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“SO SAY WE ALL”—REIMAGINING EMPIRE AND THE *AENEID*

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Battlestar Galactica, a television series that aired on the SyFy Channel from 2003 to 2009, tells the story of the Twelve Colonies, a human society whose home planets have been destroyed by a race of robots, the Cylons. These androids, originally created by mankind as a slave workforce, have at the moment of their revolution evolved to become physically indistinguishable from humans, and, after they turn against their creators, as the Internet Movie Data Base tag line puts it: “The fight to save humanity rages on.” While the series presents itself as a traditional science fiction narrative with the usual fanciful special effects, it departs from many of its predecessors, including the 1970’s series of the same name it reimagines, in its darker and grittier view of the future of the human race.¹ *Battlestar Galactica* is ostensibly set in an era very different from our own, but, as many have noted, it explores with compelling directness such contemporary phenomena as the so-called “war on terror,” the war and insurgency in Iraq, and the limits of American “hyper-power,” by recasting these themes within a mythic narrative of foundation. In this article, I focus on the relationship between two central characters, Laura Roslin and Bill Adama, and argue that *Battlestar Galactica* offers a feminized version of Vergil’s *Aeneid* that focuses on love and compromise as the basis of the new empire.²

The series highlights its connection to the classical tradition at the outset by making its human civilization polytheistic—not only do the inhabitants of the Twelve Colonies worship a multiplicity of divinities, but both gods and mortals have names that evoke the classical tradition, such as Athena, Apollo, or Hera. Structural links between *Battlestar Galactica* and Vergil’s *Aeneid* are easy to detect: the themes of exile and empire building, in particular, are reframed in an alternative mythic reality that includes many elements from the ancient epic.³ Like the Trojans who follow Aeneas after the sack of their city, the human survivors of the Twelve Colonies gather around a charismatic military leader, Admiral William “Bill” Adama, brilliantly played by Edward James Olmos, on their quest for a new home, “Earth,” a mythical planet known only from prophecies and sacred lore, where they hope to find a safe haven for their jeopardized civilization. Like the ancient poet, the series’ writers like to draw connections between their narrative’s mythic elements and recent history—in particular to those events that stress the cost of empire. By reimagining an empire in which a woman, President Laura Roslin, can be a strong leader but is also by definition a tragic figure, the series evokes the epic figure of Dido. Aeneas similarly can be seen in Admiral Adama’s self-sacrifice and determination to bring his people to a place where they will be able to refound their civilization. It is thus not surprising that Cupid should play a central role (in this case, figurative) in the narrative as the two leaders become increasingly attracted to one another. Yet it is in the romance between Dido/Roslin and Aeneas/Adama where *Battlestar Galactica* most significantly departs from its epic model insofar as it delays the romantic relationship between the two leaders and makes it the key to the success of their journey.

Instead of abandoning a new lover to accomplish his mission, as Aeneas must do with Dido in the *Aeneid*, the condition for Admiral Adama’s success in finding Earth is his connection to a woman, Laura Roslin. Laura, played by the remarkably talented actress Mary McDonnell, appears in nearly every episode of the series, and plays a central role in the foundation narrative. On the day of the Cylons’ final rebellion, Laura, in her role of Secretary of Education for the Twelve Colonies, had travelled to Galactica for the ceremony marking the passage of the battleship into a museum. While the Cylons’ attack almost succeeds in wiping out the human race, the few thousands who happen to be travelling through space at the time manage to survive. Laura, the forty-third official in line of succession, discovers that she has become the highest-ranking government official left alive and becomes sworn in as the president of the Twelve Colonies. Laura Roslin and Bill Adama, the Commander of the *Battlestar Galactica*, thus begin their relationship as the two highest surviving representatives of civilian and military leadership. Tensions between their sometimes conflicting priorities begin immediately when Adama decides he must counter-attack the Cylons and Laura points out the human race’s best hope is to run.

Laura Roslin is introduced to us from the beginning as a tragic figure: in the first episode, just before she boards her transport to *Battlestar Galactica*, she learns she has terminal breast cancer. Details of Laura’s grief-stricken life are revealed gradually and many of the most tragic events are withheld until the last season. Not only did she nurse her mother as she was dying from the same kind of cancer that will eventually kill her, but she also lost her two sisters and father in a car accident. The long series of events that gradually deprives Laura of mother, father, and sisters leads her to a life in which she is incapable of connecting with anyone. A bittersweet one-night stand with a former student pushes Laura to accept an offer to work on the campaign for the presidency of the Twelve Colonies by Caprica city’s mayor, Richard Adar, a fateful decision that explains her position as Secretary of Education at the beginning of the series. There are hints that Laura, at some point, also became Adar’s mistress, though the significance of the relationship to Laura is never made clear.

At the beginning of *Battlestar Galactica*, both Laura and Adama have lost much, and they are equally self-reliant, solitary, and stubborn in their sense of duty: he to the military that has become his family, and she to the civilian survivors for whom she has become responsible. Unlike Dido, Laura is initially reluctant to follow her emotions. It takes her four seasons to admit her feelings to herself and to Adama, whose characteristically gruff and understated reaction when she finally confesses she loves him is to tell her “it’s about time.” Their relationship is also implicitly tragic as Laura’s death from cancer is already imminent. After she first expresses her feelings to Adama, Laura’s role in the narrative becomes more passive. Laura Roslin, despite the challenges of her recurring cancer, starts as an extraordinary, strong figure and throughout the three seasons of the series remains a uniquely compelling female character: a woman who is a leader, tough, sometimes to the

point of cruelty and at the cost of her own principles, but always independent and trusting in her own judgment. Just as Dido starts to neglect her city after she meets Aeneas, Laura in love starts to distance herself from her political role. Instead of running wild through the city like Dido, “raving mad, like a doe / pierced by an arrow,” (4.68–69, Lombardo translation) Laura begins to jog happily around the battleship.

The series develops its characters in a leisurely, novelistic manner, adding layers of meanings to their actions and reactions through flashbacks and visual clues. As the seasons progress, we learn more about Laura’s and Bill’s pasts, both distant and just preceding the Cylon attacks. A flashback in “Daybreak: Part 1” (the first part of the series finale) shows how loss has defined Laura by connecting her past with her present. The scene starts in the past on Caprica, as two policemen, a man and a woman, knock on a door. The scene is formulaic, and viewers recognize the implied, visual message of the police visit: something terrible has happened. A sense of foreboding is powerfully evoked by the way in which the door to Laura’s house is lit. It is early morning—Laura answers the door in her night gown—and the sun shines through the door in such a way as to make it appear translucent, almost mystical. When the policemen walk through the door, they walk through the light, disappearing for an instant, as if through a supernatural portal.

Mary McDonnell, a master at communicating emotions without showiness or histrionics, makes clear the fear and tension felt by her character when she leads the two officers to their seats. An accident has occurred, they tell her, which has resulted in the death of her father and both of her sisters. Yet as the scene unfolds, Laura’s reaction does not fit the viewer’s expectations. She turns her back to the police officers, and asks them to show themselves out. There are no tears; her face is a passive mask. Instead of breaking down, Laura seems numb. She starts tidying up the living room, picking up the gift wraps left over from the previous evening’s baby shower she threw for one of her sisters, and comes across a photograph of herself, her sisters, and father, and looks at it in disbelief. Then Laura purposefully walks through the illuminated door. Again, the light symbolizes transition: after the policemen walked through the door, everything changed for Laura; and it is only after she crosses through the illuminated threshold, her black night gown almost disappearing in the light, that the signs of her grief begin to show. Standing at the edge of a fountain in a Caprica City park, Laura starts to inhale and exhale with increasing agitation, her chest rising and falling. As sorrow overtakes her, she walks to the center of the water and leans against a rock that is splashed by a waterfall, where the water showering her face mixes in with her tears, and the camera moves from Laura’s face to drops of water, rain-like, falling in the fountain. Softly, the drops of water fade into the drops of fluid in Laura’s intravenous drip in the present in which she lays in the sick bay. From the tragedy in Caprica City to her cancer in the present, Laura’s life is defined by her acquaintance with the horrific proximity of death.

The rock against which Laura leans in her moment of greatest despair foreshadows another image of rocks, which I will discuss below, that comes at the very end of the series and is connected with the newly found “Earth.” The series also connects Laura’s tragic illness with the survivors’ quest for home in a montage at the beginning of the series finale. Immediately following the credits, every episode of *Battlestar Galactica* starts with a short montage that showcases some of the important moments of each

episode. The last montage of the series occurs after the credits of “Daybreak, Part 1” (the series finale consisted of “Daybreak, Part 1” and “Daybreak, Part 2,” which were shown immediately following on one another), and features a series of five images: a galaxy, a bird trapped under a glass ceiling, a planet, water dripping in the fountain, and a close-up of the same planet just shown. Framing the image of the fountain where Laura finds herself after hearing of the accident that killed her family between two views of the planet the survivors will call “Earth” makes a connection between Laura’s tragedy and the successful quest for home. The drops splattering in the fountain and the drops in the intravenous drip both point to the ultimate tragedy of Laura’s life: as necessary as Laura was to the successful quest for “Earth,” she herself will not survive long beyond the day of its discovery.

In “Daybreak, Part 1,” Laura asks her doctor to cut her pain medication. It may be that the palliative drugs that keep the physical pain of her cancer at bay leave her open to reexperiencing the grief of her memories, though it is impossible to say with certainty whether the flashback of the accident is experienced as a memory by Laura herself. Be that as it may, immediately after the flashback Laura decides she would prefer to endure the pain and regain full consciousness, a decision she makes known with a hand gesture to her nurse. At the end of *Battlestar Galactica*, in “Daybreak, Part 2,” Adama launches a risky attack to rescue Hera, the only child to be born to a Cylon mother and a human father. At this point in the narrative, Laura decides to find a way to help make Adama’s plan successful. In order to be able to stand on her feet for the next 48 hours, she injects a psychostimulant drug that will temporarily give her strength but hasten her death in the process. While Laura has much in common with Dido throughout the last season of the series—her maenad-like jogging through the ship, her abandonment of governing that had been so important to her throughout the series—her self-sacrifice is the opposite of Dido’s decision to kill herself on the sword of her beloved after Aeneas’s departure. Laura’s quasi-suicide has nothing to do with romantic love. Laura’s choice to take the drugs in fact brings her back into the political life that she had seemingly given up, and thoughts of her lover play no part in her decision. Laura decides to take the drugs so that she will have enough energy to be useful during the rescue mission, and thus puts the well-being of the community before her own. From the first episode when she learns she has a deadly form of cancer to her death in the last episode, Laura’s life is defined by tragedy.

While Laura plays a central role in the survivors’ successful quest for “Earth,” the narrative of foundation in the series, as in Vergil’s *Aeneid*, centers on a strong male figure determined to lead his people to their new home. Adama is presented as a modern Aeneas: Bill Adama is a charismatic leader with an intense sense of his mission and readiness to sacrifice his own desires for the well-being of the men and women under his command. After his divorce, Adama has reconstituted his life around the military that has become his family, both in the sense of being his support system, but also, and chiefly, as being his responsibility. Adama is also a lonely, bitter man whose wife left him long ago, and whose relationships are often tainted by his position at the top of the military hierarchy. During the first season of the show, Adama is reunited with Lee Adama, himself a fighter pilot in the Colonial Fleet. His only surviving son (Adama forced Lee’s older brother into a career as a pilot that led to his death) reproaches his father

for putting his career before his family. Father and son have a complex relationship, but, eventually, they reconcile and Lee plays an important role helping the survivors of the Twelve Colonies find their new home.

Whereas Aeneas is still a young man with a future ahead of him at the beginning of the *Aeneid*, Adama is older and has reached the end of his working life when he accepts the job of being a curator as it were to the Battlestar Galactica, a storied interstellar battleship now destined to become a literal museum piece. Adama is forced into retirement from active duty just as Battlestar Galactica is decommissioned because its weapon system is deemed obsolete. Both Adama and the battleship under his command thus represent an outgoing generation and its outmoded way of doing things. Yet the archaic aspects that make both battleship and man irrelevant will be revealed as the very qualities necessary to survive after the near-destruction of human civilization. Battlestar Galactica, because its electronic systems are not networked, turns out to be more resilient to Cylon attacks than more sophisticated models. Similarly Adama's old-fashioned sense of military valor and virtue will also become crucial for the expedition's success.

Whereas Aeneas' success in founding Rome depends on his ability to subjugate the Latin population to his goal, the union between Bill and Laura, and the possibilities it opens for consensus and peace, becomes the basis for the renewal of civilization through the creation, not of an empire, but of a home. His relationship with Laura softens Bill's attitude, and convinces him that the success of their mission lies in trusting a group of rebel Cylons. His newly found sense of compromise and trust puts him at odds with many of his inferiors, some of whom attempt, unsuccessfully, to overthrow him. Both Laura and Bill are right that a new home for the survivors of the Twelve Colonies can only be found if both factions, human and Cylon, agree to work together, and together they find the planet they name "Earth."

In Vergil's *Aeneid*, Aeneas, a hero without a home on a god-given mission to found a new city, finds himself delayed by the temptation of a woman who is not his wife and a land that is not his own. Unable to go back to the city and family he has lost, and having not yet reached the land where he will found a new home, Aeneas must leave Dido, and, in *Aeneid* 4, he sees his present dilemma in terms of future memories:

*Ego te, quae plurima fando
enumerare vales, numquam, regina, negabo
promeritam; nec me meminisse pigebit Elissae,
Dum memor ipse mei, dum spiritus hos regit artus.*

"My Queen,

I will never deny that you have earned my gratitude,
In more ways than can be said; nor will I ever regret
Having known Elissa, as long as memory endures
And the spirit still rules these limbs of mine.

Vergil, *Aeneid* 4.333–336 (Lombardo translation)

Aeneas' proleptic nostalgia is striking because it encapsulates the ways in which a successful heroic homecoming is connected with leaving a woman behind and transforming loss into a memory of loss. In *Battlestar Galactica*, Adama gets the girl, and together they

find a new home, but, like Aeneas, Adama also finds that his life moves from experience to memories of loss.

Aeneas' promise to remember also has literary echoes. An obvious intertext is Jason's assurance to young Medea in Apollonius Rhodius' *Argonautica* (3.1079–1081), itself inspired by Odysseus' farewell to Nausikaa in Homer's *Odyssey*, in which Odysseus promises Nausikaa that he will remember her "for all days" because she saved his life (8.464–468). In the ancient sources, the woman who saves the hero and makes his goal attainable is always eventually left behind. Similarly, Bill Adama finds himself at the end of his epic quest alone.

Bill Adama and Laura Roslin spend their last moments together on "Earth." Laura is close to death but survives long enough for Bill to take her for a flight over the wondrous wildlife living in their new home. Laura is entranced by the animals they see and she says her last words, "so much life," with a smile. When Adama realizes Laura has just died, he takes his wedding ring—from his previous marriage—and puts it on his lover's finger. This marriage in death is striking on several counts. First, Adama uses his own wedding ring, a left-over from his first marriage, an ominous object. And second, Laura is dead, and thus unaware of this moment, which should be, by definition, a moment shared by two people. Adama's solitary gesture highlights the tragedy of Laura's premature death and Adama's own involuntary serial singlehood.

The last time we see Bill Adama in the series, he is talking to Laura:

"I laid out the cabin today. It's gonna have an easterly view. You should see the light that we get here when the sun comes from behind these mountains. It's almost heavenly. It reminds me of you."

("Daybreak, Part 2," Season 4, Episode 20)

The scene starts with close-ups of Adama's face, front and profile. When the camera pans and zooms out, it reveals a funeral mound next to Bill. Sitting next to Laura's tomb, alone, Bill is deprived of everything and everyone he loved after the destruction of his battleship, the death of Laura, and his son's departure. Despite her prominent role in the narrative, Laura, like Dido, has been reduced to a tomb, a pile of rocks, and to a memory, and like Dido, she becomes a ghost whose life and sufferings encapsulate a people's yearnings and sacrifices for home.

But, unlike Aeneas who goes on to a new city and new wife, Adama fulfills Aeneas' promise to always remember. By building the cabin, Adama fulfills a wish of Laura she had shared with him on New Caprica, a planet the survivors had hoped to settle on in season 3, before being found, again, by the Cylons. There Bill and Laura enjoyed long talks during which Laura had confessed to a desire for a cabin in the mountains. Adama fulfills her wish, but he is left as an image of memory, a solitary man who talks to a tomb and whose life is entirely in the past.

Laura's desire for a cabin is a recurrent theme in the last two seasons of *Battlestar Galactica*, and it is crucial to the bond between Bill and Laura:

Roslin: Do you remember that day?

Adama: Yes. New Caprica. Baltar's groundbreaking. We talked, and talked.

Roslin: About a lot of things. Guess what I'm thinking about right now?

Adama: Gimme a hint.

Roslin: Mountains. A stream running into a little lake. Water so clear it's like looking through glass.

Adama: Your cabin. The one you wanted to build.

Roslin: It's amazing how much I still think about it. You know, sometimes I wonder...what home is. Is it an actual place? Or is it some kind of longing for something, some kind of connection? You know, I spent my whole life on Caprica. I was born in one house, and then I ... I moved to another, and then, this. And then, now. I don't think I've ever felt truly at home until these last few months, here, with you. I know you love this ship. You probably love her more than you love me. Bill, if you don't get us off this ship, you may lose both of us at the same time. Why don't you give us a chance?

("Islanded In A Stream of Stars," Season 4, Episode 18)

For Laura, the cabin is a fantasy that she has no hope of fulfilling. The cabin symbolizes home, but, lost in space, Laura comes to see Bill as her new home. And after her death, for Bill, the whole world becomes a reminder of Laura.

The kind of allusiveness we see in Vergil alluding to Apollonius echoing Homer can be seen in *Battlestar Galactica* both with the classical and other traditions. As it gets closer to its conclusion, *Battlestar Galactica* gets ever more allusive, including in its frame of reference the whole of the literary tradition, including Greek, Roman, and biblical allusions, Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Emily Dickinson, and contemporary popular culture. This insistence on absorbing the whole of the literary tradition is itself, of course, a classical trope already central to Vergil's *Aeneid*, which appropriates and transforms Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, and Apollonius Rhodius' *Argonautica*. Within the epic, art is also depicted as a form of connection: Dido already knows of Aeneas before his arrival, and Aeneas is confronted by an artistic representation of his own life when he looks upon the sack of Troy as depicted on the temple of Juno in *Aeneid* 1. Similarly, *Battlestar Galactica*'s narrative alludes to other traditions, and it also highlights the importance of such connections in individuals' lives. Ostensibly placed in the future, the narrative constantly appeals to the past, through memory and hyper-allusiveness to both recent popular culture and the classical tradition. *Battlestar Galactica* has epic ambition and consistently insists on its ability to shapeshift between genres: thriller, adventure, melodrama, love story, epic and political saga, *Battlestar Galactica* transcends its origins as an old-fashioned science fiction quest story.

Where *Battlestar Galactica* differs from ancient epic is on the primacy of place it gives to popular culture. Jimi Hendrix's cover of Bob Dylan's song, "All Along the Watchtower," is repeatedly heard in the last episodes and its (garbled) melody plays a crucial role in the survivors' ability to finally find a planet they can settle as their new home.⁴ Both Bill and Laura also love reading mysteries, and express their love for each other by giving each other books and reading to one another. Their bond is very much focused on their strong sense of connection to the past, their goal to find a planet where to refound human civilization, and on their common taste in books. When Laura is undergoing a treatment for her cancer that leaves her very weak, Bill goes to the sickbay to read to her from one of their beloved mysteries, "Love and Bullets":

It started like it always did. With a body. This one was in the river, and I could tell she had once been beautiful, but this bullet and fast current had taken away from her. All we are, or that we think we are, all that we are certain about, is taken away from us. When you've worked the streets and seen what I've seen, you become more and more convinced of it every day. Caprica City has been my teacher, my mistress.

Adama reads this passage to Laura, but when he reaches the last lines, he looks up from the book and continues to recite aloud, revealing that he knows the last words by heart. When he speaks them, the lines ostensibly about Caprica City are actually about his relationship with Laura:

From the moment I opened my eyes, she is in my blood, like cheap wine. Bitter and sweet, tinged with regret. I'll never be free of her, nor do I wanna be, for she is what I am. All that is, should always be.

("The Ties That Bind," Season 4, Episode 3)

This passage foreshadows the bittersweet regret Bill will feel after he lays out the foundation of the cabin after Laura's death. Bill and Laura, the two leaders who guide the survivors of the Twelve Colonies to their new home, not only find a home for their people, but become each other's home.

Battlestar Galactica distances itself from the epic tradition in its emphasis on consensus. In the *Aeneid*, Aeneas can succeed only by attacking and conquering the city of the Latins. By contrast, after they find the already inhabited planet they decide to settle, the human and Cylon survivors eventually decline the opportunity to refound their empire, and attempt to put an end to the cycle of attack and vengeance. When discussing how they will establish themselves on the planet that will become their home, Adama's son, Lee, makes a radical suggestion:

No, no city, not this time.

("Daybreak, Part 2," Season 4, Episode 20)

Lee Adama convinces his father and the other survivors not to build a new city and to abandon technology completely by sending their ships into the sun. In *Battlestar Galactica*'s version of the foundation narrative, foundation is also a rejection. The past disappears as the older generation dies off, and the future is in the hands of Hera, a girl with a Cylon mother and a human father, who becomes, as we come to realize at the very end of the series, the ancestor of our human race, the "mitochondrial Eve."

Lee's formulation, "not this time," also points to the cyclical perspective of the narrative. While Lee Adama rejects the technology and, implicitly, the values of earlier generations, the future of the survivors' descendants looks remarkably like our recent present. The series ends with a fast forward to 150,000 years later, in a Times Square that looks similar to ours, and with a culture on the cusp of developing ever more complex forms of artificial intelligence. Ultimately, we do not know whether Lee's and the other survivors' attempt to end the cycle of vengeance and destruction is successful. The decision to found a civilization without cities or technology in the end leads back to the very things the survivors were attempting to avoid.

Battlestar Galactica presents a vision of an alternate future that could be our past.

All of this has happened before.

But the question remains, does all of this have to happen again?

("Daybreak, Part 2," Season 4, Episode 20)

Another departure from the epic tradition, which tends to favor one voice over the many, is *Battlestar Galactica*'s stress on community agreement reflected in the typical prayer's ending I quoted in my title, "so say we all." This emphasis on consensus hints at the possibility, in Bob Dylan's words, that "there must be some way out of here," though the ending in the form of a contemporary view of Times Square filled with images of robots evokes the opposite conclusion. Like Vergil's *Aeneid*, *Battlestar Galactica* concludes in a conundrum: can a new empire be founded on the idea of consensus? Or are victory, defeat, and vengeance only around the corner for the descendants of the Twelve Colonies? The last words are given to Jimi Hendrix performing Bob Dylan's "Along the Watchtower:"

None of them along the line know what any of it is worth.

Battlestar Galactica is about the future, but, like the *Aeneid*, it is obsessed with the past, and with how the past is remembered. Both the tragic figure of Laura Roslin and her relationship with Bill Adama, and the broader narrative of exile and homecoming echo and transform themes familiar from Vergil's *Aeneid*. Through a game of twisted mirrors, *Battlestar Galactica* carries us through the conceit of science fiction to an image, finally, of our own world, and compels us to confront questions about our civilization in a complex and candid way that is lacking from much political discourse, but which owes much to Vergil's vision of the Roman past.

ENDNOTES

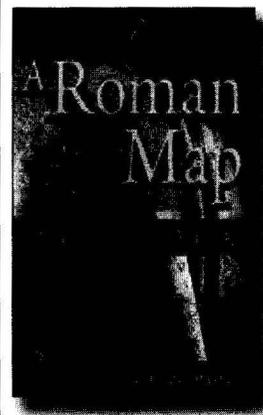
¹The 2003 television series reimagines an older show that was broadcast on ABC in the late seventies. While the new series has kept certain names and concepts, the new version forms a stand-alone narrative.

²*Battlestar Galactica* has already spawned a number of scholarly books and articles that examine the political, religious, and philosophical ramifications of the narrative. See, e.g., Josef Steiff and Tristan D. Tamplin, *Battlestar Galactica and Philosophy* (Open Court, 2008); Jason T. Eberl, *Battlestar Galactica and Philosophy: Knowledge Here Begins Out There* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2008); and Tiffany Potter and C. W. Marshall, *Cylons in America: Critical Studies in Battlestar Galactica* (Continuum, 2007).

³See, e.g., Charlotte Higgins, in *The Guardian*, "Battlestar Galactica revealed as the new Virgil's *Aeneid*," 24 February 2009, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/culture/charlottehigginsblog/2009/feb/24/classics-classics>.

⁴Bob Dylan's song is itself highly allusive and draws on many traditions, including the Bible. See Papanikolaou, "Of Duduku and Dylan: Negotiating Music and the Aural Space" in Tiffany Potter and C. W. Marshall, *Cylons in America: Critical Studies in Battlestar Galactica* (Continuum, 2007).

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