

**SUGGESTIONS  
INTRODUCTORY TO A  
STUDY OF THE AENEID**

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Suggestions introductory to a study of the Aeneid by H. Nettleship

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**H. NETTLESHIP**

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# SUGGESTIONS

INTRODUCTORY TO

## A STUDY OF THE AENEID

BY

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VIRTUTES EIUS INTELLECTU SEQUI.



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## PREFACE.

THE following remarks are offered as a contribution to the interpretation of a poem to which a great deal of recent criticism has, I venture to think, been unjust. Much has been said of the artificial and borrowed element in the *Aeneid*, very little of the original element; and yet it is clear that a poet who won the ear of his nation so soon as Vergil, and became at once one of the most popular poets and the most classical poet of Rome, could not have gained this position without great original power. Because Vergil chose a vast and multitudinous material to work upon some critics have supposed that he showed no creative power in handling it; as if he had not created a new kind of epic and a new poetical language; as if any other Roman poet before him had attempted so vast and so difficult a problem, and as if any epic poet of his nation after him had succeeded in anything like the same way in holding the attention of mankind. Mere rhetorical skill has never made and can never make a work immortal. When therefore Bernhardt<sup>1</sup>, whose careful and appreciative criticism on the *Aeneid* I wish to mention with great respect, refuses to allow that Vergil had any creative power; when Touffet<sup>2</sup>, after pronouncing the same verdict, refuses him any original gifts but those of tender sympathy and minute psychological insight, asserting that all his characters 'show a mild and humane temper, without asperity and roughness, but at the same time without energy;' when Mr. Gladstone<sup>3</sup> says

<sup>1</sup> *Grundriss der Römischen Literatur*, 1te Abtheilung, pp. 489, 496.

<sup>2</sup> *Geschichte der Römischen Literatur*, vol. ii. p. 443 foll.

<sup>3</sup> *Studies on Homer and the Homeric Age*, vol. iii. pp. 510, 512.

that 'with rare exceptions the reader of Vergil finds himself utterly at a loss to see at any point the soul of the poet reflected in his work,' and charges him with allowing his mind to become so warped by artificial influences that he becomes 'reckless alike in major and in minor matters as to all the inner harmonies of his work,' and, in deviating from the Homeric tradition, commits such gross errors as can only be ascribed 'to torpor in the faculties, or defect in the habit of mind by which Homer should be appreciated;'—one cannot but feel that, if all this be true, Vergil's position in literature is a phenomenon difficult to be accounted for.

It is a great misfortune that Keble, who as a poet had a soul to understand a poet, did not give to the *Aeneid* the same careful study which he gave to the *Georgics*. I have always found his lectures on Lucretius and Vergil fuller of poetical insight than any other modern criticisms which I have read on those writers, and though, as the following pages will show, I am not able to agree with his judgment on the *Aeneid*, which was in the main, with characteristic differences<sup>1</sup>, the same as that of Niebuhr, still, as the '*Praelectiones Academicæ*' is now, I fear, as far as students are concerned, an almost forgotten book, I am anxious to express my deep gratitude for the many new lights in poetical criticism which it has opened to me. I know of no book where Vergil's love of nature is dealt with with so much real sympathy and insight. As for the *Aeneid*, Conington has, I think, indicated in his Introduction the true line which criticism ought

<sup>1</sup> After passing some not wholly undeserved strictures on Vergil's treatment of the character of *Aeneas*, Keble (*Prael. Acad.* vol. ii. p. 723 foll.) says, 'Verum ut ea mittamus quas propria sunt *Aeneas*; neque in illius neque in Turni persona neque in alio quovis eorum qui in scenam prodeunt Virgilianam illud video quod praecipuum habet Homerus: eventus scilicet ac summam onjusque rei verti penitus in eorum qui agunt motibus et affectu . . . Virgilius . . . ipeorum qui dimicant personis vel minorem impendit curam vel certe non adeo felicem; unum modo alterumque excipias.' Niebuhr thought that Vergil's real merit lay in his erudition; Keble (who goes so far as to say '*fluminum ac sylvarum gratia ponit fata moresque hominum*') that his natural bent was towards sympathetic description of natural scenery: both critics however agree that he made a mistake in attempting to write an epic.



to take, especially in regard to the relation between the Aeneid and the Greek drama. Of his views on this matter much of what I have said is only a development, πάντως γὰρ προσθεῖναι τὸ ἄλλεῖπον.

Recent French criticism has been more sympathetic with Vergil than German. Besides Legris, who has been followed by Merivale in the forty-first chapter of his 'History of the Romans under the Empire,' M.M. Sainte-Beuve, Patin, and Gaston Boissier have contributed valuable matter to the criticism of the Augustan poets. The author last mentioned, in his work on the 'Religion of the Romans from Augustus to the Antonines,' has a most ingenious and instructive chapter on the Aeneid, which he maintains to be, in its main intention, a religious poem. Most of the following pages were written before I had seen M. Boissier's work, but I find myself in substantial agreement with his views, supposing the phrase 'religious poem' to be used in the only sense in which it can be used of any work of classical antiquity.

H. N.

## SUGGESTIONS INTRODUCTORY TO A STUDY OF THE AENEID.

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THE Aeneid has been so often criticised from different points of view that it may seem presumptuous in any one who professes merely to study and interpret, to attempt anything fresh in the way of generally elucidating the thoughts of Vergil. It may happen, on the other hand, that a great work of imagination sometimes presents such difficulties to the ordinary understanding, that, although its power and beauty are instinctively recognised by succeeding generations of men, the main thoughts which have inspired it and which are the real strength of its author are not clearly grasped, and criticism, favourable or unfavourable, lingers over details with praise, blame, explanation, or apology, while it misses the great intention which lies beneath and is the foundation of the whole. This happens chiefly in the case of those works of art which are not the products of simple and elementary forces and passions easily comprehended, but which represent a complex and manifold surrounding of speculation and fancy; an atmosphere filled with a number of ideas which the creative power of the artist finds it difficult to harmonize into a complete whole; a literary tradition rich with the gathered thoughts and forms of past generations, and claiming attention with such force as to render absolute spontaneity impossible; a society whose every form of existence is reflected and artificial, and in which the conflict of new and old elements is realized without approaching any apparent solution. In such a state of things a poet of true force and insight

finds it difficult to find expression for great and far-reaching thoughts. The reverence for previously existing forms of poetry and the gathered stores of thought and imagination lying in the works of his predecessors—a reverence of which every true artist has always been full—makes reflection and reminiscence a duty as imperative as fresh creation: and while it deepens and purifies the poet's conception, exalts and widens the range of his vision, and makes him careful to embody every thought in the finest expression, it makes difficult, if not impossible, for him the clear forward look which is the privilege of a simpler age. The *Aeneid*, standing as it does at the end of one great period of history and the beginning of another, summing up in a poetical form the ideas political, moral, mythological, and religious which had been the creation or the inheritance of republican Rome, is an instance among several of a great work produced under the conditions which I have been endeavouring to describe. The following remarks are offered as a contribution to the interpretation of the main ideas which seem to have inspired it. In dealing with such a work our first business is to interpret, our second to judge; all criticism is shallow and misleading which attempts to pronounce a verdict upon details before the main principles of the work have been fully mastered. I should not approach the subject at all were it not that, as it seems to me, the difficulties presented by the *Aeneid* have, as a whole, hardly been grappled with by modern criticism. They have been noticed, apologized for, or left on one side: the question whether there is any main idea underlying the poem, which may to any extent account for them, can hardly be said to have obtained a thorough consideration. It is evident indeed that on a first reading the *Aeneid* seems to teem with anomalies. The epic framework is out of harmony with the spirit of Vergil's time, and with the comparatively modern cast of the characters and ideas; we have all the detail natural in a primitive poem, but instead of primitive simplicity in presenting it, we find an elaboration of language which disdains or is unable to say a plain thing in a plain way; realities of nature are sometimes disregarded for the sake of literary effect; the character of the hero himself is but dimly realized; the whole aim and scope of the poem seems thwarted,