WHY DID VIRGIL COMPOSE A ‘HOMERIC EPIC’?

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When Virgil opens his epic with the words ‘I sing of war and the man . . .’ (arma virumque cano) he indicates at once that his models for the Aeneid are the Odyssey and Iliad of Homer. Why did he choose these ancient epics for his model? They were remote in time; and no living literary tradition connected Virgil with Homer. The answer has been sought in various ways.

According to Brooks Otis, ‘Virgil would never in the world have attempted a simple imitation of Homer. Others imitated: he reproduced. In other words, he deliberately used Homer for a reason and not at all out of a sense of rivalry or competitiveness.’ He saw ‘that Homer, though impossible to imitate, was supreme — indeed indispensable — as a source of symbols, a means of giving heroic connotation to contemporary reality’. By reproducing ‘the Homeric ensemble of motifs’, says B. Otis, ‘Rome could be raised to heroic dimensions while, on the other hand, the heroism of Homer could be amplified to Roman dimensions’. By such ‘amplification’ and other even more far-reaching changes ‘all sorts of new connotations could emerge — especially those that expressed the tragic contrast between primitive and civilised man and perhaps even more fundamentally the contrast between egoistic passion and its humane renunciation’.

According to Kenneth Quinn, Virgil’s choice of Homeric epic solved his artistic problem; and ‘rivalry with Homer’ became an important part of his poem. The point of this closeness to Homer was to create tension and so make the distance to Homer felt. Virgil ‘exploited’ the form of Homeric epic in order to create something new, set off against the old by being poured into the old mould. The main burden of novelty lay in the ‘problem of unthinking courage, the need to show that the standards of the Heroic Age are no longer applicable’.

However differently B. Otis and K. Quinn express what they believe to be Virgil’s aim in the Aeneid: it appears in the end, in each case, to be a spiritual or moral aim. If this is right, if Virgil, in the last resort, wanted to express ethical values in the Aeneid, why then did he choose Homeric epic as his medium? In order to discover the answer to this question, we must ask ourselves what Homer had meant to the Greeks first and then to the Romans in the past, and
what he meant in the time of Virgil himself.

Plato says of Homer that he was the ‘educator’ of Greece. Homer himself sang in order to ‘delight’ his audience. But it is clear that he was also describing men of heroic stature who would be admired and deemed worthy of imitation. According to Marrou, Homer remained the educator of Greece down to Eustathius in the 12th c. A.D. and ‘every cultivated Greek had a copy of Homer’s works at his bedside as Alexander did during his campaigns’. Xenophon, for instance, makes Niceratos say: ‘My father wishing me to become an accomplished man made me learn the whole of Homer, so that even today I can still recite the Iliad and the Odyssey by heart’.

The admiration for Homer in Greece was tremendous, an admiration which became literally adoration when soon after 217 B.C. Ptolemy IV Philopator dedicated a temple to him in Alexandria: the Homereion. In it a seated statue of Homer was surrounded by female figures representing all the cities that claimed him for their own. On the walls was a picture painted by Galaton of Homer himself spewing forth and the other poets drawing on what he had spewed forth. Similar ideas are expressed by the contemporary marble relief representing Homer’s deification (apotheosis) by Archelaos of Priene, found at Bovillae in Italy. The relief rises up in three tiers. The lowest level is on earth. On the left Homer is seated with figures representing the Iliad and the Odyssey beside his throne. To the left behind him stand winged Time and the inhabited Earth, their faces being those of the Pharaoh and his wife, Ptolemy IV and Arsinoe II. They lift up a wreath to place on Homer’s head thus expressing that the poet will be known everywhere and forever. In front of Homer is an altar at which the boy Myth and a woman History make sacrifices to the divine Homer. Behind History comes Poetry raising aloft two torches, then Tragedy and Comedy hailing the poet. To the right behind them is a little boy Physis (= Nature) looking up to four women Arete, Mneme, Pistis and Sophia (Courage or Virtue, Memory (of the great past), Loyalty, Wisdom). L. Petersen has shown how these figures and their connections can be interpreted from Homer as understood about a century later in Strabo’s Geography Book I. There the Homeric epics are taken to be a mixture of history and myth, their purpose being to educate men, particularly the young, to virtue and wisdom by remembering past greatness. Here Homer is hailed as divine, as the source of all poetry, and as the educator of men. On the second level we see a separate figure on the right, probably the poet who dedicated the
relief, and Apollo and the Muses rising up to the third level on which Zeus seated speaks to the leading Muse, or perhaps their mother, Memory. The whole is like a hymn to Homer, beginning with Zeus, Apollo and the Muses, praising the poet's eternally living power on all the earth, and his achievements on behalf of mankind. Here, Homer is the divine bard, in fact, a god, whose song is a revelation.

What was it that made Homer so vital to Greek life? Something more basic than literary excellence: the fact that Homer portrays great men and also great women. Homer was read and taught so intensively and over such a long period, because he glorified the heroic type of life, values in living, an ethic which kept its lure however much it was later criticised.

What is the relevance of all this to Rome? When Tarentum in Southern Italy, last strong-hold of Greece on Italian soil, surrendered to the Romans in 272 B.C., a Greek, Livius Andronicus, was taken captive and brought to Rome where he was first slave and then freedman of the Senator... Livius after whom he was called. He was given the task of teaching his master's sons. He would, of course, teach them Greek and his main textbook would be Homer, as it was in Greece. But he also — and this was to become much more important — translated Homer's Odyssey into Latin. According to Marrou, he did this in order to supply a text of Homer in Latin for the purpose of teaching so that Roman national pride might be satisfied. According to Grimal who wishes to remove the Odisia from the 'pedantry' of the schoolroom, Livius 'wanted to make Rome the gift of a national epic in which the latent hellenism of the city would come to expression in Latin form'. The Odisia of Livius Andronicus certainly became and remained a school textbook down into the 1st century B.C. Horace remembers being beaten by his master, Orbilius, who dictated the text for the purpose of having it learned by heart.

How did it come about that the Odisia remained a Roman textbook for such a long time in spite of the ruggedness of the metre and language which Horace criticises. The reason is that the ethic of Homer was very similar to the ethic of old Rome. Roman society was aristocratic like that of Homer, and both societies were intensively warlike. In consequence, their values were closely akin.

Let us first outline the main characteristics of Homeric heroism. The hero of the Iliad and the Odyssey was born of a noble line. What he was and strove to be was closely tied up with the nobility and excellence (arete) of his forebears and, particularly, his father.
Genealogies as being the concrete and detailed exposition of a man’s ancestors were of passionate concern to the Greeks. A hero was usually introduced by his father’s name in addition to his own name. ‘There is a general emphasis on the family in the Odyssey, quite apart from the descriptions of family life in Ithaca, Pylus, Sparta and Sceria. It appears in comparisons and similes where it is rich in warmth and humanity. But as important and more specific is the relationship between father/son/son’s son, the representatives of a noble line. Just as Odysseus in the Underworld asks his mother about his father and his son, so Achilles asks Odysseus about Neleus, his father, and Neoptolemus, his son, and is delighted to hear of his son’s excellence. From the same point of view, Penelope calls Telemachus, the off-spring of Laertes, the grandfather, and Odysseus, the father. It shows how the royal line of Arcisius, that is the ancestor, is represented by the three ages; the old man, the man, the young man. The pride of noble lineage appears most clearly when Odysseus warns Telemachus ‘not to shame the race of us, the fathers, who have been famous for valour and manliness all over the earth’.

The ethic of these nobles was primarily an ethic of war, for war was their business whether they liked it or not. Odysseus, rejecting Agamemnon’s suggestion to sail home from Troy, refers to himself and other Greeks when he says to Agamemnon that Zeus has appointed the accomplishing of wars ‘from our youth even unto our old age, until we are dead, each of us’. What is required in battle, of course, is the strength and skill of a warrior and his prowess. Sheer physical strength and the skill to use this strength with deadly precision are thought of as inseparable from the quality of character which is courage or valour. Strength, skill and prowess were the hero’s means of attaining to the one great goal of his life, namely honour (μη). In this, each hero acted for himself as an individual or at most for his noble lineage as when Odysseus warns Telemachus ‘not to shame the race of us, the fathers, who have been famous for valour and manliness all over the earth’. It was the slight to his honour inflicted on him by Agamemnon that caused Achilles’ fateful anger. A man’s honour was, in this early period of Greek life, not separate from his excellence, his arete. For, Greek culture then was, as E.R. Dodds has shown, a ‘shame culture’. A man was what he was reputed to be; he could not be great in obscurity. Honour was gained primarily, then, through pre-eminence in battle. The more and the greater the heroes killed,
the greater the honour. Honour could also be gained by contests and through the acquisition of treasure whether by aggression and piracy, or by exchange of gifts.

Another characteristic of the Homeric hero was his faith in the gods, particularly clear in Odysseus. He relied on the help of Zeus and Athene in his battle with the suitors, and Telemachus had to learn this faith. In the *Iliad*, Odysseus won the footrace over Aias because he had prayed to Athene. But other heroes, too, were closely related to the gods, as Diomedes to Athene in *Iliad* 5, and Hector to Apollo throughout the *Iliad*.

Certain heroes also excelled by their ability to give counsel whether the counsel of prudence which Polydamas gives to Hector three times over or the counsel of a warrior-like decision which Diomedes gives at the end of the Embassy (*Iliad* 9) and again later when he suggests that the wounded leaders should go among the fighting men to encourage them (*Iliad* 14).

Another quality which is particularly strong in Odysseus is intelligence and cunning. This, too, is a quality that a warrior may often need, particularly someone like Odysseus who, on his wanderings, had to encounter a great variety of beings who were all trying to keep him back. He also needed it on his return to Ithaca: he would have been overpowered by the hundred and more suitors who were in his palace, if he had come openly. It was his guile that made him go under the cover of disguise, and only this made it possible for him to return to his home safely and regain his kingship.24

In early Rome, the noble families were the mainstay of society, just as in Homer’s Greece. Most immediately, each such family was represented by grandfather, father and son. Plautus25 makes one young man say to another: ‘Did your ancestors leave you this fame just so that you could lose by vice what they had won by *virtus*? So that you could become the champion of the honour of your ancestors, your father and grandfather made the path to the pursuit of office easy and smooth for you’. Here, as in the *Odyssey*, the three generations of a noble line are closely linked in the pursuit of fame through *virtus*. While this passage is part of a comedy, the same social structure and evaluation appears in a grave inscription of one of the Scipios:26 ‘I increased the merits (*virtutes*) of my race by my upright standards (*moribus*). I begot children. I followed the exploits (*facta*) of my father. I won the praise of my ancestors (*maiorum*) so that they rejoiced that I have been born to them.
Honour (honor) ennobled my stock.' In this serious context, as in Plautus, the close and challenging relationship of the aristocratic man both to his father and to his sons is plain. In both passages also the line of the ancestors reaching back into the past is envisaged and felt as a model which one must live up to. The ancestors of a noble line were most impressively present at a man’s funeral when their busts were carried behind the dead man’s body. But their images were also to be found in the atrium of a Roman noble house so that in life and in death a man was surrounded by the spirit of his forebears, and so was his young son. From the age of 7 to the age of 16 the boy was educated by his father, and a Roman father would take this task very seriously, just as Odysseus did when he taught Telemachus to have faith in the gods and to protect his guest.

The outstanding quality of a great Roman noble was his virtus, ‘manly prowess’ which corresponds to the Homeric arete. Rome would never have become ‘Rome’, if this small Latin tribe had not been and remained for a long time an extremely warlike and aggressive society. One of the most striking pictures of a great man of early Rome is drawn by Plutarch in his Life of Aemilius Paulus. The soldiers deprived of the loot which they believed to be their due tried to vote Aemilius Paulus out of his well-deserved triumph after his victory at Pydna over Perseus of Macedon in 168 B.C. When calm had at last been restored, Marcus Servilius spoke to the rebellious crowd and completely changed their attitude. He is described as a man who had been a consul and who had challenged to single combat and killed twenty-three enemies. This suggests the same kind of fighting as Homer describes in the Iliad again and again. At the end of his speech, Servilius inveighed against Galba, a soft man, who had never been wounded, who was inciting the soldiers against Scipio. To Servilius the credentials for the right to judge a general were wounds received in battle, and he forthwith bared his chest which was badly scarred, and explained in which war he had received each wound. The fact that all this changed the mind of the soldiery shows that a man who was an experienced counsellor and a tried warrior had the power of a great ideal at Rome.

The two qualities desirable in a leading noble are expressed succinctly on the grave-stone of Scipio Barbatus (consul 298 B.C.), when he is called a ‘brave and wise man’ (fortis vir sapiensque). This formulation may well be an imitation of Homeric phrases, where the opposition of eminence in fighting and eminence in counsel is
particularly as the next line of the epitaph is clearly Greek in thought: ‘His beauty was altogether like his *virtus*. This is a translation into Latin of the Greek ideal of καλοκάγαδια. But even if this phrase is Homeric in its formulation, it is clear from the above description of M. Servilius that a great man had to be both a great fighter and a good counsellor.

Again, as in Homer, the goal of great deeds is the winning of honour and glory; and there is, in this early time, no *virtus*, if it is not famed. According to K. Buchner, ‘the society is bound to recognise *virtus*, just as *virtus* in its turn depends on the recognition of society’. This is neatly expressed in a saying of Publilius Syrus: ‘*all virtus* lies on the ground, unless it is spoken about everywhere’ (*iacet omnis virtus, fama nisi late patet*). Old Roman society was a shame-culture, just like Homeric society.

The sense of dependence on the gods in old Rome is so pervasive and well-known that it does not need detailed description. There is, I believe, no counterpart to the Odyssean approval of cunning and guile. The corresponding, but opposite quality is *fides*, ‘trustworthiness’, ‘honesty’. Regulus, of the middle of the 3rd century B.C., became the great example of the man who keeps his word at the cost of his life.

In all these moral qualities, except the last one, the similarity of social structure and outlook between old Rome and Homeric Greece is plain; and while there is a great difference in temperament between the Homeric and the early Roman warrior, as K. Buchner has shown, the ideal is basically the same. It is, therefore, not surprising that Homer’s *Odyssey*, introduced by the Greek, Livius Andronicus, into Roman education, became so firmly entrenched.

There is, however, also a basic difference between the Homeric and the Roman warrior. The Homeric hero fought for his own or his family’s glory. This was true also of the Roman warrior, but beyond this he was caught up in the wider society of the state, of Rome itself. As long as the noble warrior sought fame in deeds which were also to the good of his city, an education through reading about Homer’s heroes was wholly profitable. But when eventually the great nobles of Rome turned on their own city, fighting for their individual power and fame, then the ideal of a Homeric hero was bound to become ambivalent to the point of being dangerously insufficient. This is the crucial point for Virgil.

Even in the Rome of the 1st century B.C., Homer holds his own as a moral teacher. Strabo, who came to Rome in 44-35, again in about
31, and again in 7 B.C. defends Homer against the attacks of Eratosthenes who maintained that a poet intends to entertain, and not to teach. ‘But’, says Strabo,38 ‘the ancients assert, on the contrary, that poetry is a kind of elementary philosophy (φιλοσοφίαν τωδε λέγουσι πρώτην την ποιητικήν) which, taking us in our very boyhood, introduces us to the art of life and instructs us, with pleasure to ourselves, in character, emotions, and actions. And our school (scil. the Stoics) goes still further and contends that the wise man alone is a poet. This is the reason why in Greece the various states educate the young, at the very beginning of their education, by means of poetry; not for the mere sake of entertainment, of course, but for the sake of moral discipline (σωφρονισμοῦ).’ A little later Strabo again defends Homer against Eratosthenes39: ‘When Homer indulges in myths he is at least more accurate than the later writers, since he does not deal wholly in marvels, but for our instruction he also uses allegory, or revises myths, or curries popular favour.’ Children love myths, and by the charm of mythical tales they are induced to learn. Similarly ‘every illiterate and uneducated man40 is, in a sense, a child and like a child he is fond of stories; and for that matter, so is the half-educated man, for his reasoning faculty has not been fully developed, and, besides, the mental habits of his childhood persist in him.’ Children are spurred on ‘by pleasing myths, and deterred by fear-inspiring myths’. People in the cities are exhorted by poets telling of heroic deeds like the labours of Hercules or Theseus or honours granted to them by the gods; or again they may see such events on paintings or primitive images or in sculpture. ‘For in dealing with a crowd of women, at least, or with any promiscuous mob, a philosopher cannot influence them by reason or exhort them to reverence, piety and faith (πρὸς εὐσέβειας καὶ δικούτητα καὶ πίστεως); nay, there is need of religious fear also (δεισιδαιμονίας), and this cannot be aroused without myths and marvels’, like the lightning-bolt, aegis, tridents, and so on. The ancients believed that ‘by means of poetry they could satisfactorily discipline (σωφρονίσθαι) every period of life’. Now philosophy has taken the place of the poet in the case of the few. But poetry is still more useful to the people in general, and especially Homer who draws them. For Strabo, Homer is then an educator who enticing children and adults by his poetry teaches them the beginnings of philosophy, a philosophy which is concerned with the art of life, that is, ethics or morality.

Even Horace, reading the Iliad and the Odyssey sees in Homer the
great moral teacher. For, Homer shows more clearly and more impressively than the Stoic Chrysippus, and the Platonist Crantor, what is noble and what is shameful, what is useful and what is not.41

Such is the wider background of Virgil’s writing an epic on the model of Homer’s *Odyssey* and *Iliad*. But there seems to have been quite specific reasons for Virgil making the decision to write such an epic at the time when he must have made it. His *Georgics* were finished by 29 B.C. when he read them to Augustus on his return from the East after the battle of Actium and the pacification of the Eastern Mediterranean. It is soon after this that Virgil presumably turned to planning the *Aeneid* seriously. What was the specific situation and, in particular, the spirit or mental climate of these years? Three facts are important here. First, having made an end of civil war through his victory at Actium Augustus tried to put through a moral reform for the protection of marriage by legislation in 28 B.C. That this attempt failed, though it was successful ten years later, makes no difference. The attempt shows the attitude of Augustus. A comprehensive sequence of laws concerning morality and also religion followed later which may well have been envisaged at that time. Secondly, Horace was composing his Odes from the time of the battle of Actium on. Three books of Odes were published in 23 B.C. with not much more success than Augustus’ legislation in 28 B.C. Thirdly, soon after 26 B.C. Epirotas, freedman of Atticus, began to use Virgil and other contemporary Latin poets in his teaching.42 The poems he used would certainly be Virgil’s *Georgics* and Horace’s *Satires* the first book of which was published c. 35, the second c. 30 B.C. There may, of course, have been others.

To return to the first fact, why did Augustus so soon after the end of the civil war embark on a course of moral legislation? Gordon Williams43 has shown that Roman historians consider it their task to explain historical events in terms of the character of the leading persons; and further, human nature or the character of a man is to them a matter of ethical values, a matter of morality. Economic and social factors are occasionally mentioned, but they are obviously not considered important. Finally, Roman historians believe that if they formulate their moral analysis of the past with sufficient generality, their histories will have ‘predictive value such that decisions about the future can be based on them’.44 It appears, as William suggests, that Augustus had not only read Sallust’s description of Rome’s decline — a decline in power due to moral decline — but also — and this is much more important — that he believed this
sort of analysis to be true to the facts and a firm basis for action. Therefore, Augustus undertook to restore the ancient rectitude of Rome by means of legislation on a comprehensive scale.

Augustus was not alone in believing that the end of the civil war had to be followed by moral regeneration. Horace supported him in his poetry. In *Intactis opulentior*, one of his early odes belonging to the years after Actium he represents it as necessary for the conclusion of the civil war to be followed by a curb on moral licence, if civil war is going to be prevented permanently. Beginning with excessive wealth which cannot free a man from fear or from death, Horace praises the simple frugal life of the nomads, the Scythians and the Getae. He praises the virtue and chastity of their wives. From the background of this ideal picture Horace refers to Augustus and his moral legislation of 28 B.C. indirectly:

‘Whoever shall wish to abolish godless slaughter and civic madness, if he shall seek fame as saviour of cities, then he must have the courage to curb unbridled licence — destined to fame with posterity, since we, alas (30), hate virtue while it is with us but regretfully mourn it when it is snatched from our midst.’

The causal connection which Horace here makes between sexual immorality and civil war is in Roman thought not as vague or as strange as it is to us. To our twentieth century outlook, civil war is a public matter while immorality is a private affair. This does not hold for the Romans: both civil war and immorality are public affairs, closely bound up with the state and detrimental to its well-being. Civil war means, of course, the killing of Romans by Romans; and immorality implies interference with or even failure to produce Romans in a healthy family life with unbroken traditions. It is obvious that such was the view of the Roman citizen of the third century B.C. For the Stoic, too, marriage and the raising of children was one of the wise man’s activities within the framework of public life. Horace’s social criticism turns, however, also against other vices than immorality: against the insatiable greed for wealth, for instance, in the above ode. But Horace goes beyond mere criticism. Even legislation is futile, if men’s ways of life are not changed (*leges sine moribus vanae*). It is education that might make the difference:

‘The elements of depraved desire must be eradicated and young minds must be shaped by sterner pursuits. Our freeborn youth
does not know how to ride a horse (55) and fears to hunt, better at playing with a Grecian hoop or, should you prefer, with the dice forbidden by law.⁵⁰

Later Horace puts the need for training and education of nobly-born boys in its classical form:⁵¹

‘But education furthers the inborn powers and the right training strengthens heart and mind’.

Horace himself speaking about morality in his Odes intends more than to put forward his ideas. He wants young people to be stirred and roused to right action. For Horace sings as the priest of the Muses to ‘maidens and boys’ (virginibus puerisque canto).⁵² Working as an educator through the medium of his poetry he aims to do what in his conception a poet should do to find the fullest approval, namely ‘both delight his reader and teach him’.⁵³ In his letter to Augustus of the year 14 B.C., Horace speaks explicity of the poet’s usefulness to his city. The poet forms the speech of the child.⁵⁴ For, reading was taught by reading aloud great poetry, the works of Homer and Virgil at the time of Quintilian.⁵⁵ ‘Soon the poet also moulds the child’s character by loving precepts turning him away from harshness, envy and anger. He reports deeds done rightly and equips the coming ages with examples known by his poetry.’⁵⁶

Augustus shared Horace’s view of literature and acted on it in the most direct and practical manner. Suetonius⁵⁷ says of him that ‘in reading authors in both languages (i.e. Greek and Latin) he was interested in nothing so much as to find precepts and examples which were wholesome for public or private life. These he copied literally and frequently sent them to members of his household, to men at the head of the armies or the provinces or to the magistrates of a city wherever anyone was in need of admonition’.

On this background of Augustus’ drive for moral regeneration and in view of Horace’s attitude visible soon after 30 B.C., e.g. in Intactis opulentior, Epirota’s innovation in using contemporary poets for his educational work is readily intelligible. The fact that he did this was also bound to be a stimulus to poets to compose their poetry with an eye to young people.

This is the spirit of the twenties in which Virgil decided to compose the Aeneid and composed it.
We have seen that Homer was central to both Greek and Roman education. While in the field of literature to compose an epic modelled on Homer was a startling and risky novelty, in the field of education it was a tremendous piece of work but one set firmly in a very ancient and unbroken tradition.

The specific circumstances which precipitated Virgil into this work are now, I hope, visible. If civil war was caused by moral degeneration, then only moral regeneration could provide security against the recurrence of those terrors. Augustus worked towards this regeneration by legislation, Horace by his odes — and Virgil by shaping a new Homeric epic, an epic which would provide precepts and examples to educate the hearts and minds of young people in a new ethic, an ethic of peace and, if necessary, of war for the sake of peace, but not an epic of war for the sake of the glory of war, like the Iliad.

In the figure of Dido, the connection of Virgil's work with Augustus' attempt at moral reform in 28 B.C. is strikingly clear, as G. Williams has shown. The guilt (culpa) that she incurs by loving Aeneas and calling him her husband lies in her deserting her loyalty to her dead husband Sychaeus. Dido herself says to Aeneas that it is on his account that the flame of her loyal regard for Sychaeus has been extinguished and that she has lost her former reputation which alone would have raised her to the stars, that is, made her immortal. The reputation she means is that of having had one husband, the ideal which Horace praises in Intactis opulentior when he speaks of the chastity of the Scythian's wife as 'afraid of a second husband'. This is only one small point. The extent and detail of the moral teaching of the Aeneid through its actions and its characters, especially Aeneas, can only be realised by a reading of the whole of the epic from this point of view.

We will, however, now turn to a different, though closely related aspect of Homeric epic and the Aeneid. So far, we have looked at Homer as the great educator in the art of living, in morality. But the ancients saw in him also the inspired teacher about the gods and about the universe. This is made explicit by writers later than Virgil. The conviction that knowledge of the cosmos, which includes theology, is also to be found in Homer is stated most explicitly by Heraclitus of the first century A.D. in his Homeric Questions. He calls Homer the great priest who instructs in the mysteries of heaven, and of the gods (ἱεροφάντης), who has opened up the paths to heaven which were impassable and closed to human souls.
Heraclitus rejects those who ‘in their ignorance fail to understand Homeric allegory and have not descended into the innermost parts of his wisdom’ (οὕδ᾽εἰς τὰ μυχια τῆς ἐκείνου σοφίας καταβεβήκασιν).63

Their judgement about the truth is made hastily without careful examination, and they snatch at what Homer seems to fashion mythically without knowing what he has said philosophically. With people like these Heraclitus contrasts himself and those who think like him: ‘But we who have been hallowed within places made sacred by the sprinkling of water, let us track down holy truth led by the music of the poems.’

In the main body of his work Heraclitus accordingly explains the deeper allegorical meaning of passages, many of them dealing with the gods, in the Iliad (chapters 6-59) and in the Odyssey (chapters 60-75). In the conclusion he attacks Plato and Epicurus for their criticisms of Homer. By defending Homer he wants to prevent that a ‘dumb ignorance about the cosmos should be spread abroad’, that the band of little children should be left unaided, who first drink wisdom from Homer, like milk from a nurse, and that young men (text difficult) and old men should be deprived of the pleasure of it.64

Here we meet again the conception of Homer as the educator, especially of children, but also as one who has knowledge about the cosmos, an idea which is stated explicitly by Cornutus, also of the first century A.D., and teacher of Seneca and Lucan.65 ‘The ancients were not just ordinary men, but they were capable of understanding the universe, and they were inclined to philosophize about it through symbols and riddles.’ The concern of Cornutus is similar to that of Balbus in Cicero’s De Nat. Deor.,66 namely that the young should be led to have reverence (εὐσεβεία) but not to be superstitiously afraid (δεισώαι μονείν).

In these passages we find not only the conviction that the ancient writers, and Homer in particular, possessed knowledge about the universe, but also a method by which this knowledge, which is a mystery hidden in ‘myth’, can be made accessible and become ‘philosophy’: namely, through the revelation of a deeper, allegorical meaning. This method of interpreting the traditional gods is stated in detail by Varro, older contemporary of Virgil, with reference to the statues of the gods worshipped in the Graeco-Roman world. For him, as for Heracleitus a century later, entrance into the understanding of the underlying true meaning of the traditional picturesque presentations of the gods is a revelation of a mystery.67 Varro
The ancients fashioned the statues of the gods and their emblems and outfit in such a way that those who had entered into the mysteries of the teaching (qui adissent doctrinae mysteria) could, when they saw them with their eyes, with their mind (animo) see the soul of the universe and its parts, that is, the true gods (veros deos). The way in which Augustine twice repeats mockingly the phrase 'mysteries of the teaching' makes it certain that Varro used these very words. This is highly significant: the 'true gods' are the soul of the universe and its parts which are apprehended by the mind when the eye sees the traditional statues of the gods. The way to achieve this is 'to enter into the mysteries of the teaching', or, as one might also put it 'to become an initiate to these mysteries'. Varro goes on to say: 'Those who made the statues in the image of man seem to have pursued this idea that the mind of mortal man which is in the human body is most similar to the immortal mind. Just as, if vessels were set up to denote the gods and a wine-jar were placed in the temple of Bacchus which was to signify wine, the container would mean its content: even so through the statue which has a human body is indicated the rational soul, because in it, as in a vessel, there is wont to be contained that nature of which they want god or the gods to be.' This rather pregnant passage is best illuminated by a passage of Dio Chrysostomus of the later half of the first century A.D. In his twelfth discourse Dio makes the sculptor Phidias say: 'for no sculptor or painter will be able to picture mind and wisdom as they are in themselves. For no man has ever seen or gathered knowledge about anything of the kind. But since we have more than conjecture, in fact definite knowledge, about that in which mind and judgement came into existence we take refuge in this, namely the human body, and attach it to the god like a vessel for mind and wisdom when we seek to show forth that which cannot be seen and pictured, thus making use of the force of a symbol.' Phidias goes on to mention Homer as 'by far the greatest Maker (demiourgos) of images concerning the divine'.

The need to reinterpret or rethink the traditions about the gods is felt also by Cicero. When he makes Balbus distinguish between 'superstition' and 'religion', he seems to mean by the 'superstitious' those who believe in the gods about whom tales of passion are told and who simply believe in the gods as given in tradition. He certainly means by the 'religious' people those who have 'rethought' it all (qui autem omnia, quae ad cultum deorum pertinenter, diligenter retractarent et tamquam relegen
t), that is, for instance, who have
apprehended behind the traditional Neptune who is the mind that pervades the sea. These gods, says Balbus, we must worship. ‘The worship of the gods however is most excellent, chaste, holy and full of piety provided that we worship them always with a pure, sincere and unsoiled mind and voice.’ (*ut eos semper pura, integra, incorrupta et mente et voce veneremur.*)

It is, by the way, noteworthy that Varro, too, distinguishes between *religiosus* and *superstitiosus.* The superstitious man is afraid of the gods as of enemies, while the religious man reveres them as if they were his parents. The contrast between piety and fear drawn by Strabo and by Cornutus is also comparable. These passages make the terrifying face of *religio* of Lucretius more real than scholars will usually allow.

Let us now briefly glance at the history of allegorizing Homer in order to form some conception of what lay ready to Virgil’s hand in his tradition. How much and what he *did* use can only be found out by detailed interpretation.

In the late sixth century B.C., Xenophanes of Colophon inveighed against the Homeric gods on account of their human form and their all too human actions. He says that ‘Homer and Hesiod have attributed to the gods everything that is a shame and a reproach among men, stealing and committing adultery and deceiving each other’. And again: ‘But mortals consider that the gods are born, and that they have clothes and speech and bodies like their own.’ This is the road of criticism against the old poets which culminates in Plato’s casting out of Homer from his Ideal State.

The alternative road also came into view in the sixth century. The Homeric (and also the Hesiodic) stories about the gods were not taken at their face value, but their overt meaning was understood as pointing to another meaning underlying it: they were interpreted as allegories. Poetic allegory had been developed earlier. Archilochus, for instance, had already in the seventh century described war in terms of a storm at sea. In the late sixth century Theagenes of Rhegium in South Italy explained the notorious battle of the gods against each other in the Twenty-first book of the *Iliad* as an allegory. In part he identified the gods with physical elements, in part with abstract qualities. He called fire by the names of Apollo, Helios and Hephaistos; water, Poseidon and Scamandros; the moon, Artemis; the air, Hera, and so on. He also gave the names of gods to ‘natural dispositions’ (*διαθέσεως*), calling ‘reason’ (*φρόνησις*) Athene: ‘unreason’ (*αφροσύνη*) Ares; ‘desire’ Aphrodite; ‘reasoning’
Hermes. Here the battle of the gods is seen as a cosmic battle in part between opposed elements, in part between moral or spiritual qualities. Since our source for Theagenes however is late, we do not really know how Theagenes put the matter. Here, the allegorical meaning of Homer is cosmological, both in a physical and a moral sense.

It is outside the theme of our investigation to pursue this twofold attitude to Homer and also to Hesiod throughout the fifth and fourth centuries. It will suffice to mention two passages from Plato. In discussing the education of the Guardians, Socrates says: The stories about Hera being fettered by her son, about Hephaistos being hurled down by his father when he wanted to protect his mother against getting a beating, and all the stories about battles among the gods which Homer has fashioned ought not to be admitted into the city, whether they have been fashioned in allegories or without allegories (οὐτ’ ἐν ὑπονοίας πεποίημένας οὗτ’ ἀνευ ὑπονοιῶν). For the young person is not able to discern what is allegory and what is not. But whatever such a youngster seizes on in his opinions usually becomes hard to wash out or change.' In this passage Plato does not take sides concerning the alternative possibility that Homer himself may have written in allegorical form, or that he may not. He decides solely as an educator: even if Homer’s tales on the gods are allegories they are no use for training the minds of the young, because the young might take them at their face value. As regards Homer himself, Plato implies it at least as a possibility that he may have composed in allegories. In other passages Plato makes Socrates assume that he does. In the Theaetetus Socrates treats as allegory the Homeric tale in which Zeus threatens to tie up with a golden rope all the gods and goddesses, together with the earth and sea, and hang them up suspended on a cliff of Mount Olympus, if they will not obey. Socrates says: ‘By the golden rope Homer means nothing else than the sun, and he shows that as long as the revolution (of the world) and the sun go on moving, the universe is in existence, and life among gods and men is safe; but if this were to come to a halt, as if fettered, then all things would perish . . .’ Allegorically this threat of Zeus means then that if the gods will not obey, he will stop the revolution of the sun and everything else, which will result in chaos for gods and men.

A poem by Callimachus on the Apollo of Delos is both a description and a modern ethical interpretation of an archaic statue, as T.B.L. Webster puts it. Apollo says: ‘In order to punish fools
for their insolence, I have the bow, but to the good people I stretch out my hand with the Graces. I carry the bow in the left hand, because I am slower to chastise mortals, but the Graces in the right hand, as I am always disposed to distribute pleasant things. Professor Webster adds that in a further line something was said about the possibility of repentance. Here the bow, the traditional weapon of Apollo from ancient times, expresses the god's just retribution, the fact that he carries it in the weaker, less active hand that he is slow to exact punishment, the fact that he carries the Graces on his right hand that he is ever eager to be gracious rather than stern. Seeing the statue of Apollo in this way the onlooker looks through what is immediately perceptible to the spiritual qualities of the god.

The second poem which is illuminating in this context is the hymn to Zeus by Cleanthes. I will consider only one feature of Zeus as he appears through this hymn, namely that he is in possession of the lightning. Zeus is called 'the lord of lightning' (άρχικέραυνε), and 'he of the black clouds' (κελαινεφές). The first is a striking variant on Homer's αρΎΙκέραννος, the second is Homeric. Furthermore, it is through his lightning that Zeus has gained the power he has, and has become the supreme being forever (line 10 ω σι τόσος γεγαώς υπάτος βασιλεύς δια παντός). The story of how Zeus gained supremacy by his lightning bolts is told in detail by Hesiod in the Theogony. After his victory over the Titans, Zeus is confronted with the last, most terrible adversary, the monstrous Typhoeus: 'When Zeus had raised his fighting spirit on high and seized his weapons, thunder, lightning flash and the smoky lightning bolt, he struck him leaping upon him from Olympus . . . and when he had subdued him whipping him with blows, he fell down lamed . . .' The event following on this victory is that the gods urge Zeus to be their king. Zeus is then king through the power of his lightning bolt. So far the image of Zeus is still the image of Homer and Hesiod. But into it are infused the new Stoic beliefs. When the lightning bolt is called 'fiery' and 'living for ever' (πυρόεντα, αειξωντα κεραυνών) this evokes the fiery substance of the Stoic world-spirit. When Zeus by this lightning directs the common reason, which pervades all things, mingling with the great and the small lights', this is an allusion to the Stoic identification of the world-spirit with reason. The mighty archaic myth of Zeus' victory over Typhoeus would be read by Cleanthes as the irresistible penetration of the cosmos by the fiery and rational spirit of the god.
In both these poems we see how the traditional images of the gods and their weapons are no longer accepted simply, but they are, in meditation, interpreted as images of a deeper, underlying meaning. The underlying meaning in these two instances is spiritual and ethical. Allegory as we have seen it in a variety of examples, by its very nature, works with two levels of understanding: one that is on the surface, and one that is deeper and underlying the first. In the poem of Callimachus and the hymn of Cleanthes what is overt is the god and his weapon, Apollo and his bow, Zeus and his lightning bolt. What is apprehended through and behind these traditional images are the ethical and spiritual qualities and powers of the gods. It is plain that allegorizing of Homer must have been well known to Virgil through Greek literature, while he found the principle of such interpretation stated explicitly in Varro.

The fact that Virgil was, indeed, passionately interested in the universe and the gods is obvious to anyone reading Virgil in a straightforward way. With reference to the cosmos, it has also been shown in detail by Boyancé. In the *Catalepton*, Virgil's friendship with Siro, Epicurean teacher, is evident; and that Virgil knew *De Rerum Natura* of Lucretius closely we know from the many points of style he takes over. This means that Virgil must have been interested, at least to some extent, in the atomic theory of the universe. In the *Eclogues*, two astronomers are referred to, Conon and probably Sosigenes of Alexandria and the star of Caesar which helps corn and grapes to ripen. Astronomy and astrology are, of course, the fields of knowledge most closely concerned with the cosmos. Another aspect of Virgil's awareness of the universe appears in the great singers Orpheus and particularly Daphnis, diving prototype of the singing shepherd. Both are in close harmony with nature, especially Daphnis. When he dies, nature mourns; when he rises up to new life, it is jubilant. The same harmony exists between the promised child of *Eclogue 4* and his development and the life both of nature and of civilisation. In the *Georgics*, the most striking passages are the description of an Italian spring which widens to the Spring at the beginning of the world when Father Aether mated with Mother Earth and the description of the divine spirit dwelling in the bees and pervading the whole of the universe. But there is also a sensitive coherence, a 'sympathy' between Roman political events and events in nature, especially at the end of *Georgics 1*, where the death of Caesar is foretold by grim natural omens, when even 'the sun covered his shining head with the colour of rust'. This
last instance foreshadows the kind of sympathy characteristic of the *Aeneid*. According to Boyancé,¹⁰¹ 'what comes to expression for a man's intelligence in his belief in “universal sympathy” is manifest to his feelings in omens'. In the description, for instance, of the Eating of the Tables,¹⁰² the perspective suddenly widens 'from the trivial and the familiar to all the cosmic powers interested in this solemn moment of the arrival of the Trojans on Italian soil'.¹⁰³ Besides brief references of an astrological sort,¹⁰⁴ Virgil represents the bard Iopas as singing about the nature of the universe, sun, moon and stars, origin of man and beast, of rain and fire and so on. Finally, Boyancé suggests that Jupiter, made more sublime in Virgil's representation, comes close to the World Spirit who pervades the universe.¹⁰⁵

One might, at this point, have gathered the impression that Virgil's interest in moral instruction, particularly of the young, and his interest in the cosmos were two quite different reasons for embarking on a 'Homeric' epic. Such an impression would be mistaken, because the Virgilian cosmos is a carefully articulated structure of moral values: human action is set firmly into the hierarchy of divine forces which culminates in and is ultimately ruled by Jupiter.

To sum up, there are many reasons for which Virgil chose to write a Homeric epic apart from those with which I have tried to deal in this paper. One is most certainly the challenge which Homer's exquisite poetry offers to a great poet. The reasons which I have tried to present are, therefore, not meant to supplant those put forward by Brooks Otis and others, but they are additional, though in my estimation important. In fact, Virgil's educational intentions were perhaps, I suggest, to himself and his contemporaries of primary importance.
NOTES


7. Quinn, op.cit., p.299.


12. Cf. below p.12; *Pistis* is more difficult: either 'credibility' or 'loyalty', see Webster and Petersen.


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24. The use of guile, however, does not go uncriticized even in Homer. Achilles says to Odysseus that the man 'who hides one thing in his breast and says another is hateful to him like the gates of Hades' (9.312f.).


27. Cf. on all this Marrou, op.cit., p.235.


29. Thornton, op.cit., pp.71 and 74; when Marrou says (p.235) that the examples of virtue placed before the young Roman 'were taken from the nation's history, not from heroic poetry', he surely omits the fact that the young Roman was also steeped in Homer.


30a. Earl, op.cit., p.22.


32. Ernout, op.cit., p.13 believes that *fortis vir sapiensque* is a translation of that ideal, not rightly I think.


34. Publilius Syrus 266; quoted by Büchner, p.380.


39. Strabo, op.cit., C.18 §7; also Lucretius, *De Rerum Natura* 4.8ff.


42. Suetonius, *Gram.* 16, 2, quoted by Marrou, op.cit., p.252


44. Williams, op.cit., p.631.


48. Cf. above pp.7f.
52. Horace, *Carm.* 3.1.4.
55. Quintilian I, 8.5; cf. Heinze on Horace, note 54.
64. Heraclitus, op.cit., ch.76, p.100.
70. Cf. Leiva Petersen, op.cit., p.72.
73. Strabo, quoted above p.12: Strabo, however, believes that religious fear is a good thing.
74. Cornutus, quoted above p.19.
75. Lucretius I. 62ff.

77. Xenophanes, frg. 170.


83. Plato, *Theaetetus* 153c and d.

84. Cf. also Plato, *Cratylus* 402a and b; cf. Wehrli, op.cit., pp.72ff. on Socrates and allegory; Pépin, op.cit., p. 113.


87. The interpretation is Professor Pfeiffer’s, *J.W.C.I.* 15 (1952) 26, 30ff.


89. *SVF I*, loc.cit., 1.28; the change to ὑπηκέπαυε by Meineke is unnecessary and is not accepted by l’estugière, op.ci., p.321.


91. Hesiod, 881ff.

92. Dodds, op.cit., p.241: ‘When in the Hymn of Cleanthes we find the Stoic god decked out with the epithets and attributes of Homer’s Zeus, this is more, I think, than a stylistic formality — it is a serious attempt to fill the old forms with a new meaning.’


98. Virgil, Georg. 2.319ff.
100. Virgil, Georg. 1.467.
103. Boyance, op.cit., p.244.
104. Virgil, Aeneid 4.519 consicia fati sidera; 10.176 interpres Asilas, cui pecudum fibrae, caeli cui sidera parent; 3.360 interpres divum . . . qui sidera sentis.