Hadrian was a deep-dyed reactionary, who was particularly incensed at the progress made by the social class of freedmen and was determined to put these upstarts back in their box, as it were. Frighteningly ambitious, he was one of those people who always has to be first or best, combative, with a relish for scoring points off genuine experts or professionals. He liked to dispute with philosophers, professors and scholars (than whom, in his

own opinion, he always knew better), and if he could not gain the day by argumentation or logic, did so by the glint in his eye that warned his adversary not to press the point. On one occasion he argued with the sophist Favorinus, and it was quite obvious to all that Favorinus had the better of the debate. Prudently Favorinus then said that the emperor had converted him to his way of thinking and was quite right. When reproached for cowardice by his friends afterwards, Favorinus said, 'You advise me badly, friends, since you do not permit me to believe that he who commands thirty legions is the most learned of all. Just remember that. The most learned man is always the one who commands thirty legions.'²⁷

Hadrian regarded himself as the greatest polymath of all time. Those who knew him well said that he had a fair grasp of arithmetic, geometry and painting and could sing and play the flute well. But this was not enough for the emperor: he wanted to be acclaimed as an original genius, across the board and in all fields. He regarded himself as an expert astrologer, studied star signs and the attributes of the 'houses', and liked to remind people that his great-uncle had been an acknowledged adept in astrology. He claimed to be able to outpoint everyone in his knowledge of architecture, etymology and military science.

He yearned for literary fame, composed poetry and wrote his own autobiography (alas, lost).²⁸ A maddening 'know-all', Hadrian always had to be one up. The poet Florus, writing about the emperor's tour of Britain in 122, penned these lines:

I don't want to be emperor, please
To tramp around among Britons,
Or in Scythian frosts to freeze.

Hearing of this, Hadrian at once composed an answer:

And I don't want to be Florus, please
To tramp around pubs and bars
And get myself infested with fleas.²⁹

Holding himself forth as an expert in literature, he let it be known that he disliked Homer and Plato (he was speaking with authority, he said, as he was the world's leading authority on them), scouted Tacitus and Suetonius, preferred Cato

to Cicero, Ennius to Virgil and Coelius Antipater to Sallust. That all this went beyond simple eccentricity in literary criticism to outright bad taste is most clearly evinced by his preference for Antimachus of Colophon to Homer.³⁰ Hadrian bestowed honours and riches on tragedians, grammarians, comedians and rhetoricians, but in return it was clearly understood that one had to take his ignorant criticisms and his affectation of intellectual superiority.³¹ Maddeningly omniscient (at least in his own mind), superior, patronising and condescending, Hadrian and his 'superiority complex' might have been no more than an embarrassing irritant, but the desire to be top dog also masked genuinely homicidal tendencies: Hadrian was a man one crossed at one's mortal peril. Always on a notoriously short fuse, he once stabbed a slave in the eye with a pen in one of his rages. The unfortunate lost his eye, and Hadrian later felt remorse and asked the slave to choose a gift in recompense. The one-eyed victim did not reply. Hadrian then pressed him, whereupon the slave said that all he wanted was his eye back.³²

Yet blindings and strikings were not the worst of it. At the limit, this man who is usually classed among the 'good emperors' could be as vicious as Nero or Caligula. He ruthlessly killed off all the likely successors he did not approve of - Severianus, Fruscus, Platorius Nepos, Terentius Gentianus - and his murder of senators at the beginning and end of his reign made him a hate-figure for the Senate. Towards the end of his life, he even turned on his beloved Greeks and conceived a poisonous hatred for the city of Antioch.³³ His natural taste for violence is clear from his love of gladiators; anticipating Commodus, he even fought in the arena himself to demonstrate his expertise with arms. Vengeful, brooding and vindictive, Hadrian would nurse grudges for ever and then suddenly take revenge for ancient slights, having even common soldiers and freedmen executed for petty insults.³⁴ His worst fault was a paranoid hyper-suspicion, even of close friends. He compelled his brother-in-law Severianus to commit suicide even though he was ninety, drove two 'bosom buddies' to suicide, reduced another to poverty, destroyed the reputation of yet another, and outlawed and persecuted most of the rest who were on intimate terms with him.³⁵ In the year of his death, he dreamed he had been overcome by a lion, and this may be the most significant clue to the inner Hadrian.³⁶ Even those who reject the insights of modern depth

psychology, when applied to the ancient world, can scarcely deny the relevance of an ancient interpreter of dreams who stressed a gap between the manifest and latent content of them. Artemidorus tells us that all dreams of wild animals indicate sickness, and particularly those where a lion features.³⁷ Hadrian's 'lion complex' may tell us something significant about his inner demons, for his true sickness was surely mental.

Such was the man in whose shadow the young Marcus grew up. In the period just before adopting the *toga virilis*, Marcus would have been transfixed, as all elite Romans were, by the third and most horrible of all Rome's Jewish wars. Although it is conventional to regard Hadrian's reign as a period of peace after the strenuous wars of Trajan, the Roman empire was in fact rarely undisturbed by one or other invasion, incursion or uprising. There was armed conflict in Spain with the Moors of Africa, with the Sarmatians along the Danube and in Britain, Libya and Egypt.³⁸ In the year 132 the thunderbolt of war hit Palestine. The Jews - on paper Roman subjects for some 200 years - had never reconciled themselves to their fate. A great rebellion in the year 66 had managed to prolong itself because of the crisis caused by the final years of Nero and, in particular, by the year of the four emperors in 68-9. Vespasian ordered his son Titus to stifle the core of the rebellion in Jerusalem, which he did efficiently in 70, but the last embers of revolt did not die down until the mass suicide of Jewish defenders at the fortress of Masada in 73. Trajan's Parthian war provided another opportunity for the discontented in Palestine. There is clear evidence of collusion between Parthia and the Jews who, in Roman eyes, treacherously stabbed them in the back while they were occupied on the Euphrates.³⁹ But the 'second front' failed as ignominiously as the main front in Mesopotamia, and a Jewish rising was again put down, this time with terrible loss of life, which Cassius Dio, like all ancient historians with a mania for exaggerated numbers, estimated at 460,000; this is an impossible figure, but we may nonetheless assume casualties large enough to shock even the ancients.⁴⁰

The so-called Bar-Kochba revolt of 132-5 was the most serious threat yet to the Roman position in Palestine, as for the first time the Jews had mastered their fatal flaw of factionalism and united under a common leader, the mysterious Simon Bar-Kochba. What triggered the third great uprising is disputed. The Romans were

to the imperial purple; both Nigrinus and Commodus had stronger claims to succeed than either Aelius or Marcus.⁴⁸ Inevitably, the suspicion has arisen that the newly styled Aelius Caesar was Hadrian's own illegitimate son from a union with Plautia (wife of L. Ceionius Commodus the elder), but we should beware of giving the idea too much credence; after all, the emperor's partiality for Marcus had been implausibly explained in the same way. An even more absurd idea was that Ceionius was Hadrian's lover, but after the scandal of Antinous, anything was considered possible.⁴⁹

Having adopted Aelius Caesar as his son and heir, Hadrian then made the inexplicable decision to send a man of such uncertain health to serve for a year in Carnuntum on the Danube frontier, where the climate was notoriously harsh. The idea that he sent his designated successor to impress the flaky German tribe, the Quadi, whose rising power was causing concern, fails to convince, as does the linked notion that by adopting Aelius, Hadrian signalled that he in turn wanted *his* son, the future Lucius Verus (see below *passim*) to succeed.⁵⁰ Lucius Verus was at this time only six, and there was no guarantee that Aelius Caesar would live long enough to hand over to a son who had achieved adulthood. On the other hand, if as is usually alleged Hadrian was simply using Aelius as a stopgap until his real choice as successor, young Marcus, was old enough, then all becomes clear. Yet another view is that the impulsive Hadrian made another of his wild decisions (probably because someone was advising a contrary course of action on him) and then regretted it, but could not go back on his word once he had made the choice public, so decided to give Nature a helping hand in polishing off Aelius. Whatever the case, the climate on the Danube did the trick, and Aelius died shortly after his return to Rome, on 1 January 138, expiring from the kind of haemorrhage associated with tuberculosis.⁵¹ The idea of Aelius as someone who would keep the throne warm for Marcus is the most appealing of the rival hypotheses. A great deal of fuss is made in the official histories of Marcus about his apparent generosity to his sister. The surface story is that Marcus's mother asked him to give Anna Cornificia Faustina part of the fortune he had inherited from his father; Marcus then replied that he was quite content with the bequest from his *grandfather*, so made the whole of the paternal fortune over to his sister, adding the recommendation that his mother should bequeath all her property in the same manner.⁵² But the probable reality is that Hadrian had dynastic plans of his

own for Anna Cornificia and 'leaned on' Marcus to make the transfer.

The circumstantial evidence that Hadrian wanted Marcus to succeed him, possibly around the time the young man was twenty-one, is overwhelming.⁵³ Soon after being officially entered on the rolls of manhood, Marcus was made prefect of the city during the Latin Festival. Originally an office of real significance under the republic - for the prefect administered Rome whenever the two consuls were absent - the prefecture had been kept on under the empire as a formality: a sinecure given to young members of the senatorial class on the make or to princes of the imperial family.⁵⁴ Marcus did with this office what he had done as a young priest with the Salii, making something out of an empty ritual and impressing by his administrative skills, both when dealing with magistrates and when attending Hadrian's banquets.⁵⁵ It did Marcus's prospects no harm at all that he also became the favourite of the empress Sabina. But the year 136 was a black one for many. First, Sabina died in mysterious circumstances, and it was rumoured that Hadrian had poisoned her because she opposed his plans for the succession - not his favouritism for Marcus, but the elevation of the Ceionius clan. Then the emperor entered one of his most paranoid phases. He nearly died from a haemorrhage and was seriously ill at his magnificent villa at Tivoli to the East of Rome, but during his convalescence he brooded over reports that his spies had brought him about the less-than-correct behaviour of his ninety-year-old brother-in-law Julius Severianus and his grandson Pedanius Fuscus Salinator. He at once ordered the two to commit suicide. Severianus did not go quietly. He made a public declaration of his innocence, offered incense to the gods and then opened his veins, but not before pronouncing a solemn curse on Hadrian: 'May he long for death but be unable to die.'⁵⁶ His death and that of his grandson were deeply unpopular with the Senate, but the emperor simply responded to the underground murmurings with a wider purge, involving even more deaths. His supporters claimed, sycophantically, that there were precedents for the emperor's murder of Pedanius Fuscus, citing the way Claudius had dumped his son Britannicus in favour of Nero.⁵⁷

With his critics temporarily silenced by early 138, but with Aelius Caesar dead, Hadrian had still not settled the succession and his health grew worse by the day. On his sixty-second birthday, 24 January, he once again surprised and dismayed

the senators by announcing his new choice as successor: it would be Aurelius Antoninus, a relatively unknown senator with limited experience of government. Lying on his invalid's couch, Hadrian explained the reasons for his choice: in brief, it was Antoninus's very lack of distinction and his middle age, for an older man might be senile and make grievous mistakes, while a younger one might be rash and headstrong. From Hadrian's point of view, Antoninus was a perfect blank slate: he was a steady character, had no real enemies or ongoing feuds, had no siblings and just one daughter surviving from five children; his two sons had both died young. To satisfy all the legal requirements, Hadrian formally 'adopted' Antoninus, but made it a condition of the succession that Antoninus should in turn adopt the seventeen-year-old Marcus and the seven-year-old son of Aelius Caesar, the future Lucius Verus.⁵⁸ Although the movement into new families for dynastic reasons was a special form of adoption, the practice in general was common in Rome, particularly in the senatorial class. There were many reasons for its popularity. For those childless against their will, it provided an heir, and it was always a condition of being named as the heir in Roman wills that the adopted 'son' would assume the name of the benefactor. For the willingly childless, adoption was an ingenious way of perpetuating the family name without incurring the expenses of child-rearing, which were considerable. Large families were financially burdensome: daughters had to be provided with dowries, and sons put through the expensive senatorial career hoops - the *cursus honorum*.⁵⁹

Even philoprogenitive families tried to avoid having more than three, but planning a family (in the literal, non-contraceptive sense) was fraught with risks. If you decided to opt for a large family, given the high levels of infant mortality and the possibility that all the children could be girls, you could still fail to perpetuate your line. On the other hand, if you had too many boys, you could end up having to put *them* up for adoption. Roman law allowed a paterfamilias to give children in adoption, and it was usually the eldest son for whom this fate was reserved, provided he was of good health and above-average intelligence. A sum of money was exchanged, the boy assumed the new father's name and a secondary name (*cognomen*) that indicated his original family.⁶⁰ Apart from being a crafty way to maintain the hereditary principle, which might otherwise collapse through lack of male heirs, the adoption system enabled the childless to play manipulative games with their clients. In the Roman world, where an aristocrat was judged by

the number of his clients, a rich elderly man (or woman) would typically have lots of cronies, clients and hangers-on, always hoping to inherit in the absence of a clear heir. The devious would enjoy stringing all these hopefuls along until failing health indicated the approach of death, when there would be a sudden adoption. In general, adoption made sense both in financial terms and because important families could thereby cement kinship alliances with other elite members. In the case of emperors, even more important considerations weighed, since adoption ensured a smooth succession.⁶¹ Typically, Hadrian aimed not just at the succession of Antoninus, but at the subsequent principate of the new son of the emperor-in-waiting, who from this moment on officially took the name Marcus Aurelius.

Antoninus took a long time to accept the crown offered by Hadrian, confirming the dying emperor's opinion that he was not ambitious and had thus been a wise choice. There is some evidence that Antoninus was genuinely reluctant to take up the imperial burden, but simple prudence obliged him to accept. If he turned down the offer and still lived when a new emperor emerged, he would be a marked man - not so much a king over the water, but an emperor on the water of the Tiber; no man could feel secure on the throne knowing that he was second choice and that the first choice was still extant, ready at any moment to be used as a rallying point by rebellious senators or praetorians.⁶² The formal ceremony of adoption took place on 25 February. In addition to adopting Marcus and the son of Aelius Caesar, Antoninus also pledged himself to marry his daughter Faustina to the eight-year-old boy (the future Lucius Verus) when they were of age. Antoninus was not yet emperor and could not style himself Augustus, but he received the title *imperator* and the traditional powers given to a Caesar, the tribunician and proconsular powers and privileges.⁶³ His elevation distressed and disconcerted many, but especially Marcus's step-great-grandfather Catilius Severus, who was angry that he had been passed over for a man with (in his view) lesser claims. They had been consuls together in 120, but it was Antoninus's first consulship and Severus's second, making him clearly the senior man. He had been proconsul of Africa, had commanded one of the German legions, served in three junior prefectures in Rome and had governed Cappadocia and finally Armenia in Trajan's Parthian war (in 117); he was one of that emperor's favourites and had been decorated by him. Hadrian had used him in a senior position in the Syrian army, and most recently he had been prefect of the city of Rome. How could Antoninus, a

man of undistinguished record compared to his, be elevated above him? Hadrian knew of Severus's feelings and acted with his usual ruthlessness. He dismissed him from his post as prefect and shortly afterwards had him liquidated. He also cropped anyone else he thought could be a danger to Antoninus, just as he had felled the opposition to Aelius earlier. During these years Ummidius Quadratus and his namesake son were in mortal peril, especially the son who had married Marcus's sister. It is surprising that in his clean sweep of potential pretenders Hadrian did not eliminate them too, but it has been speculated that Quadratus the younger made it clear that he did not want the crown.⁶⁴

Given that Antoninus was already an old man and, in normal circumstances, Marcus would not have long to wait before he assumed the purple, it might be supposed that he was ecstatic at his adoption as, in effect, heir apparent. Nothing could be further from the truth. So far from being overjoyed by his elevation, he was appalled. He told his friends and intimates that royal adoption meant he must leave the realm of innocence behind, to assume the cares of office and experience the evil of mankind.⁶⁵ The worst part of the promotion was that he had to leave his mother's villa to move into Hadrian's private home. Marcus made a point of living as austerely and frugally there as he had at home and insisted on acting towards his family as a dutiful son, despite his elevation as heir apparent. Living with a near-madman cannot have been easy, for Hadrian was now fading fast, demanding that his doctors kill him by euthanasia and issuing fresh death-warrants when they refused. Patiently Antoninus explained to the dying emperor that it was his duty to endure pain rather than be put out of his misery, as this would make him (Antoninus) a parricide.⁶⁶ But still the madness went on, with Hadrian identifying fresh enemies every day: those who allegedly opposed his peace policies, mere traitors who wanted the principate for themselves, and dog-in-the-manger senators who opposed his plans for the succession.⁶⁷ Marcus's state of mind, given the liquidation of his mentor Severus and the danger in which his sister and brother-in-law stood, can be imagined. Yet we have even better evidence for his mental world at this time, for he tells us that on the night after his adoption he dreamed he had ivory shoulders. According to Artemidorus, to dream of ivory was an auspicious sign denoting eloquence in the dreamer.⁶⁸ Yet some modern observers have suggested, more cogently, that the dream reinforced Marcus's own stated feelings that he was entering a world of madness, evil and

who neglected the interests of the empire in favour of globe-trotting. Instead of providing leadership and discipline and addressing the deep problems of empire, Fronto thought, Hadrian spent his time building monuments and sucking up to his soldiers. As for the famous peace policy, what about the fact that Hadrian lost far more men in the Bar-Kochba revolt - itself the result of his ineptitude - than all the 'warlike' emperors had in their campaigns?⁷⁹ Fronto thought Hadrian a great one at empty speechifying, haranguing soldiers with banalities and clichés even though his real enthusiasm for the military was skin-deep; his real motive was fear of the army. What was one to make of a man, Fronto said tauntingly, who abandoned all Trajan's hard-won gains and then allowed his troops to grow stale through lack of real combat while he insisted they perform technical manoeuvres; why train men with wicker weapons when he could have got them to fight with a real sword and shield? Marcus was never one for allowing Fronto to get away with what he considered his wilder statements, but it is significant that he allowed all these animadversions to pass without a word of demur.⁸⁰

As for the travels, Marcus praised Antoninus particularly for staying in Rome and running the empire from the centre; once again the implicit criticism of Hadrian is obvious. He also spoke of Antoninus's frugality - in obvious contrast to Hadrian's lavish building programmes and general prodigality - and of his respect for Roman traditions, again in contrast to Hadrian's over-hasty innovations. Yet beyond all this, it is legitimate to infer in Marcus a visceral dislike of Hadrian and all his works. Hadrian had himself portrayed on his coins with grandiose titles: Clement, Indulgent, Just, Tranquil, Patient in Illness. Marcus made it clear that he despised such boastful imperial titles; the epithets he aspired to were those denoting a philosopher or a good man. And he loathed Hadrian for using murder and terror as an instrument of policy; Hadrian, it was clear, was a man who had no proper idea of friendship and knew neither its value nor its limits.⁸¹ It was for the precocious quaestor, now emerging from the dark days of Hadrian, to show by example that, though still a young man, he already knew better.

3

When Antoninus became emperor, with Marcus as his deputy, one of his first tasks was to complete the young's man 'formation' in traditional learning. The transitional figures in Marcus's education appear to have been the two Alexanders. Alexander the Platonist, a native of Seleucia, seems to have taught the elements of rhetoric and philosophy, and Marcus always liked him immensely at the personal level; when he was emperor, Marcus made Alexander his secretary for Greek correspondence - a controversial appointment, as will be seen later. Alexander taught him conscientiousness and duty, that it was not good enough to say that one was too busy to reply to correspondence or to claim 'urgent business' to get out of unpleasant chores.¹ Marcus was not so fond personally of Alexander of Cotiaeum, the grammarian, also the tutor of Lucius Verus, possibly because he suspected him of moral unsoundness. In contrast to other grammarians like Apollonius Dyscolus, who lived in learned poverty and austere obscurity (mainly in Alexandria), Alexander of Cotiaeum was a devotee of the high life, who liked the luxury of palace living, was money-minded and charged high fees. Marcus forgave him, partly because, as already mentioned, he learned from Alexander how to reprimand people without angering or alienating them, instead making them aware of their faults indirectly; and partly because Alexander was generous to his friends and to his native city and benefited the Greek world in general by his eminence.² Other figures from the intermediate stage of Marcus's education were Caninius Celer, who taught Greek and elementary rhetoric and was the author of a romance entitled *Araspes the Lover*; and Aninius Macer, of whom nothing is known.³

Marcus also attended lectures on law by Lucius Volusius Maecianus. It may have been at these lectures that he met the young men he later mentioned as his favourite fellow-students: Seius Fuscianus and Aufidius Victorinus from the senatorial order, and Baetius Longus and Calenus from the equestrian; to the latter two Marcus was generous with money, as lack of funds often destroyed a promising career for those less well-off, like the knights.⁴ Around the beginning of

the reign of Antoninus, Marcus was also a regular attendee at the lectures of Sextus of Chaeronea, nephew of the famous biographer Plutarch. Sextus was a professional teacher of philosophy who made a deep impression on the young man. He taught Marcus a variety of useful lessons: what it meant to be a true father; how to live according to Nature; how to achieve gravitas without pomposity; how to use logic to investigate and analyse the world; how to avoid anger and other negative emotions and to be free of passion while full of love; how to praise without bombast and to display expertise without being pretentious. Above all Marcus imbibed human lessons from Sextus: how to get on in company and so act that everyone wanted to be your friend and was pleased and honoured by your presence; part of this involved developing intuitive sympathy for friends, and tolerance for all amateurs, sloppy thinkers, barrack-room lawyers and saloon-bar philosophers.⁵ Another influence was Cinna Catulus, a Stoic philosopher, from whom he learned the following: 'Not to shrug off a friend's resentment - even if it is unjustified - but to try to put things right. To show your teachers ungrudging respect and your children unfeigned love.'⁶

Of all the Greeks who were brought in to tutor him, Marcus seems to have valued Apollonius of Chalcedon most. He probably first met him in 136 and attended some of the classes he gave in Rome, but then Apollonius returned to his native city. When Antoninus became emperor and Marcus mentioned the Greek's qualities, the emperor sent for him to return to Rome and be the young man's personal tutor. An arrogant prima donna, Apollonius was said by his critics to have come to Rome as if he were Jason in search of the Golden Fleece - a reference to the high fees he charged, which raised imperial eyebrows. Told to report to the palace for his duties, Apollonius replied that it was not right for the master to go to the pupil; the pupil should rather seek out the master and sit at his feet. Such impudence might not have gone down so well with Hadrian, but Antoninus laughed it off: 'It seems it was easier for Apollonius to come from Colchis to Rome than from his lodgings in Rome to the Palatine,' he remarked waspishly.⁷ Marcus ignored Apollonius's massive self-regard and instead focused on the wisdom he imparted, later remarking that he was one of three people whom he especially thanked the gods for having known. Apollonius taught that nothing mattered except the purity of Stoic doctrine, and that a man should be the same in all circumstances, indifferent both to worldly success and to pain, illness or the loss

of a child. From him Marcus learned that the truly generous man knew how to receive as well as give, and came to realise that you could accept favours from friends without losing self-respect or appearing ungrateful.⁸ Cynics (in the modern sense) said that the virtue of receiving was a very convenient doctrine for one so interested in receiving largesse, and that Apollonius rationalised his greed by asserting that his teaching was far more valuable than any 'mere' material object he received from grateful students.

Antoninus took a very liberal attitude to the education of his heir apparent, but never had the tolerance for Greek philosophers and (especially) sophists that Marcus had - or, in the latter case, taught himself to have. Antoninus thought that a training in rhetoric was the most important aspect of an aristocrat's education, and that the teachers of an emperor-in-waiting should be not just masters of their disciplines but also well versed in politics and the problems of running the state. That is why he made sure that five men of consular rank or close to their consulships were also appointed as Marcus's tutors (Claudius Severus, Claudius Maximus, Cornelius Fronto, Herodes Atticus and Junius Rusticus). The first of these, Claudius Severus Arabianus, consul in 146, was an Aristotelian philosopher who instructed Marcus in the entire philosophical tradition of resistance to tyranny. A devotee of republican virtue and ancient Roman liberties, Severus's main theme was the importance of reconciling imperial authority with liberty. There is a minority view that he was as important a rhetorician as Aelius Aristides (of whom more later) and as libertarian a thinker as the Christian apologist Athenagoras (ditto).⁹ Only about nine years older than Marcus, he was from the city of Pompeiopolis in Asia Minor, and the title Arabianus referred to his birth in Trajan's new province of Arabia, where his father had been the first governor. He was another of Marcus's special favourites (though not in the top three), and his son would later marry one of Marcus's daughters. From him Marcus learned about the famous heroes of republican Rome who gave everything for liberty - Thræsea, Helvidius, Cato, Dion, Brutus. Severus believed in freedom of speech, equality before the law and enlightened rulers. He preached the love of family, truth and justice, the value of helping others, the joys of sharing and the merits of optimism. He advised Marcus always to be straightforward with people and to let them know exactly where they stood, never dissembling or harbouring long-term grudges as Hadrian used to do. A friend should always be quite clear what your attitude was

on any subject, there should be no prevarication, and if people offended you or merited your disapproval, you should be utterly frank with them.¹⁰

An even greater influence on Marcus (and ranked by him as the second most important person for whose acquaintanceship he had to thank the gods) was Claudius Maximus. About twenty years older than Marcus, Maximus was consul in 144 and went on to a distinguished career in imperial administration, being governor or proconsul of Upper Pannonia and Africa in the 150s. He is probably best known for being the presiding judge at the trial of Apuleius, author of *The Golden Ass*, who flattered him shamelessly in the process of getting a favourable verdict.¹¹ Another Stoic, Maximus inculcated the following lessons: you must master your self, keep your personality in balance and combine dignity and grace; you should be cheerful in all circumstances, particularly when ill, and do your job without whining; you should be generous, charitable, honest, sincere and forgiving. Marcus said that by common consent Maximus was a man who always spoke without malice, but who said exactly what he thought. He was imperturbable and unshockable, was never apprehensive and never taken aback; he was never rash, hesitant, bewildered or at a loss, never hung back from a task, was never downcast or fawningly hypocritical, never obsequious, but not aggressive or paranoid either. Unlike the men who could not lie straight in bed, Maximus seemed a man of natural probity and integrity - there was nothing forced or bogus about his rectitude - and he gave the sense of staying on the straight and narrow by his own choice rather than keeping on it by external duress. Nobody could ever patronise him, but, by the same token, no one would ever feel patronised by him. Like so many others of Marcus's mentors, he also preached affability and geniality in social life.¹²

It would be invaluable to know more about all these men and their influences on young Marcus, but the historian and biographer is at the mercy of his sources and, unlike the historical novelist, cannot simply make things up. It is all the more regrettable, then, that the largest cache of primary material that has come down to us concerns Marcus's relations with his teacher of rhetoric, Cornelius Fronto, a man he did not hold in particularly high regard. The greatest rhetorician and advocate of his age, Fronto was at one time thought of as a second Cicero. Born in Cirta, North Africa and probably from the equestrian class, he migrated to Rome

oligarchic children were put to Greek composition even before writing in their own language, Fronto distrusted Greek as the language of philosophy; for the first three centuries of the Christian era no philosopher wrote exclusively in Latin.²⁰ He therefore 'leaned on' Marcus whenever the younger man wrote in Greek, but the quicker-witted Marcus was able to catch the master out in instances where Fronto himself had written in the older language.²¹ Fronto believed that even demotic Latin was better than Greek, and he was not alone in this prejudice: Juvenal the satirist famously tore into Roman women who thought it clever to converse in Greek.²²

Much of the correspondence of Fronto to Marcus shows the teacher only too aware of his charge's eminence. The letters have been compared to those of Pliny the Younger to Trajan, but Fronto's were even more wheedling and sycophantic. Typical is this: 'You were formed by Nature, before you were fitted by training, for the exercise of all the virtues. For before you were old enough to be trained, you were already perfect and complete in all noble accomplishments, before adolescence a good man, before manhood a practical speaker. But of all your virtues, this even more than the others is worthy of admiration, that you unite all your friends in harmony.'²³ Marcus, for his part, claimed more affection for his teacher than he obviously felt. An early letter reads as follows:

Go on, threaten as much as you like and attack me with loads of arguments, yet you shall never drive me, your lover, I mean me, away. Nor shall I any the less assert that I love Fronto or love him the less because you prove with reasons so various and so vehement that those who are less in love must be more helped and indulged . . . This I can without any rashness affirm: if that Phaedrus of yours ever really existed, if he was ever away from Socrates, Socrates never felt for Phaedrus a more passionate longing than I for the sight of you all these days.²⁴

There is no record of any reply to this, but four years later we find Fronto writing archly that his wife has said (albeit teasingly) that she envies Fronto for being so loved by Marcus. He continued in the same vein: he was lucky to have Marcus's affection, as Fortuna was a goddess while reason was man-made: in other words, there was no rational motive for Marcus's affection, so it must be a gift from the goddess Fortuna. 'Let men doubt, discuss, dispute, guess, puzzle over the

origin of our love as over the fountains of the Nile.²⁵

There is much more in the same vein in the correspondence. 'Like all your friends,' writes Fronto, 'I take in deep draughts of love for you.' Marcus is even more euphuistic: 'Your letter had the effect of making me feel how much you loved me . . . beyond question you have conquered in loving all lovers that have ever lived . . . So passionately, by heaven, am I in love for you . . . I will love you while I have life and health . . . I will love you more than anyone else loves you, more in fact than you love yourself . . . I can never love you enough' - these are just some of the expressions of affection in the correspondence.²⁶ These high-flown sentiments have seduced the unwary into thinking that what is being described here is carnal, homosexual love.²⁷ But this is to misunderstand an idiom of the Roman world of the second century, a conceit, admittedly tiresome to modern ears. To buttoned-up modern sensibilities, it seems inconceivable that two men could express love without sexuality, but the Romans were in this sense more liberated. Marcus and Fronto used the word 'love' in a ludic way, and both knew what the other was doing and what it meant; it was a kind of elaborate charade or game, in its way part of the very rhetorical hyperbole that Fronto was supposed to be teaching his pupil.²⁸ To labour the issue would seem to protest against wrongful interpretations too much and to give them too much credit. Three points are salient. All Marcus's pronouncements were hostile to homosexuality and he praised the emperor Antoninus for clamping down on the practice.²⁹ Even the easygoing Romans regarded same-sex intercourse with a man aged more than eighteen as a serious offence - which was one of the reasons Hadrian caused such outrage - and the dutiful Marcus Aurelius lacked the rebellious or 'deviant' personality needed to defy this code.³⁰ Finally, despite all the verbal conceits, Marcus simply did not rate Fronto that highly and does not include him in the 'top three' he thanks the gods for having known - inconceivable if he had actually been his physical lover. All Marcus has to say about Fronto in his *Meditations* is that his tutor taught him to recognise the malice, cunning and hypocrisy that power produces and the peculiar ruthlessness and lack of affection evinced by the Roman aristocracy; by implication he does not even consider that his tuition in rhetoric was outstanding.³¹ No true physical lover could ever be so offhand and dismissive, for even if the 'affair' had turned sour, we would expect to

discern some bitterness or bile.

It is the banality of the Fronto-Marcus correspondence that most impresses, not its passion. Much of it is technical advice on similes, metaphors, tropes and other rhetorical devices—a kind of early attempt to teach creative writing. Like all true hypochondriacs, Fronto spends a lot of time moaning about his ailments and is simply overjoyed if his pupil has anything wrong with him and so can be inducted into the magic circle of valetudinarians. Fronto complains of a bad knee, an injured arm, insomnia and other mystery ailments, and Marcus comforts him with verbal bromides, telling him that he would rather see him well again than master all the Catos, Ciceros and Sallusts there ever were.³² Sometimes we can detect a certain weariness in Marcus at having to deal with the constant illnesses and complaints thereof. Sending him birthday greetings some time in the period 140–3, Marcus makes a fourfold appeal to the gods on behalf of his teacher. He wishes that Aesculapius, the god of healing, will bring him good health; that Minerva will ensure that all his wisdom comes from Fronto; that the tutelary deities will watch over him; and that, as he journeys to Rome, the god of travel will ensure that his tutor is with him in spirit.³³ Meanwhile Fronto continues as didactic and tiresome as ever. ‘Unless speech is graced by the dignity of language, it becomes downright impudent and indecent. In sum, you too, when you have had to speak in the Senate or harangue people, have never used a far-fetched word, never an unintelligible or unusual figure, knowing that a Caesar’s eloquence should be like the clarion and not like the clarionet, in which there is less resonance and more difficulty.’³⁴ Only occasionally are Fronto’s thoughts more interesting, as when he suddenly announces that the so-called Golden Age in history was really a time of laziness and lotus-eating. He muses that even good-looking women can never really trust their physical beauty and feel the need for make-up to enhance their charms. And he announces that small is beautiful: lions are not as diligent in tracking down their prey as ants, and spiders weave their webs more meticulously than Penelope (Odysseus’s wife) wove hers.³⁵

The complacent tenor of the Fronto-Marcus relationship was broken up in the year 140 when Antoninus decided to employ yet another teacher of rhetoric for his heir apparent. This was none other than Herodes Atticus, well known already to the young man from his early friendship with Marcus’s mother. Born in

Marathon, Attica (famously twenty-six miles from Athens), into a fabulously wealthy family (his grandfather was worth 100 million sesterces), Herodes made a name for himself as an orator and also acquired administrative experience under Hadrian, who appointed him prefect in charge of the free cities of Asia Minor in 125. Since his father had been consul under Trajan, he had an effortless entrée into elite circles, but he was tactless and insensitive, making many enemies throughout his career.³⁶ Antoninus fell foul of him when he was proconsul of Asia under Hadrian. One particular incident, described later on page 78, is said to have led to Antoninus's ire. Even Herodes's biographer Philostratus, who was always prepared to give his hero the benefit of the doubt, tacitly admitted that Herodes was in the wrong.³⁷ Since Antoninus later became emperor, Herodes could have considered himself lucky that it was not his brooding, vengeful predecessor he had insulted. He then retired to Athens and was elected chief magistrate or archon, but alienated many by his high-handed methods, patronising attitude and intolerance of criticism. Although generous in funding the building of great public edifices and monuments, Herodes was not one to do good by stealth. As an orator, he was considered the most naturally talented of all, a man whose speciality was understatement, subtlety and irony. He found learning easy, but could not resist showing off his talents by studying while drinking and by making a virtue of doing with very little sleep.³⁸ Marcus always found the prima donna-ish antics of the arrogant Herodes a trial, especially later when he was emperor, and as a teacher either found him deficient or decided that he could learn nothing from him; this is the explanation for the total absence of any mention of Herodes in the *Meditations*, when he thanks the gods for his teachers.

However, Herodes was by no means negligible, even if Marcus did not care for him. A dislike of philosophy did not prevent Herodes from using the works of Epictetus to put a bumptious, self-regarding young philosophy student in his place by citing a telling passage of Stoicism that decisively refuted the would-be genius's stance.³⁹ In general, though, Herodes despised Stoicism and its doctrine that emotions should be held in check, and declared that such an attitude was like that of benighted and ignorant barbarians who, learning that pruning was a good thing, proceeded to chop down all their vines and olives; or, as we might say, threw out the baby with the bath water. 'These disciplines of devotees of the unemotional,' he said, 'who want to be considered calm, brave and steadfast

because they experience neither desire nor grief, neither anger nor pleasure, are people who strangle the vitality of the spirit and gradually live out their days in a torpor of bloodless, enervated negativity.⁴⁰ It may have been such sentiments as these that earned him Marcus's displeasure. But it is hard not to sympathise with Herodes's contempt for idlers and drones who affected a 'philosophic' stance while demanding handouts. Like modern hippies who claimed to be 'artists', many lazy Romans turned to panhandling while dressed in the traditional philosopher's cloak, bearded and with hair hanging down to their waist. On one occasion such a man stopped Herodes in the street and asked for money. When Herodes asked him what he did for a living, the hirsute man answered that he was a philosopher; 'Isn't that obvious?' he added aggressively, as if talking to an idiot. 'I can see a man and a beard,' Herodes replied, 'but I don't see a philosopher.' One of Herodes's entourage then came up and recognised the man as a well-known tramp with an ugly reputation, one of those beggars who demands money as of right. After delivering a pithy lecture on the deplorable practice of layabouts posing as philosophers, Herodes was munificent enough to give the man sufficient money for thirty days' subsistence.⁴¹

Although there are not that many overt references to Herodes in the Fronto-Marcus correspondence, it is clear that Fronto found the presence of a rival unsettling; from 140 onwards there is far less explicit didacticism in the letters from master to pupil and more anxiety to please. Marcus's divided loyalties soon found expression in a strange letter to Fronto, where he asked him to back-pedal on a case involving Herodes: 'I know that you have often said to me, "What can I do that will please you most?" Now is the time. If my love for you *can* be increased, you can increase it now . . . It is a favour I am asking you and, if you grant it, I promise to put myself in your debt in return.'⁴² It seems that Herodes Atticus was to appear in court, and Fronto had been retained for the other side. Much about the trial Marcus refers to is obscure; we do not even know its eventual result. Either Herodes was being accused by the Athenians, who seemed to do this periodically as they got tired of his high-handedness, and Fronto was the prosecutor; or, as seems marginally more likely, this is the case that Fronto's speech *De Demonstrativo* refers to, in which case Herodes was the prosecutor and Fronto the defending counsel. It is known that the Athenians were especially angry with Herodes, as they claimed he had defrauded them of a bequest to the

later piled on the misery by insisting that Fronto write to Herodes to commiserate with the 'uneducated little Greek' for the loss of his son.⁴⁸ But whenever there was dissension among his friends, Marcus tended to blame Fronto - an attitude inconceivable if they had really been, as some eccentric modern critics allege, sexual lovers.

After the excitement over the Herodes Atticus affair, Marcus and Fronto resumed a more normal teacher-pupil relationship. We cannot follow all the stages in the higher education of the heir apparent, but the veils lift again in the year 143, when Fronto became suffect consul (a kind of deputy who replaced consuls who died or resigned in office), which meant that he remained in Rome during the summer while Marcus spent time at the seaside resort of Baiae on the Campanian coast-a favourite retreat for emperors and imperial families.⁴⁹ For Fronto to have been given even this modified form of consular office was a great honour, which he owed almost entirely to the favour of Marcus Aurelius. He conceded the point himself in a letter to Marcus in this year, when he played devil's advocate: 'What benefit has your Fronto conferred on you that you have so much affection for him? Has he given his life to you or your parents? Has he undergone dangers in your place? Has he successfully administered some province? Has he commanded an army? None of these things?'⁵⁰ One of the reasons Marcus gave his tutor the position was to balance his status with that of Herodes, who was ordinary consul in 143, having just made a dynastic marriage to an aristocratic Roman lady named Annia Regilla. As the son of a man who had been consul (Atticus), Herodes was doing no more than occupy a post that was clearly his in the normal course of a senatorial career (*cursus honorum*), but Fronto was an equestrian, and even Marcus dared not defy class-bound convention by making such a man an ordinary consul; the position of suffect consul, which Fronto held in July-August 143, was the best consolation prize he could find for him.⁵¹ Fronto used his time alone in Rome to cosy up to Marcus's mother Domitia Lucilla. He sent his wife Gratia to celebrate Domitia Lucilla's birthday, utilising some heavy-handed humour in a letter to Marcus to the effect that Gratia would cost his mother nothing, as she had a birdlike appetite.⁵² Fronto obviously enjoyed being suffect consul and able to address the Senate, but, in yet another of those tiresome conceits that he and Marcus used, claimed to be bored by it. His flattery of Domitia Lucilla was downright shameless. After lauding her as the acme

of womanhood, he went on to contrast her with the normal run of women, who tended to be insincere and mask their true feelings with laughter: 'This goddess, true woman that she is, who gets most worship from women, is Deceit, offspring, truly, of Aphrodite and a meld of many and various traits of womankind.'⁵³

From Baiae, and later Naples, Marcus continued dutifully to send his rhetorical exercises back to the master. He was now concentrating on the so-called 'epideictic' or 'show oratory' - encomiastic, panegyric, eulogistic and denunciatory, in which the usual subjects were episodes from Greek and Roman history or praise and censure of characters in Homer.⁵⁴ Set the task of refuting Quintilian's famous oration in praise of sleep by composing one entitled 'Of Wakefulness', Marcus sent Fronto an essay predictably cherry-picking certain passages from the *Odyssey* and making the risible argument that Odysseus would not have spent twenty years roaming around the Mediterranean except that he kept falling asleep at critical moments, as when his sailors released the caged winds of Aeolus. There followed the usual tiresome examples from elsewhere in Homer, from Ennius and from Hesiod (truly the Romans liked to cite a precedent for everything they did or thought), with Marcus almost visibly yawning and admitting that even he did not find his arguments convincing and that he would always prefer to sleep than to be awake. 'Now, after soundly abusing sleep, I am off to slumber, for I have spun all this out for you in the evening. I hope sleep will not pay me out.'⁵⁵ Needless to say, any attempt at humour was wasted on Fronto, who sent back a pedantic, nitpick ing screed of practical criticism. Curiously, though lacking humour himself, Fronto knew only too well that it was the most effective weapon in propaganda and persuasion, pointing out that anger, spleen and invective were rarely as effective as irony, as Socrates, the great master of this technique, demonstrated. 'For the race of mankind is by nature stiffnecked against the high-handed but responds readily to coaxing.'⁵⁶ Here Fronto was on the verge of the important insight, doubtless commonplace to us, that the greatest humourists are deep down usually angry men, who know that human nature ignores tirades, but is responsive to laughter.

The extant correspondence for the year 143 alternates Fronto's po-faced hints and tips for oratorical success with a degree of mutual back-scratching that the modern reader is bound to find arch, insinuating and even maudlin. Fronto warns

his pupil to be careful never to alienate the all-important masses when making a speech. Echoing the deep fear of the Roman mob entertained by the elite, he reveals himself as the disenchanting patrician by reflecting gloomily that the people always get what they want; an emperor even has to release felons or criminals if the crowd clamours for it.⁵⁷ He claims to have spent a sleepless night worrying about whether his partiality for Marcus has blinded him to defects that a detached observer could clearly see, only to conclude that, no, he is on the right track. There is continuing praise for Marcus's great eloquence, far beyond anything normally expected in a man of his age, but a warning that verse is better than prose as an aid to writing speeches and some advice not to waste time reading Ennius, who has nothing to teach orators.⁵⁸ Marcus replied to all this by saying that he could see through his teacher; that Fronto, unable to win credit for his praise because he was so partial to him, has decided to make it more credible by throwing in some abuse. Archly he added that he was 'nervous in mind and a little depressed lest I have said something in the Senate today such that I should not deserve to have you as a master'.⁵⁹ There were signs that Marcus was already confident enough to reject the parts of Fronto's teaching he did not care for. A particular bone of contention seems to have been the orator Marcus Antonius Polemo, then at the height of his fame as a rhetorician. Marcus responded to Fronto's praise of him by bracketing Polemo and Horace as the two writers he most disliked.⁶⁰ Polemo, famously described as conversing with emperors with condescension and only with gods as equals, once evicted the future emperor Antoninus from his house in Smyrna - and at midnight - saying that he was a mere proconsul of Asia and therefore could not compare with him.⁶¹ Antoninus thus had the dubious distinction of having been insulted by two Greek egomaniacs in Asia Minor, if we bear in mind his altercation with Herodes Atticus on the road to Mount Ida.

The real value of the Fronto-Marcus correspondence, when the pupil was on the Campanian coast and the teacher in Rome, is the rare insight it gives us into Marcus's everyday life as a young man. Admitting that his observations are 'banalities', Marcus nonetheless conveys an easy sycophancy in his impressions of summer on the coast:

The climate of Naples is decidedly pleasant, but violently variable. Every

two minutes it gets colder or warmer or rawer. To begin with, midnight is warm, as at Laurentum, then, however, the cockcrow watch chilly, as at Lanuvium; soon the hush of night and dawn and twilight till sunrise cold, for all the world like Alfidus; anon the forenoon sunny, as at Tusculum; following that a noon as fierce as at Puteoli; but indeed when the sun has gone to his bath in Ocean, the temperature at last becomes more moderate, such as we get at Tibur; this continues the same during the evening and first sleep of night.⁶²

A more interesting letter reveals the famous quick-tempered, 'short fuse' side of Marcus, but what is intriguing is that we cannot really discern his true attitude to the incident. As he cantered along the main highway from Laurentum to Rome⁶³ with his bodyguard, he met two shepherds with four dogs and a flock of sheep blocking the road. As they came within earshot, Marcus heard one of the shepherds say to the other: 'Watch out for these mounted fellows, they're a dab hand at pillaging.' Angered by this, Marcus dug his spurs into his horse and galloped straight into the middle of the flock, stampeding them in all directions. One of the shepherds was so angry at all the unnecessary work caused that he threw his crook at the offenders, and it hit Marcus's equerry. The headstrong young heir to the throne remarked drily: 'Thus he who feared to lose his sheep, lost his crook instead.'⁶⁴ Is this the typical arrogance of the young blood temporarily inconvenienced by one of the lesser breeds? Or is Marcus telling the story against himself? The tone and timbre of the letter do not permit a definite answer. However, to set this incident in context, it is worth pointing out that in the year 144, when he was twenty-three, Marcus told Fronto of the delightful afternoon he spent picking grapes. As we see from Odysseus in Homer's poem, from Cincinnatus and other examples in the ancient world, aristocrats in classical times did not consider agricultural labour beneath them; there was none of that horrible anti-manual work snobbery that so disfigured the culture of the Spanish conquistadores. On the very same grape-picking day Marcus joined the emperor Antoninus in the oil-press room of a country villa after their bath; it was an unusual venue, but they chose it so that they could listen to the badinage and banter of the local yokels, who were quite unaware that their emperor was eavesdropping.⁶⁵

Sensing that whatever hold on Marcus he once had was slipping away, Fronto was overjoyed if ever he could bring his student back to his favourite subject: illness, hypochondria and the swapping of symptoms. Sick with constant mysterious ailments in shoulder, elbow, knee and ankle (surely at least some of them psychosomatic), and forever suffering from insomnia, Fronto pounced in gratitude if Marcus ever mentioned an ache, pain or malady.⁷¹ Marcus was already becoming something of a food fad (the physician Galen would have much to say about this at a later date) and boasted of gargling with honey and eating a single slice of bread for lunch, while all around him were gorging and guzzling on beans, onions and herrings full of roe.⁷² He alternated between keeping strange hours through sleeplessness - he once read Cato's primer on agriculture between the hours of 5-9 a.m. - and sleeping late on the grounds that he had a heavy cold. Consciously or unconsciously (for the delight certainly shows in his letters), Fronto was overjoyed that Marcus was joining the ranks of the creaking gates and compulsive valetudinarians. At times the Fronto-Marcus correspondence bids fair to become an essay-writing contest between *malades imaginaires*; the only thing to be said in Marcus's favour is that he was always a model patient and exhibited scrupulous humility in following his doctors' prescriptions.⁷³ Typical is this from Marcus: 'As far as my strength is concerned, it is certainly beginning to come back. The pain in my chest, too, is quite gone; but the ulcer in the trachea is still there.'⁷⁴ Fronto may have experienced, in addition to his own ailments, 'biter bit syndrome', for by the year 145 Marcus's tales of woe sound indistinguishable from the master's: Socrates is right, says Marcus, the greatest pleasure is cessation from pain, and he then goes on to draw a typical Fronto-like analogy between the ending of pain and absence making the heart grow fonder. In so far as there was an organic explanation for Marcus's ailments, his doctors should at least have prevented him from dictating thirty letters a day, which he mentions as a fair average.⁷⁵

The year 144 marked the moment when Marcus began to turn away from Fronto and reject many of his ideas, so perhaps a judicious summary of his real influence is in order. As a writer, Marcus never entirely jettisoned the lessons taught by Fronto, who instilled the idea of using ornate language in which to clothe philosophical thoughts: 'Every time you conceive of a paradoxical thought, turn it over within yourself, vary it with diverse figures and nuances, make trial of it and

learned not to flare up when people irritated and annoyed him, as Rusticus did constantly.⁹¹

It is deeply sad that Marcus Aurelius should have subscribed to such a bleak and ultimately nihilistic view of the universe and mankind's place in it.⁹² Stoicism was an arid doctrine that tried, in D.H. Lawrence's phrase, to 'do the dirt on life'. It is a world view in which nothing unexpected can happen, and noble things like desire, fantasy, adventure, initiative, creativity, hope, cultural life and, ultimately, civilisation itself all disappear. That it should have any modern adherents is almost incredible.⁹³ Even the most perceptive of the ancients could see through to the fallacy at its core. As Sextus Empiricus pointed out, hunger will never convince the hungry that it is not an ordeal, and those who suffer will always rail against the injustice of the world.⁹⁴ Cicero, another Stoic fellow-traveller, made a very mild criticism: 'What the Stoics say may be true, it is certainly important, but the way they say it is all wrong.'⁹⁵ It is a supreme irony that a 'unitary' theory of the world should have produced, in its most famous initiate, a 'divided self'. Marcus Aurelius never apostatised from this creed that made such an impression on him as a young man, but Stoicism did not help him in his role as emperor. As ruler of an empire, he had to accept mundane standards of what was good and bad, for Stoic forbearance would not stop barbarians crossing the frontier or the Roman crowd rioting if the grain ships did not arrive from Africa. In dealing with his subjects who were not Stoic or sage material, he accepted conventional definitions of right and wrong. He did his duty, but the duty collided with the philosophy he held so dear, since that very duty was deduced from moral standards he did not accept as valid. The ultimate paradox of Stoicism is that it enjoins the would-be sage to do his duty as part of the higher morality, but that very duty is based on standards that the ethics of Stoicism itself reject.⁹⁶ That sounds like the very definition of unhappiness. The young man so captivated by this strange doctrine would never again be the carefree horse-riding and grape-treading youth of yesteryear.

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Standard Edition of the Works of Sigmund Freud, 24 vols (1974), Vol. 21, p.182. Freud's point is made more pithily and in typical crackerjack fashion by the American humorist Will Rogers: 'When you put down the good things you ought to have done, and leave out the bad ones you did do - well, that's memoirs' (*The Autobiography of Will Rogers* (1949)). • 117. Pascal, *Design and Truth in Autobiography* op. cit., p.8. • 118. Gilbert Murray, *Five Stages of Greek Religion* (1935), pp.213-14. • 119. J.S. Mill, *Autobiography* (New York 1924), pp.3-4, 6-7, 12, 19-20, 21. • 120. *ibid.*, pp.22-4, 27-9, 32-4. • 121. *ibid.*, p.94. • 122. *ibid.* • 123. Buckley, *The Turning Key* op. cit., p.80. • 124. Mill, *Autobiography* op. cit. • 125. *ibid.*, p.100. • 126. Buckley, *The Turning Key* op. cit., p.79. • 127. Pascal, *Design and Truth* op. cit., p.22. • 128. *ibid.*, p.29. • 129. Carolyn A. Barros, *Autobiography* op. cit., pp.85-116. • 130. J.H. Newman, *Apologia pro Vita Sua* (1864), p.42. • 131. Sheridan Gilley, *Newman and his Age* (1990), p.325. • 132. Herbert Paul (ed.), *Letters of Lord Acton to Mary, daughter of the Right Honourable W.E. Gladstone* (1904), p.lx. • 133. J.E.C. Bodley, *Cardinal Manning* (1912), p.22. • 134. Barros, *Autobiography* op. cit., pp.51-83. • 135. Newman, *Apologia pro Vita Sua*, p.216. • 136. *ibid.*, pp.15-16. • 137. *ibid.*, pp.217-18. • 138. Jean Starobinsky, *Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Transparency and Obstruction* (Chicago 1988), p.115. • 139. Delusional incidents: S. Elosu, *La maladie de Rousseau* (Paris 1929). Paranoia: A. Chatelain, *La Folie de Jean-Jacques Rousseau* (Neuchâtel 1890); P. Sérieux & P. Capgras, *Les folies raisonnantes* (Paris 1909). Latent homosexuality: 'Étude sur Jean-Jacques Rousseau', *Psychopathologie de l'échec* (Paris 1944). • 140. Starobinsky, *Jean-Jacques Rousseau* op. cit., p.371. • 141. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, 'Émile', *Oeuvres Complètes de Rousseau* (Pleiade) iv, p.268. • 142. Starobinsky, *Jean-Jacques Rousseau* op. cit., p.167. • 143. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Confessions* (1892). • 144. *ibid.*, pp.68-70. • 145. *ibid.*, p.167. • 146. *ibid.*, p.207. • 147. *ibid.*, pp.302, 355, 513. • 148. *ibid.*, p.300. • 149. *ibid.*, p.309. • 150. *ibid.*, p.306. • 151. *ibid.*, pp.508-36. • 152. Starobinsky, *Jean-Jacques Rousseau* op. cit., p.48. • 153. *Confessions* op. cit., p.296. • 154. *ibid.*, p.343. • 155. Starobinsky, *Jean-Jacques Rousseau* op. cit., pp.33-64. • 156. Quoted in *ibid.*, p.61. • 157. *Confessions*, p.341; also *Oeuvres Complètes* op. cit., i, pp.386-8. • 158. *Confessions*, p.343. • 159. For example, Meds 11.22; 4.48. • 160. *Confessions*, p.14. • 161. *ibid.*, pp.45, 72, 119, 343, 352. • 162. *ibid.*, p.9. • 163. For this entire issue, see David Reynolds, *In Command of History. Churchill Fighting and Writing in the Second World War* (2004). • 164. Andrew M. Riggsby, *Caesar in Gaul and Rome* (Austin, Texas 2006). • 165. Kathryn Welch & Anton Powell (eds), *Julius Caesar as Artful Reporter: The War Commentaries as Political Instruments* (Swansea 1998). • 166. Riggsby, *Caesar in Gaul*

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Cataloging-in-Publication data for this book is available from the Library of Congress

eISBN : 978-0-786-74580-7

Published by Da Capo Press A Member of the Perseus Books Group www.dacapopress.com

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