

## *On the History of Allegorism*

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### I. THE ORIGINS

I have shown in an earlier article<sup>1</sup> that from the second half of the fifth century onwards the desire to defend Homer and Hesiod against accusations of immorality was certainly not the main motive which actuated the allegorical interpreters of the early poets. That desire, no doubt, existed; but the part which it played was wholly a subordinate one. In the present article I propose first to consider allegorism in its earlier stages, and to state my case for holding that the practice of allegorical interpretation cannot have originated in this desire of Homeric partisans to exculpate the poet. My view is that the function of allegorism was originally not negative or defensive but rather (as with Anaxagoras, Metrodorus, etc., in later times) positive or exegetical.

For the last century and a half the tendency has been to magnify unduly the apologetic aspect of allegorism. The most recent writer on the subject<sup>2</sup> agrees with most of his predecessors in assuming that the practice must have been in its origins defensive: Pythagoras and Xenophanes had accused Homer, and Theagenes of Rhegium came to the rescue by showing how the Battle of the Gods could be understood as a conflict partly between forces of nature and partly between warring passions in the human breast; and while there may have been allegorists before Theagenes (as he admits in view of my remarks on Pherecydes in *C.R.* XLI pp. 214-5), still (it is implied) their motive must have been similar. I find this view a very superficial interpretation of the facts.

The attempt of Hesiod to be more didactic than Homer merely encouraged the notion that Homer intended to be as didactic as he. The later Greeks, ignoring the opposition between the two schools (signalized in the *Theogony* vv. 27-8), regarded the Homeric and Hesiodic traditions as one, and found in them a divine authority on all manner of subjects. The result was that the early philosophers were felt to be competing with Homer and Hesiod in their own field. This is the reason why Xenophanes<sup>3</sup> (whether he be ranked as poet or as philosopher) sought to discredit their authority; their teachings could not be ignored or tacitly replaced by something new. The same motive impelled Pythagoras<sup>4</sup> and Empedocles to attack the early poets. The fragments of

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<sup>1</sup> *C.Q.* XXIII pp. 142 sqq.

<sup>2</sup> E.E. Sikes, *The Greek View of Poetry*, pp. 12-3. I fear that Mr. Sikes has misunderstood my remarks on the nature of Pherecydes' allegorism. This may be my fault, and I have tried to explain myself more clearly in the present article. But it is surprising to find Mr. Sikes repeating (p. 72) the old error of referring to Xen. *Symp.* 3, 6 as proof of the statement (quite unfounded, as I showed in *C.Q.* XXIV pp. 4 sqq.) that the Cynics (i.e. Antisthenes) were fond of allegorism and transmitted the practice to the Stoics; and equally surprising to find him a little later (pp. 168-9) adopting (with due acknowledgements) my view of the matter, apparently without noticing that he thereby involves himself in a notable self-contradiction.

<sup>3</sup> *Frr.* II, 18 (Diels); *D.L.* IX 18; cf. Empedocles, *fr.* 4.

<sup>4</sup> *D.L.* VIII 21.

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Heraclitus are the best illustration of this professional hostility. Most men 'follow the poets'<sup>5</sup>; and therefore if the philosopher is to get a hearing he must first disabuse men's minds of their extreme admiration for those stupid polymaths, Homer and Hesiod.<sup>6</sup> It is clear that the philosophers, even when

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they condemn Hesiod along with Homer, remained faithful to the Hesiodic view of the function of poetry. The criticisms passed by Heraclitus, for example, obviously assume that it was the business of the early poets to know and reveal the true (i.e. the Heraclitean) philosophy.

Now Heraclitus not merely criticizes and interprets the works of the early poets as though they were scientific manuals; in expounding his own theories he adopts a mode of expression largely borrowed from the mythical traditions. Thus he plays with the word 'Zeus' as though it were derived from ζῆν, and declares that wisdom might in one sense be called by this name. He speaks too of the Erinyes as the handmaids of justice, who will take vengeance if the sun should exceed his measures, thereby virtually transforming those spirits of vengeance into personifications of the laws of equipoise on which, he thinks, the universe depends.<sup>7</sup> The impulse of the philosophers to rival the poets not merely in their teaching but also in their style and language is illustrated also by Parmenides, who wrote in verse evidently because he considered it the natural medium for the expression of philosophic truth. Parmenides claimed indeed to be inspired—his poem was, he says, put into his mouth by a goddess. In his use of verse he was followed by Empedocles, whom Aristotle<sup>8</sup> regarded as a most successful imitator of the Homeric style. Empedocles, as became an Orphic preacher, was fond of symbol and myth; his four elements or 'roots' of things, for example, he personifies and labels with names drawn from mythology. Strongly religious in his sentiments, he too prays that he may be inspired by the Muses, and begs the gods to make a pure stream flow from his lips. In spite of his hostility to Homer he rated highly the calling of poet; according to one fragment, those who have kept the rules of holiness appear at their final incarnation as prophets, poets, physicians and princes, before they ascend up as gods.<sup>9</sup>

This appropriation of poetry and mythology by the philosophers, whether they wrote in verse or, like Heraclitus, in oracular prose, is due to various factors. It is in part to be ascribed, no doubt, to the confusion of the myth-mongering of Homer and Hesiod with mysteriously expressed doctrines of conduct and theology, such as those of the Orphic hymns. But, further, the task of replacing the older mythologies by new ones of their own concoction was all the more congenial because the philosophers whose reach exceeds their grasp naturally tend to express themselves in figure and in allegory. Even Heraclitus set forth his doctrines not as hypotheses established by argument but as a masterly achievement of intuition or native wit. Hence his poetic and obscure language, which he apparently seeks to justify by the plea that it is like the style of 'the Delphic

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<sup>5</sup> Frr, 57, 104.

<sup>6</sup> Fr. 42 ; Plutarch, *Camill.* 19 ; fr. 28 (see also Burnet, *E.G.P.* c. III); fr. 40.

<sup>7</sup> Frr. 32, 94.

<sup>8</sup> D.L. VIII 57.

<sup>9</sup> Frr. 6, 4, 146.

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oracle which neither utters nor hides its meaning but hints at it darkly.'<sup>10</sup> The language of myth is the language of intuition and of inspiration; it is that which in all ages is naturally adopted by those thinkers who are not able or willing to attempt a precise statement of truth by the aid of the discursive reason, but who at the same time hold, and desire to teach, certain opinions as beautiful, appealing or illuminating. Hence when Plato insisted on the need for dialectic, and reacted violently against all those alleged short-cuts to truth which, being non-inferential, could yield merely 'opinion' and not scientifically grounded 'knowledge,' Homer, Hesiod and their enemies like Heraclitus were all alike involved in the same condemnation.

But the chief reason was that so much of these speculations had in a manner grown out of the study of Homer and Hesiod. These philosophers had been students of Homer before they became philosophers. When their own thought developed and they proceeded to revise Homer and Hesiod, they were reacting against what they had already absorbed; and so, rather than forge new terms of their

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own, it was natural for them to retain the style and vocabulary of the traditions which they merely in part rejected. The more they pondered over Homer and Hesiod, the clearer it seemed to them that those early poets had wielded the myths for the purpose of teaching philosophic doctrines,<sup>11</sup> however inadequate or mistaken those doctrines frequently appeared to them to be. One way of correcting the errors of the poets was by revising their mythology.

Thus Homer and Hesiod were one of the bones on which Greek philosophy cut its infant teeth. Here is, I think, the circumstance in which we should look for the origin of the allegorical interpretation of Homer, which grew up gradually with the gradual growth of the more conscious allegorical use of mythical language to express theories which were at first only partly philosophic. It was the natural outcome of the study and veneration bestowed upon the early poets in the belief that their works constituted in some sense a divine revelation. It was both owing to their long study of the works of the poets and owing to their own developing philosophic insight (which was, no doubt, assisted by that study) that the early expounders of Homer and Hesiod began to see deeper meanings in their verses. And it was because they saw such deeper meanings that they adapted the myths to the needs of their own world-view, so as to make them by excision, combination and addition more satisfying symbols of the cosmic process. As I have pointed out elsewhere,<sup>12</sup> allegorism can be seen at an early stage of its growth in one of these fusers of myths, Pherecydes of Syros, a prose-writer whose date is much earlier than that of Heraclitus. We have some report of his comments on two notorious passages of the Iliad (I 590, XV 18). But it should be noticed that his treatment of these passages was not necessarily part of an apology for Homer. It is indeed not at all certain that Pherecydes mentioned Homer; he may merely have appropriated the vocabulary and revised the doctrine of the passages in question. It is true that Celsus found Pherecydes' remarks useful in attacking Christianity, which was one

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<sup>10</sup> Fr. 93.

<sup>11</sup> Hence Homer, Hesiod, Xenophanes, Parmenides, Empedocles were classed together as men who 'philosophized in poetry' (see e.g. D.L. IX 22).

<sup>12</sup> *C.R.* XLI pp. 214-5, where I also showed how the late allegorists support my view as to the origin of allegorism.

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way of defending the Homeric mythology; but he so used them under the stress of a controversy to which of course Pherecydes was a stranger. My point is that whether Pherecydes mentioned Homer or not he provides an excellent example of that process of rationalizing (to some degree) and remoulding the myths for one's own purposes—the process which later unfolds into overt allegorism. It is not necessary to my argument to suppose that Pherecydes, Heraclitus, Empedocles and other early philosophers explicitly regarded Homer as allegorical and openly interpreted him from that standpoint. (Some of them may have done so, as I have pointed out.) It is sufficient that their treatment of mythology tended in that direction. If I am right, it follows that allegorical interpretation was in its very first gears positive, not defensive, in its aim; that is to say, it was practised in order to make more explicit the doctrines which the students of the poets believed to be actually contained in the poets' words, and not simply to defend the poets against censure. That deeper wealth of meaning, which, as I have explained, they thought to be implied, they attempted to express and amplify for themselves, and later to replace, in language which was at first more than half mythical but which tended to become more and more scientific and precise. The development from Pherecydes to Heraclitus, or, at any rate, to the Heracliteans, represents the general process. Later still, when philosophy had learned to express itself in technical language of its own, the new conceptions were felt by many to be due (as in some small degree they were) to the early poets; and thus allegorism—the reading of scientific or quasi-scientific doctrines into the mysterious language of tradition—became full-fledged.

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And, as I have stated in an earlier article, the chief incentive to the use of allegories and etymologies for supporting philosophical dogmas continued down to the Neoplatonists to be the belief that the early poets were divinely wise or else inspired in just the same sense as prophets and oracles.<sup>13</sup>

What then of Theagenes of Rhegium and the defensive function of allegorism? There is no doubt that far too much importance has been attached to Theagenes, whose allegorism is known to us only from a stray remark of Porphyry on the *Theomachy*. The scholiast does not say (as some writers rashly assume) that Theagenes was the first allegorist. He says either that Theagenes was the first *defensive* allegorist or alternatively (for his remark is ambiguous) that Theagenes was the first to use allegorical interpretation for the purpose of defending one particular passage—and

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<sup>13</sup> Plato's *Cratylus* analyses this notion so far as concerns the etymological side of allegorism. Thanks to divine inspiration words resemble the things they name; and therefore a likeness between words—even of different languages points to a real connection between the realities denoted by them. Examples of such significant puns could be multiplied from Homer e.g. *Od.* I 62), the Homeric Hymns, Hesiod, Pindar, Aeschylus (*Agam.* 689: some divinity gave Helen her appropriate name; cf. Plato, *Crat.* 4380). The Orphics and Pythagoreans believed in, or at any rate exploited, this kind of word-play (e.g. the doctrine that the body is the tomb of the soul could not fail to be most impressive in the form σώμα σῆμα); one is reminded also of the hymn quoted in Plato, *Phaedrus* 252b, with its explanation of ἔρωσ as πτέρωσ in the language of the gods. Cf. also the allegory in *Gorg.* 493, with its plays on σώμα σῆμα, τίθος, τιθανός, etc. The popular love of puns, riddles and circumlocutions is one of the minor factors which helped to bring about such allegorism as that practised by the Stoics. (Another factor—though this is more doubtful—may have been the mysteries which, according to E. Hatch, *Hibbert Lectures*, 1888, pp. 59 sqq., referring to Heraclitus, *Quaest. Hom.* 6, and the well-known passages of Demetrius and Philo on the subject, 'habituated the Greek mind to symbolical expression of religious and moral truth.)

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that merely one among several more or less equally notorious—of the Iliad. Beyond this, Theagenes is but a name; not one of his allegorical efforts survives. His barren record serves merely to illustrate the fact that grammarians and biographers of Homer could make use of the labours of the philosophers for the purpose of expounding, eulogizing and defending the poet. (History repeated itself later, when Crates and the grammarians of his school similarly took over the allegorism of the Stoics.) But this defensive function of allegorism is wholly derivative and subordinate. It cannot account for the spate of allegorical interpretations which, from Metrodorus of Lampascus onwards, encumbered the inoffensive just as much as the offensive passages of Homer. Nor can it, I submit, account for the origin of allegorism, which is to be found, as I have said, in the desire of speculative thinkers, like Pherecydes, to appropriate for their own use some at least of the mythical traditions which they could not help venerating.

In concluding this section I have only to add that I think I have discovered the reason why so many modern writers have laid undue stress upon the defensive aspect of allegorism. They have too confidently followed the views expressed by Schow in his edition of the allegorist whom he called Heraclides. Schow (pp. 223-4) holds that allegorism originated in the desire to answer Plato on the subject of Homer. Better informed writers have accepted this view except for the fact that they have read—instead of 'Plato'—'Pythagoras' or 'Xenophanes,' and that they have then proceeded to say that Plato's censure of Homer encouraged (though it did not originate) the allegorical defence of the poet. Hence the current view, which I have sought to refute in writing of Plato's attitude towards allegorism and in the present article. So far as I can trace, writers earlier than Schow (e.g. Heyne) are innocent of this error. And it is clear that Schow's opinions in this respect did not deserve the tender treatment which they have heretofore received. Schow, though he would make Plato the cause of allegorism, did not mind admitting that there were allegorists before Plato.

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Apart from this self-contradiction and other errors (such as his notion that Aristarchus was an allegorist the Danish scholar was at fault in not having made himself sufficiently acquainted with other extant collections of allegories in addition to the one which he actually edited. Heyne indeed slyly insinuates in his prefatory epistle to Schow's work (1782) that our editor could have acquitted himself better if he had paid more attention to Cornutus, Ps.-Plutarch, the Neoplatonists, Eustathius and the scholiasts (p. xiv). It is true that, as Heyne light-heartedly suggests, there are more important things for a man to do. Yet it was this unimportant omission which misled Schow into the hasty generalization which has been unaccountably accepted by subsequent writers as substantially correct. Because some later allegorists, of whom Heraclitus or Heracleides (or whatever his name may have been) is practically the sole extant representative, attacked Plato with allegories, it by no means follows that the desire to defend the poets against Plato (or Xenophanes or Zoilus or Epicurus) was the ruling motive of allegorism.<sup>14</sup> Ps.-Plutarch *Vit. Hom.*) does not defend the poets against Plato, though he regards Homer as the father of all philosophies, arts and sciences from morality to chariot-driving, from play-writing to

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<sup>14</sup> Though the cases are not exactly parallel, it is worth mentioning, in support of my views, that the allegorical interpretation of Virgil did not arise out of any desire to defend the poet (v. Comparetti, *V. in the M.A.*, I viii).

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astronomy.<sup>15</sup> Neither does Cicero's Balbus<sup>16</sup>; nor Cornutus, who so far from excusing the ancient poets actually censures them for corrupting the myths. The Neoplatonic allegorists eulogized both Homer and Plato. Yet, to do Schow justice, he is right on one point where later writers have preferred to err with Heyne: the pupil rightly calls Heraclitus a not unlearned grammarian (p. 225), the master opines, without adducing any argument, that he was a philosopher (p. xiv).<sup>17</sup>

## II. THE KINDS OF INTERPRETATION

It would be impossible for lack of data to write anything like a complete history of Greek allegorism. Some efforts have been made to trace to their sources the interpretations recorded in the extant collections. But the results are meagre and largely problematical, and shed no light on the growth and progress of allegorism. My own aim in writing on the subject has been to gain some such light not by theorizing on questions of authorship but by seeking (with Plato's help) to read the mind of the various allegorists or allegorizing schools. It occurs to me now that my conclusions might be better understood if I summarize a few points in accordance with a tentative classification of allegorisms which I venture to offer here.

Let me call the first kind historic interpretation, by which I mean the interpretation of poetry in the sense in which the author intended it to be taken. If the interpretation offered as historic clearly perverts that sense, it may conveniently be

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called pseudo-historic. For example, it was a piece of pseudo-historic allegorical interpretation for Diogenes of Apollonia to say that Homer intended 'Zeus' to mean 'air.' Practically all the allegorical interpretations prior to Plato's time belong to this pseudo-historic class; and it was this kind of interpretation which ought not to have survived the polemic which Plato directed against it. But it survived with at least some of the Stoics, whence it passed to Crates and his school of grammarians, from whom (at many removes, no doubt) derive the late allegorical collections which we possess. The assumption of these allegorists was that the poets (or, according to Cornutus, the myth-makers and coiners of words and names on whom the poets may have drawn) were wise men who expressed the truth about reality through the medium of myths and

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<sup>15</sup> Ps.-Plutarch, *Vit. Hom.* 106; Heraclitus, *Quaest. Hom.* 49, similarly states that Homer knew as much astronomy as Eudoxus and Aratus, and that his learning was as extensive as that of Eratosthenes. It is admitted that Homer omitted some of the details; but both grammarians explain this fact by a consideration which comes as a welcome gleam of sanity: Homer had a different aim from such philosophers, to write the *Iliad*, not to explain natural phenomena.

<sup>16</sup> The Stoic authorities followed by Cicero in the *De Nat. Deor.* apparently occupied a position midway between that of Zeno and that of Cornutus on the question how far the early poets admitted errors and fictions which ought not to be allegorically interpreted. See *C.Q.* XXIV p. 9 and XXIII pp. 41 sqq. It is noteworthy that Balbus refuses to allegorize the Theomachy. Evidently the Stoic or Middle-Stoic position is much more judicious than that of the grammarians, who (from Theagenes onwards) made much of that passage.

<sup>17</sup> On Heraclitus see *C.Q.* XXIV pp. 1 sqq. He calls the Stoics 'the greatest philosophers'; but that does not make him either a Stoic or a philosopher. *Q.H.* 22-3 offers a good example of Heraclitus' sublime impartiality; the number of the elements according to Homer is either one or two or four or five.

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symbols.<sup>18</sup> The results of this assumption were numerous and strange—in a single sentence Heraclitus, for example, can rob a whole book of the *Iliad* of all point.<sup>19</sup> They lend colour to Plutarch's remark<sup>20</sup> that poetry was to the Greeks like the head of the polypus, pleasant to taste but liable to cause nightmare. Pseudo-historic allegorism was probably the worst feature of the nightmare which naturally ensued upon a surfeit of the Homeric banquet. But that we may preserve our good opinion of the Greeks, let it be noted that allegorism was never popular.<sup>21</sup> Plutarch<sup>22</sup> himself, like Aristarchus and the moderate Stoic, Ariston of Chios, would have none of it. Platonists later than Plutarch, such as Maximus of Tyre.<sup>23</sup> and certain of the Neoplatonists, mark a retrograde movement.

The second variety I should call *intrinsic* interpretation, i.e. any form of interpretation which sets out to consider the words of the poet objectively, quite apart from his intentions known or unknown, and to interpret them according to the actual significances and symbolisms of the words themselves. The results of this method are not necessarily the same as those of the historic method, for the poet may be understood to have said more than he actually meant. The reader may claim to know better than the poet what is the meaning of the poem. His excuse is the deep suggestiveness of great poetry which is at the very least a constant temptation to the enthusiastic reader to spend his energies in ingenious comment and speculation. He will consider himself the more justified in this course if he is persuaded that what he is studying comes from no mere human source but is directly inspired by higher powers. Plato's treatment of inspiration and his view that the world of sense and opinion is in some sort an expression of ideal truth leave us free to believe, if we like, that there are plenty of 'undersenses' in Homer. But can we be sure that the poets, even when they exhibit all the symptoms of daemonic possession, are genuinely inspired by the divinities who cannot lie or deceive? And can we be sure that the interpreters also enjoy—for this too is necessary—some degree of divine inspiration? And further, since truth can be discovered by the dialectic reason, is it worth the philosopher's while to bother about 'opinion' and inspiration?<sup>24</sup> Ignoring these doubts and difficulties which Plato raised, some of the Neoplatonists availed themselves of the liberty which the master apparently left them to adopt the

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standpoint of intrinsic allegorism. The myths (or some of them) are divine—such was their assumption—and must therefore in some measure express the divine truth, just as the visible world cannot but be an expression of invisible reality.

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<sup>18</sup> The belief in the wisdom of the poets was the basis of Stoic allegorism: *C.Q.* XXII pp, 66, 68, XXIII p. 42.

<sup>19</sup> E.g. the plague in *Il.* I was not the wrath of a god but 'an accident of the atmosphere' (*Q.H.* II).

<sup>20</sup> *De Aud. Poet.* 15B. Cf. Plato, *Rep.* 607C.

<sup>21</sup> Such is the implication of Plato, *Phaedr.* 230a. Heraclitus (*Q.H.*); and Maximus of Tyre complain that Homer is read not for his deeper meanings but for the charm and interest of his narrative. Popular didacticism no doubt admitted (Strabo I 2, 17) that Homer's work was a philosophic treatise; but this was a 'pious opinion' that most people would shrink from putting into practice by means of allegorism.

<sup>22</sup> *De Aud. Poet.* 19E, 31E.

<sup>23</sup> Maximus is the first extant writer (as Proclus is the last) to make a serious attempt to reconcile Homer and Plato. He has a far greater respect for the poet as savant than those Stoics who from Zeno onward admitted in varying degrees the existence of ignorance and opinion in Homer. See *C.Q.* XXIII p. 42, XXIV pp. 2 sqq.

<sup>24</sup> See also *C.Q.* XXIII p. 149.

The allegorists veered between praising now the divine wisdom and now the prophetic inspiration of the poets; and accordingly they adopted now the historic and now the intrinsic point of view. This is certainly true of the Neoplatonists. As Julian puts it, the ancients, either possessed by the gods (the standpoint of the intrinsic allegorist) or thinking out for themselves the causes of things (the standpoint of the historic, or rather pseudo-historic, allegorist), cloaked them in strange myths, in order to promote true learning by stimulating interest and curiosity and at the same time to conceal from the common throng those high doctrines of philosophy which ought not to be made public property.<sup>25</sup> Similarly Porphyry (*De Antro Nympharum*) in expounding the significance of the cave of the nymphs described in *Odyssey XIII* is on the one hand inclined to regard the passage as a conscious allegory on the part of the poet—i.e, he tends to adopt the standpoint of the historic allegorist; but on the other hand he contends that it does not matter whether the symbols are Homer's invention or not; nor does it matter whether the description is that of an actual cave. The point is that caves have an intrinsic significance; they are symbolic of the universe and its processes; so that a description of a cave, whether the cave be actual or imaginary, is bound to contain mysterious meanings.

It will be seen that the Neoplatonic allegorists were not above shifting their ground. They did not honestly face the difficulties attending their self-imposed task of reconciling Homer with Plato. They simply followed Maximus of Tyre in assuming that poetry and philosophy are the same thing. But the long-standing quarrel between poetry and philosophy could not be resolved in that manner; and it is worth while pointing out the inconsistencies in which Julian,<sup>26</sup> for example, finds himself involved. On the one hand, the testimony of the poets was valuable to the pagan apologist; Homer and Hesiod testified to the existence of the gods, and it was right that even the common people who cared nothing for allegorism should learn this lesson from them. On the other hand, the poets (unless allegorically interpreted, and sometimes even then; are a stumbling-block as well as a support. Julian regrets the offensive fables which have brought scorn on the poets; he recommends the priests to avoid reading tales which are erotic, or which assert that the gods do harm to mankind or to one another out of hatred, or which in any manner use unclean language; for to such tales (he says) the Christians can point in triumph. Yet he holds that these shocking myths are useful not only for teaching ordinary men that the gods exist, but for helping the more intelligent to discover by allegorical interpretation the divine truths which their authors express symbolically. It was for the latter class that Hesiod intended his myths; they were not meant for children. Obviously one difficulty in using the myths as authoritative support for paganism was that their correct interpretations could not be discovered or understood by anyone who was not already a Neoplatonist. There is the further difficulty that the poets, though they contain much that is divine, contain also (Julian says) much that is merely human, and that is therefore not to be treated allegorically. Thus, those who have no training in philosophy are not to read offensive myths; and yet it is from these myths that they are to learn of the existence of the gods. And the philosopher who has studied Pythagoras and Plato is, by the help of the gods, to find these same myths a source of enlightenment, though they contain much that is merely human, and no criterion is offered him for distinguishing their human element from the divine.

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<sup>25</sup> *Orat.* IV 136b, V 170abc. *Epist.* 301a, 422 sqq.

<sup>26</sup> *Orat.* IV 136c, 137c, 149c, VII 206c sqq.

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The fables of the poets, wise men though they were and possessed of Phoebus, are sometimes merely 'sportive'; and yet they contain mys-

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terious truths, which only the philosopher can elicit and understand. Plato, Plutarch and the Stoics are often censured by modern writers for making the study of the poets some sort a preparation for the study of philosophy. But what ought to be said of the Neoplatonic allegorists on whose principles the study of philosophy is a necessary preparation for the reading and understanding of Homer? Such are the results of trying to combine Platonism with views which Plato had expressly repudiated—in particular with allegorism and esoteric mystery-mongering which are the measure of Neoplatonic disloyalty to Plato. The text-book method of learning did not commend itself to Plato, least of all when the text-books offered consisted of the myths (with their immoral implications) and the vague and self-contradictory opinions of the poets. Truth to Plato was not a matter of mysterious initiations and private illuminations but of open, free and reasoned argument; he certainly would not have considered that the philosopher could advance in knowledge by the process of 'getting lights' in reading Homer and Hesiod. But be it noted once more that the moderate, if prosaic, didacticism of Plutarch is much more characteristic of the Greeks attitude towards poetry than the wild excesses of Stoics, grammarians like Heraclitus, or Neoplatonists like Julian.

The third kind of interpretation may be called the *artificial*, by which I mean such interpretation as attributes to the poet's words significance which are not offered as historic or intrinsic; it is the fanciful application of the poet's words to any purpose (other than that intended by the poet or thought to be actually and objectively implicit in his words) for which they may be regarded as appropriate. All the pseudo-historic interpretations are really examples—usually very frigid—of this kind of allegorism. And this is the kind of interpretation which Plato (and Socrates<sup>27</sup> too) practised himself on occasion, usually for the purpose of illustrating his own doctrines. For examples I might refer to *Crito* 44b, *Phaedo* 69c, and *Laws* 904e.<sup>28</sup> Some of the Stoic allegorisms may have belonged to this class<sup>29</sup>; and it seems clear that the attitude of Plotinus was that of what I have called artificial allegorism.<sup>30</sup>

### III. POETIC INSPIRATION

Allegorism of the first two kinds is, as I have shown above, accompanied as a rule by a belief in the divine inspiration of the poets allegorized. But what exactly did this divine inspiration imply?

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<sup>27</sup> Xen., *Mem.* I 3, 7 (moralization of the story of Circe); *Symp.* VIII 28 sqq. (the etymology of Ganymede as meaning 'rejoicing in counsel' explains why he was the favourite of Zeus), Socrates used such interpretations 'in jest but with a serious meaning.' Cf. Plato, *Crat. passim*, It looks as if Socrates, though free from all superstitious reverence for the poets, could, when the whim seized him, ironically outdo the ingenuity of all the sophists in all forms of poetic exegesis.

<sup>28</sup> Where δίκη in the quotation means 'justice' for Plato, though he no doubt knew that it had a different meaning for Homer.

<sup>29</sup> As Chrysippus' admissions on the subject of his etymologies would suggest; see *C.Q.* XXIV p. 3 n. 3.

<sup>30</sup> *C.Q.* XXIII p. 154.

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The didacticism which is the keynote of the Greek attitude towards poetry laid most stress on the divine wisdom of the early poets; but it could also, though somewhat inconsistently, hold that they were directly inspired by the gods in the same sense as prophets and oracles. As the allegorisms stand for extreme didacticism they express both these tendencies in an exaggerated form. Perhaps their chief support was the view that poetry is inspired like prophecy (which, if consistently held, would be the standpoint of intrinsic allegorism); but we usually find this view rather inharmoniously combined with an exaggerated respect for the wisdom (in some sense divine) of the poets themselves (standpoint of historic allegorism). The Greeks appear to have regarded prophecy as due to possession by some supernatural power; the personality of the seer was thought to be completely

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submerged, so that his words were in no sense his own.<sup>31</sup> The view that poetic inspiration was of this kind may possibly be a survival from the time when the poet-priest led the ceremonial dance round the altar of the Muses. But it is certainly not the view of the poets of more historical times. Homer, whose views are sometimes misstated even by modern writers,<sup>32</sup> does not claim to be 'controlled' by a spirit not his own, or to utter oracles containing a manifold significance. Whatever the precise sense of the terms which we translate 'inspired,' they certainly meant nothing so mediumistic. The words of Phemius<sup>33</sup> alone are sufficient to make good this contention. Nor does he claim the standing of a priest. (Perhaps it is worth while to mention here what seems to have been the view of Jebb,<sup>34</sup> that the Homeric bard must have ranked as an inspired priest because Aegisthus apparently marooned, instead of butchering out of hand, the bard who was left as guardian of Clytemnestra,<sup>35</sup> a circumstance which Jebb took as suggesting that the bard must have been a sacrosanct person whose blood could not be shed without incurring an extraordinary pollution. Against this view there are two facts, first that Phemius owed his life to no such scruple on the part of Odysseus,<sup>36</sup> and second that the doctrine of pollution arising from bloodshed is apparently unknown to Homer.<sup>37</sup> It cannot then be admitted, I think, that Homer claimed personal inviolability for his bards as though they enjoyed the privileges of some special religious office.) Again the Homeric claim to inspiration does not imply profound wisdom or even veracity; though the favour of the Muses is, no doubt, a valuable aid to the memory and the descriptive powers of the bard, as well as a reason for paying him honour.<sup>38</sup> The Hesiodic remarks on inspiration<sup>39</sup> also appear to leave the poet free and responsible. The Muses of the *Theogony*—daughters of Zeus and Memory—are more like a

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<sup>31</sup> Sikes, *op. cit.*, pp. 19 sqq. There are a few exceptional passages where Plato appears to accept the Homeric, as opposed to the Dionysiac, view of inspiration, e.g. *Laws* VII 804a, quoting *Od.* III 26 sqq.

<sup>32</sup> Cf. J. A. K. Thomson, *Studies of the Odyssey*, p. 165; *C.Q.* XXIII p. 148.

<sup>33</sup> *Od.* XXII 347

<sup>34</sup> *Essays and Addresses* pp. 63 sqq.

<sup>35</sup> *Od.* 111 267 sqq. The old grammarians (Schol. *ad loc.*, Athenaeus I xxiv, Strabo I 2, 3, ps.-Plutarch, *Vit. Hom.* 213) thought that Agamemnon chose a bard for this post because of the moral tendency of poetry. Sextus Empiricus *Adv. Mus.* 11, 26) objected that this poet-moralist made a bad job of Clytemnestra,

<sup>36</sup> *Od.* XXII 356.

<sup>37</sup> G. M. Calhoun, *The Growth of Criminal Law in Ancient Greece*, c. II.

<sup>38</sup> *Od.* VIII 487 sqq.

<sup>39</sup> *Theog.* 26 sqq.

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conventional literary allegory than the Muses of Homer. They cannot be trusted to tell the truth; they will tell it only if they choose, i.e., to put it prosaically, if the poet chooses they will aid him in telling the truth as much as they aided fiction-loving Homer. Hence it was that Homer, according to this criticism, wrote fiction though he was genuinely inspired. Accordingly, if veracity depends on the intention of the poet himself, he cannot be regarded on the Hesiodic—any more than on the Homeric—view as the passive instrument of supernatural powers. Pindar too, though in one fragment<sup>40</sup> he places himself—more or less metaphorically, no doubt—in the same class as the inspired seer, and elsewhere<sup>41</sup> invites us to interpret his oracular style allegorically, regards inspiration as a special faculty or instinct—god-given, it is true, but still under the poet's complete control<sup>42</sup>; so that in Pindar's view also the poet is no passive mouthpiece of the gods but in fact needs learning and acquired skill<sup>43</sup> in addition to his divine gift. Like Hesiod, Pindar does not find Homer remarkable for veracity;

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the characteristic of Homeric inspiration he finds to be not wisdom of truthfulness but a preternatural charm or persuasiveness.<sup>44</sup> So much then for the poets: for we may take it that the Pindaric emphasis on divinegenius rather than a divine afflatus is typical of their attitude. But the popular view, at any rate by the fifth century, shows a certain exaggeration in both directions. We learn from Plato<sup>45</sup> that according to the general opinion the poet when he sits on the tripod of the Muses is not in his right mind; and it also appears from Plato and Xenophon<sup>46</sup> to have been the prevalent view that the poets were the practically omniscient teachers of mankind. Curiously enough the same confusion, appears in two fragments of Democritus<sup>47</sup> on poetic inspiration. Plato<sup>48</sup> points out that the poets cannot have it both ways; either they are endowed with a wisdom and genius of their own or else they are no better than those scarcely respectable persons, the soothsayers who are subject to possession, The first alternative he rejects because of the ignorance which the poets exhibit. As to the second, he evidently regards divine interference as the only explanation of the 'right opinions' which are surprisingly to be found on occasion in their works; and at the same time the unstable emotionalism which belongs to the temperament of the soothsayer makes their utterances in general unreliable, so that the ideal state will have for poets not men who are inspired in the ordinary sense of that term but men of genius and right education.<sup>49</sup> For a long time after Plato we hear little of poetry as the effect of either divine genius or divine possession. The Stoics certainly exploited and probably shared the popular belief

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<sup>40</sup> Fr. 150. Cf. *Ol.* III 10 (the poet's strains are 'heaven-sent'), *Paeon* IX 34 (the poet is prompted by some divine power to compose a noble strain).

<sup>41</sup> *Ol.* II 83.

<sup>42</sup> *Ol.* II 86: the true poet 'knows much by gift of nature'; and that the gift of nature is also the gift of God is clear from *Ol.* IX 100 sqq., where, after saying 'that which is by nature is altogether best;' he adds immediately that it is better to pass over in silence everything in which God has no part.

<sup>43</sup> *Isthm.* V 28 ; though mere learning is of no avail, *Ol.* II 86.

<sup>44</sup> *Nem.* VII 20 sqq.; cf. *Ol.* I 28.

<sup>45</sup> *Laws* 719; cf. *Phaedr.* 245a, *Ion* 534e, *Apol.* 22b, etc.

<sup>46</sup> Plato, *Rep.* 598e, Xen., *Symp.* IV 6-7.

<sup>47</sup> Fr. 18, 21.

<sup>48</sup> *Meno* 99, *Ion* 534, etc.

<sup>49</sup> *C.Q.* XXIII pp. 147 sqq.

J. Tate, "On the History of Allegorism," *Classical Quarterly* 28 (1934): 105-114.

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in the wisdom of Homer and Hesiod, so that their standpoint in allegorism was mostly the pseudo-historic. But with more reputable critics from Aristotle onwards<sup>50</sup> poetic inspiration is regarded chiefly as a matter of natural genius (φύσις, δύναμις, *natura*, *ingenium*) developed by art (τέχνη, *ars*)—the equipment which, with the addition of knowledge (ἐπιστήμη} Plato desired in poets and orators<sup>51</sup>—or of a highly emotional temperament. Had such a view prevailed regarding Homer and Hesiod it would have meant an end to the belief in their divine authority. But the old confusion still persisted, even in extreme forms, for example, in the minds of those who used Homer for purposes of divination<sup>52</sup>; and in spite of Plato and the naturalistic views of the Alexandrian critics, it raised its head again with the late allegorists such as the Neoplatonists (except Plotinus) who, when other oracles had failed, made Homer and Hesiod once more into seers and hierophants to be praised both for their inspiration (which on Platonic principles was nothing much to their credit) and for their wisdom (which on Plato had taken some pains to prove non-existent).<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> *C.Q.* XXII pp. 71-2.

<sup>51</sup> *Phaedr.* 259-70.

<sup>52</sup> Ps.-Plut., *Vit, Hom.* 218,

<sup>53</sup> *C.Q.* XXII p. 72 n. 2, XXIV p. 4.