

Virgil (70 B.C.-19 B.C.)

Introduction *The Heroic Adventure of Founding an Empire.* We have looked at the similarities and differences between Hesiod and Ovid, who occupied opposite extremes of the development of Classical Culture, but who shared a common inwardness to the myth system of the classical world. We might make a similar point about Homer and Virgil, themselves separated by more time than Hesiod and Ovid, and springing from sharply different cultures. In this parallel, as in the first, we grasp the strong continuity of the classical cultural tradition, while at the same time appreciating how deeply the Roman epic perspective differed from that of Homer. Virgil's *Aeneid*, written on the cusp of the Roman Empire—and only a few decades distant from the birth of Jesus Christ—is a response to Homer's *Odyssey*, which replaces Odysseus' return home with Aeneas' post-Troy wanderings, under divine guidance, toward the land of Italia, where a glorious new state (Rome of the just being crowned Caesar Augustus) was being founded. While Homer narrates a social and individual tale, Virgil chooses to tell of a hero with a glorious civilizing mission.

The Roman historical setting. Thanks to the nature of his epic, Lucretius did not clamor for attention to the historical setting in which he was writing. Yet well he might have done. The first half of the first century B.C. was a time in which Rome, and the Italian cities which surrounded it, and which were coming increasingly under Roman domination, was being thrown into the whirlpool of intense political and cultural change. The early formative centuries—4th and 3rd B.C.—had seen the firming up of the independent free spirited senate of the still largely agricultural Roman society, the value formative struggles of a hardy people who had taken charge of the Italian peninsula, and who were building the muscle soon to be required for intense military effort, wars against the Gauls in the North, and then the three exhausting Punic Wars, fought against the Carthaginians from 264 B.C.-146 B.C. In the century following the conclusion of these Wars, in which Rome was 'victorious' and consolidated its control of Italia, tumultuous developments forced the older rural Rome into legislative reform—here and throughout the civic arena the brothers Gracchi were the powerful innovators—and generated private political forces with their own armies, like Marius (157-86 B.C.) and Sulla (138-78 B.C.) , which guaranteed a state of pressure cooker intensity to the whole peninsula. We are close to the period during which Julius Caesar and Pompey formed their first alliance—60 B.C. was the year—and with that we are stepping onto the rolling sidewalk of history along which the Roman Republic was careening toward Empire. No wonder, then, that we feel Lucretius's epic might well have clamored for attention to its historical embedding. And indeed, if we look closely enough, at Lucretius' stress on removing the fear of death, or on freeing mankind from superstition and anthropomorphic gods, we can see that in his work he *was* building himself a shelter from the chaos of his time.

The *Aeneid*. The same can be said, more obviously, for the work of Virgil in creating his *Aeneid*, which was written between 29 B.C. and 19 B.C., and which thus coincided with the accession to imperial power of Augustus Caesar (Emperor from 27 B.C. to 14 A.D.). Not only was Virgil a close friend of the man who was to become the greatest power figure of his age, but Virgil witnessed/heard about up close those tumultuous events—Julius Caesar's seizure of power and assassination in 44 B.C., the death of Pompey, the battle between

Augustus and Antony/Cleopatra, which ended with the Battle of Actium in 34 B.C.—which were the transition of Rome into a world power, and one whose influence is profoundly culture shaping to our day. While Lucretius sought for personal quiet and speculative freedom, as a haven from the chaos of his world, Virgil took another path, letting his epic imagination expand onto a new vision of the new world Augustus was ushering in.

Virgil and Homer. Virgil's move was one of ultimate ambition, to write of world changing developments by following not only the dactylic hexameter epic tradition, inherited from the Greeks, but to create his epic directly out of the impulses of Homer's two epics, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, which were probably composed around the beginning of the first millennium B.C., and which had served as a virtual Bible for the Greeks—underwriting their mythical imaginations, their sense of group pride, and providing an exemplar for aesthetic taste.

The Iliad and the Odyssey Put very roughly, the first half of Virgil's epic follows the thematic developments of Homer's *Odyssey* while the second half of the *Aeneid*—the 'poem about Aeneas'—follows the thematic of the *Iliad*. This reversal of thematics, by which Virgil handles the sequence of events of Homer's poems in reverse order, brings distinct attention to the second part of the *Aeneid*, which concerns the founding of the city of Rome by the hero, Aeneas, who has fled with his family and his family gods from the destruction of the citadel of Troy by the Greeks. While many moderns find the second half of the *Aeneid* less gripping than the first, in which Aeneas recounts the tales of his wandering after leaving Troy, and Virgil narrates Aeneas' moving love affair with the Carthaginian Queen, Dido, there seems little doubt that for Virgil the true meaning of the epic lies in the second half of the *Aeneid*, in which Aeneas heroically defeats the regional Italic king, Turnus, and conquers Italy for Rome, the site of a new millennial world change. To call this monumental poem praise of Virgil's friend Augustus, would be a huge understatement. The epic goes through and beyond flattery, to a level where the grandeur of the human enterprise is put out for viewing.

Invocation. In the fashion of the classical epic, Virgil opens with an invocation to the Muse, in which he sums up his whole theme. It will be up to the reader to consider the daring of emulation, and firmness of purpose, which Virgil demonstrates in opening as follows:

*I sing of arms and the man, he who, exiled by fate,
first came from the coast of Troy to Italy, and to
Lavinian shores – hurled about endlessly by land and sea,
by the will of the gods, by cruel Juno's remorseless anger,
long suffering also in war, until he founded a city
and brought his gods to Latium: from that the Latin people
came, the lords of Alba Longa, the walls of noble Rome.*

Readings

-*Bedford Anthology of World Literature, Book 1. Boston: Bedford-St. Martins, 2004.*

--*Aeneid, Book 1, pp. 1174-1274*

Putnam, Michael, *The Poetry of the Aeneid: Four Studies in Imaginative Unity and Design* (Cambridge, 1965).

Ross, David O., *Virgil's Aeneid: A Reader's Guide* (Oxford, 2007.)

Discussion Topics

Idea: Politics and the Epic Poem - How do you like the 'politicizing' of Homer's theme, by Virgil? Do you see anything in common between Virgil and Ovid? What do you make of the durability of the epic verse meter, the dactylic hexameter? Does the epic voice demand a traditional and formalized mode of expression?

-*Idea: Piety* - Why is the concept of piety central to the Aeneid? What are the obstacles to piety? How does Aeneas overcome them? Does the idea of piety play a role in the Greek epic tradition too? Is Odysseus pious in any way?

Theme: Journey - Discuss Aeneas's journey to the underworld. What is the purpose of Aeneas's journey to the underworld? What obstacles does he face? How can he ensure safe return? What does he learn? What does Aeneas desire most? What motivates him? What are the values by which he lives and acts? What makes him worthy to be the founder of Rome?

Theme: War - What does Aeneas choose in telling the story of the fall of Troy to Dido? What does he say about the losing side? War is glorified in many societies, particularly from side of the winners. But, no one thinks of the losers, and what happens to them. Why? What does Virgil hope to achieve by telling the story?

Readings: Virgil, *Aeneid*, translated by Robert Fitzgerald (New York, 1990.)

It is customary to view the *Aeneid* as a panegyric of Augustus. Do you see another way of viewing the epic? What about the extreme brutality that marks the Romans' accession to power on the Italic peninsula? Is that brutality being justified in the poem?

Aeneas himself is called *pious*, in the *Aeneid*; a term suggesting *devout, reliable, mature*. Do you find Aeneas an engaging literary personality? Is he the stuff of a good novel?

How do you read the 'love affair' with Dido? Is there a true love exchange, or is their relationship entirely between blocks of national/ethnic groups of power? Is it hard for Aeneas to leave Dido?

Does Virgil avoid didacticism? His theme—or do you agree?—is arguably praise of Rome and Augustus. (There is much dispute about this.) If that is his theme, does he build it into a 'good story' while at the same time making his point?