

W. E. GLADSTONE



THE HOMER AND THE HOMERIC AGE

VOL. 1-3

W. E. Gladstone

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I. PROLEGOMENA.^[1]

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SECT. 1.

—*On the State of the Homeric question.*

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We are told that, in an ancient city, he who had a new law to propose made his appearance, when about to discharge that duty, with a halter round his neck. It might be somewhat rigid to re-introduce this practice in the case of those who write new books on subjects, with which the ears at least of the world are familiar. But it is not unreasonable to demand of them some such reason for their boldness as shall be at any rate presumably related to public utility. Complying with this demand by anticipation, I will place in the foreground an explicit statement of the objects which I have in view.

These objects are twofold: firstly, to promote and extend the fruitful study of the immortal poems of Homer; and secondly, to vindicate for them, in an age of discussion, their just degree both of absolute and, more especially, of relative critical value. My desire is to indicate at least, if I cannot hope to establish, their proper place, both in the discipline of classical education, and among the materials of historical inquiry. When the world has been hearing and reading Homer, and talking and writing about him, for nearly three thousand years, it may seem strange thus to imply that he is still an 'inheritor of unfulfilled renown,'^[2]

and not yet in full possession of his lawful throne. He who seems to impeach the knowledge and judgment of all former ages, himself runs but an evil chance, and is likely to be found guilty of ignorance and folly. Such, however, is not my design. There is no reason to doubt that Greece

Dum fortuna fuit

knew right well her own noble child, and paid him all the homage that even he could justly claim. But in later times, and in most of the lands where he is a foreigner, I know not if he has ever yet enjoyed his full honour from the educated world. He is, I trust, coming to it; and my desire is to accelerate, if ever so little, the movement in that direction.

As respects the first portion of the design which has been described, I would offer the following considerations. The controversy *de vitâ et sanguine*, concerning the personality of the poet, and the unity and antiquity of the works, has been carried on with vigour for near a century. In default of extraneous testimony, the materials of warfare have been sedulously sought in the rich mine which was offered by the poems themselves. There has resulted from this cause a closer study of the text, and a fuller development of much that it contains, than could have been expected in times when the student of Homer had only to enjoy his banquet, and not to fight for it before he could sit down. It is not merely, however, in warmth of feeling that he may have profited; the Iliad and the Odyssey have been, from the absolute necessity of the case, put into the witness-box themselves, examined and cross-examined in every variety of temper, and thus, in some degree at least, made to tell

their own story. The result has been upon the whole greatly in their favour. The more they are searched and tested, the more does it appear they have to say, and the better does their testimony hang together. The more plain does it become, that the arguments used on the side of scepticism and annihilation are generally of a technical and external character, and the greater is the mass of moral and internal evidence continually accumulated against them. In consequence, there has set in a strong reaction among scholars, even in Germany (in England the destructive theories never greatly throve), on behalf of the affirmative side of all, or nearly all, the main questions which had been raised. Mure,^[3] the last and perhaps most distinguished of British writers on this subject, has left the debate in such a state that those who follow him may be excused, and may excuse their readers, from systematic preliminary discussion; and may proceed upon the assumption that the Iliad and Odyssey are in their substance the true offspring of the heroic age itself, and are genuine gifts not only of a remote antiquity but of a designing mind; as well as that he, to whom that mind belonged, has been justly declared by the verdict of all ages to be the patriarch of poets. These controversies have been 'bolted to the bran;' for us at least they are all but dead, and to me it seems little better than lost time to revive them.

Having then at the present day the title to the estate in some degree secured from litigation, we may enter upon the fruition of it, and with all the truer zest on account of the conflict, which has been long and keenly fought, and in the general opinion fairly won. It now becomes all those, who

love Homer, to prosecute the sure method of inquiry and appreciation by close, continued, comprehensive study of the text; a study of which it would be easy to prove the need, by showing how inaccurately the poems are often cited in quarters, to which the general reader justifiably looks for trustworthy information. To this we have been exhorted by the writer already named:^[4] and we have only to make his practice our model. That something has already been attained, we may judge by comparison. Let us take a single instance. In the year 1735 was published 'Blackwell's Inquiry into the Life and Writings of Homer.' Bentley, as it would appear from Bishop Monk's Life^[5] of that extraordinary scholar, was not to be taken in by a book of this kind: but such men as Bentley are not samples of their time, they are living symbols and predictions of what it will require years or generations to accomplish. We may rather judge of the common impression made by this book, from the Notes to Pope's Preface to the Iliad, where Warton^[6] extols it as 'a work that abounds in curious researches and observations, and places Homer in a new light.' But no reader of Homer, in our own time, would really, I apprehend, be the poorer, if every copy of it could be burned.

Since the time of Blackwell's work, important aids have been gained towards the study of Homer, by the researches of travellers, fruitful in circumstantial evidence, and by the discovery of the Venetian Scholia, as well as by the persevering labours of modern critics. We have been gradually coming to understand that these precious works, which may have formed the delight of our boyhood, have also been designed to instruct our maturer years. I do not

here refer to their poetic power and splendour only. It is now time that we should recognise the truth, that they constitute a vast depository of knowledge upon subjects of deep interest, and of boundless variety; and that this is a knowledge, too, which can be had from them alone. It was the Greek mind transferred, without doubt, in some part through Italy, but yet only transferred, and still Greek both in origin and in much of its essence, in which was shaped and tempered the original mould of the modern European civilization. I speak now of civilization as a thing distinct from religion, but destined to combine and coalesce with it. The power derived from this source was to stand in subordinate conjunction with the Gospel, and to contribute its own share towards the training of mankind. From hence were to be derived the forms and materials of thought, of imaginative culture, of the whole education of the intellectual soul, which, when pervaded with an higher life from the Divine fountain, was thus to be secured from corruption, and both placed and kept in harmony with the world of spirits.

This Greek mind, which thus became one of the main factors of the civilized life of Christendom, cannot be fully comprehended without the study of Homer, and is nowhere so vividly or so sincerely exhibited as in his works. He has a world of his own, into which, upon his strong wing, he carries us. There we find ourselves amidst a system of ideas, feelings, and actions, different from what are to be found anywhere else; and forming a new and distinct standard of humanity. Many among them seem as if they were then shortly about to be buried under a mass of ruins,

in order that they might subsequently reappear, bright and fresh for application, among later generations of men. Others of them almost carry us back to the early morning of our race, the hours of its greater simplicity and purity, and more free intercourse with God. In much that this Homeric world exhibits, we see the taint of sin at work, but far, as yet, from its perfect work and its ripeness; it stands between Paradise and the vices of later heathenism, far from both, from the latter as well as from the former; and if among all earthly knowledge, the knowledge of man be that which we should chiefly court, and if to be genuine it should be founded upon experience, how is it possible to over-value this primitive representation of the human race in a form complete, distinct, and separate, with its own religion, ethics, policy, history, arts, manners, fresh and true to the standard of its nature, like the form of an infant from the hand of the Creator, yet mature, full, and finished, in its own sense, after its own laws, like some masterpiece of the sculptor's art.

The poems of Homer never can be put in competition with the Sacred Writings of the Old Testament, as regards the one invaluable code of Truth and Hope that was contained in them. But while the Jewish records exhibit to us the link between man and the other world in the earliest times, the poems of Homer show us the being, of whom God was pleased to be thus mindful, in the free unsuspecting play of his actual nature. The patriarchal and Jewish dispensations created, and sustained through Divine interposition, a state of things essentially special and exceptional: but here first we see our kind set to work out

for itself, under the lights which common life and experience supplied, the deep problem of his destiny. Nor is there, perhaps, any more solemn and melancholy lesson, than that which is to be learned from its continual downward course. If these words amount to a begging of the question, at least, it is most important for us to know whether the course was continually downwards; whether, as man enlarged his powers and his resources, he came nearer to, or went farther from his happiness and his perfection. Now, this inquiry cannot, for Europe and Christendom at least, be satisfactorily conducted, except in commencing from the basis which the Homeric poems supply. As regards the great Roman people, we know nothing of them, which is at once archaic and veracious. As regards the Greeks, it is Homer that furnishes the point of origin from which all distances are to be measured. When the historic period began, Greece was already near its intellectual middle-age. Little can be learned of the relative movements of our moral and our mental nature severally, from matching one portion of that period with another, in comparison with what we may gather from bringing into neighbourhood and contrast the pristine and youthful Greece of Homer on the one hand, and, on the other, the developed and finished Greece of the age of the tragedians or the orators.

The Mosaic books, and the other historical books of the Old Testament, are not intended to present, and do not present, a picture of human society, or of our nature drawn at large. Their aim is to exhibit it in one master-relation, and to do this with effect, they do it, to a great extent, exclusively. The Homeric materials for exhibiting that

relation are different in kind as well as in degree: but as they paint, and paint to the very life, the whole range of our nature, and the entire circle of human action and experience, at an epoch much more nearly analogous to the patriarchal time than to any later age, the poems of Homer may be viewed, in the philosophy of human nature, as the complement of the earliest portion of the Sacred Records.

Although the close and systematic study of the Homeric text has begun at a date comparatively recent, yet the marked development of riches from within which it has produced, has already been a real, permanent, and vast addition to the mental wealth of mankind. We can now better understand than formerly much that relates to the fame and authority of this great poet in early times, and that we may formerly have contemplated as fanciful, exaggerated, or unreal. It was, we can now see, with no idle wonder that, while Greek philosophers took texts from him so largely in their schools, the Greek public listened to his strains in places of thronged resort, and in their solemn assemblages, and Greek warriors and statesmen kept him in their cabinets and under their pillows; and, for the first and last time in the history of the world, made the preservation of a poet's compositions an object of permanent public policy.

SECT. 2.

—*The Place of Homer in Classical Education.*

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Now, from these considerations may arise the important question, Does Homer hold in our English education the place which is his due, and which it would be for our advantage to give him? An immense price is paid by the youth of this country for classical acquirement. It is the main effort of the first spring-tide of their intellectual life. It is to be hoped that this price will continue to be paid by all those, who are qualified to profit by the acquisition; and that though of other knowledge much more will hereafter be gained than heretofore, yet of this there shall on no account be less. Still, viewing the greatness of the cost, which consists in the chief energies of so many precious years, it highly concerns us to see that what we get in return is good both in measure and in quality. What, then, are the facts with respect to the study of Homer in England at the present day?

I must here begin with the apology due from one who feels himself to be far from perfectly informed on the case of which it is necessary to give an outline. But even if I understate both the amount of Homeric study, and its efficiency, there will, I am confident, remain, after every due allowance shall have been made for error, ample room for the application of the general propositions that I seek to enforce. They are these: that the study of Homer in our Universities is as yet below the point to which it is desirable

that it should be carried, and that the same study, carried on at our public Schools, neither is, nor can be made, a fitting substitute for what is thus wanting at the Universities.

In my own day, at Oxford, now a full quarter of a century ago, the poems of Homer were read chiefly by way of exception, and in obedience to the impulse of individual tastes. They entered rather materially into those examinations by which scholarship was principally to be tested, but they scarcely formed a substantive or recognised part of the main studies of the place, which were directed to the final examination in the Schools for the Bachelor's degree. I do not recollect to have ever heard at that time of their being used as the subject matter of the ordinary tutorial lectures; and if they were so, the case was certainly a rare one. Although the late Dr. Gaisford, in the estimation of many the first scholar of his age, during his long tenure of the Deanery of Christ Church, gave the whole weight of his authority to the recommendation of Homeric study, it did not avail to bring about any material change. The basis of the Greek classical instruction lay chiefly in the philosophers, historians, and later poets; and when Homer was, in the academical phrase, 'taken up,' he was employed ornamentally, and therefore superficially, and was subjected to no such searching and laborious methods of study as, to the great honour and advantage of Oxford, were certainly applied to the authors who held the first rank in her practical system. I am led to believe that the case at Cambridge was not essentially different, although, from the greater relative space occupied there by examinations in

pure scholarship, it is probable that Homer may, under that aspect at least, have attracted a greater share of attention.

When, however, the University of Oxford brought to maturity, in the year 1850, a new Statute of examinations, efforts were made to promote an extended study of Homer. Those efforts, it happily appears, have produced a considerable effect. Provision was made by that statute for dividing the study of the poets from the philosophical and historical studies, and for including the former in the intermediate, or, as it is termed, 'first public' examination, while both the latter were reserved for the final trial, with which the period of undergraduateship is usually wound up. All candidates for honours in this intermediate examination are now required to present not less than twelve Books of Homer on the list of works in which they are to be examined. And I understand that he has also taken his place among the regular subjects of the tutorial lectures. This is a great sign of progress; and it may confidently be hoped that, under these circumstances, Homer will henceforward hold a much more forward position in the studies of Oxford. There remains something to desire, and that something, I should hope, any further development of the Examination Statute of the University will supply.

It is clear, that the study of this great master should not be confined to preparation for examinations which deal principally with language, or which cannot enter upon either primitive history, or philosophy, or policy, or religion, except by way of secondary illustration. Better far that he should be studied simply among the poets, than that he should not be studied at all. But as long as he is read only among the

poets, he cannot, I believe, be read effectively for the higher and more varied purposes of which Homeric study is so largely susceptible.

The grammar, metre, and diction, the tastes, the whole poetic handling and qualities of Homer, do, indeed, offer an assemblage of objects for our consideration at once and alike singular, attractive, extended, and profitable. The extraneous controversies with which his name has so long been associated as to his personality and date, and as to the unity and transmission of his works, although they are for us, I trust, in substance nearly decided, yet are not likely to lose their literary interest, were it only on account of the peculiarly convenient and seductive manner in which they open up many questions of primitive research; presenting these questions to us, as they do, not in the dull garb pieced out of antiquarian scraps, but alive, and in the full movement of vigorous debate. All this is fit for delightful exercise; but much more lies behind.

There is an inner Homeric world, of which his verse is the tabernacle and his poetic genius the exponent, but which offers in itself a spectacle of the most profound interest, quite apart from him who introduces us to it, and from the means by which we are so introduced. This world of religion and ethics, of civil policy, of history and ethnology, of manners and arts, so widely severed from all following experience, that we may properly call them palæozoic, can hardly be examined and understood by those, who are taught to approach Homer as a poet only.

Indeed, the transcendency of his poetical distinctions has tended to overshadow his other claims and uses. As settlers

in the very richest soils, saturated with the fruits which they almost spontaneously yield, rarely turn their whole powers to account, so they, that are taught simply to repair to Homer for his poetry, find in him, so considered, such ample resources for enjoyment, that, unless summoned onwards by a distinct and separate call, they are little likely to travel further. It was thus that Lord Bacon's brilliant fame as a philosopher diverted public attention from his merits as a political historian.^[7] It was thus, to take a nearer instance, that most readers of Dante, while submitting their imaginations to his powerful sway, have been almost wholly unconscious that they were in the hands of one of the most acute and exact of metaphysicians, one of the most tender, earnest, and profound among spiritual writers. Here, indeed, the process has been simpler in form; for the majority, at least, of readers, have stopped with the striking, and, so to speak, incorporated imagery of the 'Inferno,' and have not so much as read the following, which are also the loftier and more ethereal, portions of the 'Divina Commedia.' It may be enough for Homer's fame, that the consent of mankind has irrevocably assigned to him a supremacy among poets, without real competitors or partners, except Dante and Shakspeare; and that, perhaps, if we take into view his date, the unpreparedness of the world for works so extraordinary as his, the comparative paucity of the traditional resources and training he could have inherited, he then becomes the most extraordinary, as he is also the most ancient, phenomenon in the whole history of purely human culture. In particular points he appears to me, if it be not presumptuous to say so much, to remain to this day

unquestionably without an equal in the management of the poetic art. If Shakspeare be supreme in the intuitive knowledge of human nature and in the rapid and fertile vigour of his imagination, if Dante have the largest grasp of the 'height and depth' of all things created, if he stand first in the power of exhibiting and producing ecstasy, and in the compressed and concentrated energy^[8] of thought and feeling, Homer, too, has his own peculiar prerogatives. Among them might perhaps be placed the faculty of high oratory; the art of turning to account epithets and distinctive phrases; the production of indirect or negative effects; and the power of creating and sustaining dramatic interest without the large use of wicked agents, in whom later poets have found their most indispensable auxiliaries. But all this is not enough for us who read him. If the works of Homer are, to letters and to human learning, what the early books of Scripture are to the entire Bible and to the spiritual life of man; if in them lie the beginnings of the intellectual life of the world, then we must still recollect that that life, to be rightly understood, should be studied in its beginnings. There we may see in simple forms what afterwards grew complex, and in clear light what afterwards became obscure; and there we obtain starting-points, from which to measure progress and decay along all the lines upon which our nature moves.

Over and above the general plea here offered for the study of Homer under other aspects than such as are merely poetical, there is something to be said upon his claims in competition with other, and especially with other Greek poets. The case of the Latin poets, nearer to us

historically, more accessible in tongue, more easily retained in the mind under the pressure of after-life, more readily available for literary and social purposes, must stand upon its own grounds.

In considering what is the place due to Homer in education, we cannot altogether exclude from view the question of comparative value, as between him and his now successful and overbearing rivals, the Greek tragedians. For we are not to expect that of the total studies, at least of Oxford and Cambridge, any larger share, speaking generally, can hereafter be given to Greek poetry, as a whole, than has heretofore been so bestowed. It is rather a question whether there should be some shifting, or less uniformity, in the present distribution of time and labour, as among the different claimants within that attractive field.

I do not dispute the merits of the tragedians as masters in their noble art. As long as letters are cultivated among mankind, for so long their honours are secure. I do not question the advantage of studying the Greek language in its most fixed and most exact forms, which they present in perfection; nor their equal, at least, if not greater value than Homer, as practical helps and models in Greek composition. But, after all allowances on these, or on any other score, they cannot, even in respect of purely poetic titles, make good a claim to that preference over Homer, which they have, nevertheless, extensively enjoyed. I refer far less to Æschylus than to the others, because he seems more to resemble Homer not only in majesty, but in nature, reality, and historical veracity: and far less again to Sophocles, than to Euripides. But it may be said of them, generally, though

in greatly differing degrees, that while with Homer everything is pre-eminently fresh and genuine, with them, on the contrary, this freshness and genuineness, this life-likeness, are for the most part wanting. We are reminded, by the matter itself, of the masks in which the actors appeared, of the mechanical appliances with the aid of which they spoke. The very existence of the word, ἐκτραγωδεῖν,^[9] and other^[10] like compounds, shows us that, in the Greek tragedy, human nature and human life were not represented at large; they were got up; they were placed in the light of certain peculiar ideas, with a view to peculiar effects. The dramas were magnificent and also instructive pictures, but they taught, as it were, certain set lessons only: they were pictures *sui generis*, pictures marked with a certain mannerism, pictures in which the artist follows a standard which is neither original, nor general, nor truly normal. Let us try the test of an expression somewhat kindred in etymology: such a word as ἐξομηροῦν would carry upon its face a damning solecism. Again, let us mark the difference which was observed by the sagacity of Aristotle.^[11] With the speeches in the Iliad, he compares the speeches in the tragedians; those most remarkable and telling compositions, which we have occasion so often to admire in Euripides. But, as he says, the Characters of the ancients, doubtless meaning Homer, speak πολιτικῶς, those of the moderns, ῥητορικῶς. I know no reason why the speeches of Achilles should not be compared with the finest passages of Demosthenes: but no one could make such a comparison between Demosthenes and the speeches, though they are most powerful and effective harangues,

which we find in the Troades, or the Iphigenia in Aulide. This contrast of the earnest and practical with the artificial, runs, more or less, along the whole line which divides Homer from the tragedians, particularly from Euripides.

When we consider the case in another point of view, and estimate these poets with reference to what they tell, and not to the mere manner of their telling it, the argument for assigning to Homer a greater share of the attention of our youth, becomes yet stronger. For it must be admitted that the tragedians, especially the two later of the three, teach us but very little of the Greek religion, history, manners, arts, or institutions. At the period when they wrote, the religion of the country had become political or else histrionic in its spirit, and the figures it presented were not only multiplied, but were also hopelessly confused: while morals had sunk into very gross corruption, of which, as we have it upon explicit evidence, two at least of them largely partook. The characters and incidents of their own time, and of the generations which immediately preceded it, were found to be growing less suitable for the stage. They were led, from this and other causes, to fetch their themes, in general, from the remote period of the heroic or pre-historic ages. But of the traditions of those ages they were no adequate expositors; hence the representations of them are, for the most part, couched in altered and degenerate forms. This will be most clearly seen upon examining the Homeric personages, as they appear in the plays of Euripides. Here they seem often to retain no sign of identity except the name. The 'form and pressure,' and also the machinery or physical circumstances of the Greek drama, were such as to

keep the tragedians, so to speak, upon stilts, while its limited scope of necessity excluded much that was comprised in the wide circle of the epic action; so that they open to us little, in comparison with Homer, of the Greek mind and life: of that cradle wherein lie, we are to remember, the original form and elements, in so far as they are secular, of European civilization.

If I may judge in any degree of the minds of others by my own experience, nothing is more astonishing in Homer, than the mass of his matter. Especially is this true of the Iliad, which most men suppose to be little more than a gigantic battle-piece. But that poem, battle-piece as it is, where we might expect to find only the glitter and the clash of arms, is rich in every kind of knowledge, perhaps richest of all in the political and historical departments. It is hardly too much to say, in general, that besides his claims as a poet, Homer has, for himself, all the claims that all the other classes of ancient writers can advance for themselves, each in his separate department. And, excepting the works of Aristotle and Plato, on either of which may be grafted the investigation of the whole philosophy of the world, I know of no author, among those who are commonly studied at Oxford, offering a field of labour and inquiry either so wide or so diversified, as that which Homer offers.

But, if Homer is not fully studied in our universities, there is no adequate consolation to be found in the fact, that he is so much read in our public schools.

I am very far indeed from lamenting that he is thus read. His free and genial temperament gives him a hold on the sympathies of the young. The simple and direct construction

of almost all his sentences allows them easy access to his meaning; the examination of the sense of single words, so often requisite, is within their reach; while it may readily be believed that the large and varied inflexions of the Greek tongue, in his hands at once so accurate and so elastic, make him peculiarly fit for the indispensable and invaluable work of parsing. It may be, that for boyhood Homer finds ample employment in his exterior and more obvious aspects. But neither boyhood nor manhood can read Homer effectively for all purposes at once, if my estimate of those purposes be correct. The question therefore is, how best to divide the work between the periods of life severally best suited to the different parts of it.

It is, indeed, somewhat difficult, as a general rule, beneficially and effectively to use the same book at the same time as an instrument for teaching both the language in which it is written, and the subject of which it treats. What is given honestly to the one purpose, will ordinarily be so much taken or withheld from the other. For the one object, the mind must be directed upon the thought of the author; for the other, upon the material organ through which it is conveyed; or, in other words, for the former of these two aims his language must be regarded on its material, for the latter on its intellectual, side. The difficulty of combining these views, taken of necessity from opposite quarters, increases in proportion as the student is young, the language subtle, copious, and elaborate, the subject diversified and extended. In some cases it may be slight, or, at least, easily surmountable; but it is raised nearly to its maximum in the instance of Homer. There are few among us

who can say that we learned much of the inward parts of Homer in our boyhood; while perhaps we do not feel that our labours upon him were below the average, such as it may have been, of our general exertions; and though other generations may greatly improve upon us, they cannot, I fear, master the higher properties of their author at that early period of life. Homer, if read at our public schools, is, and probably must be, read only, or in the main, for his diction and poetry (as commonly understood), even by the most advanced; while to those less forward he is little more than a mechanical instrument for acquiring the beginnings of real familiarity with the Greek tongue and its inflexions. If, therefore, he is to be read for his theology, history, ethics, politics, for his skill in the higher and more delicate parts of the poetic calling, for his never-ending lessons upon manners, arts, and society, if we are to study in him the great map of that humanity which he so wonderfully unfolds to our gaze—he must be read at the universities, and read with reference to his deeper treasures. He is second to none of the poets of Greece as the poet of boys; but he is far advanced before them all, even before Æschylus and Aristophanes, as the poet of men.

But no discussion upon the general as well as poetical elevation of Homer, can be complete or satisfactory without a more definite consideration of the question—What is the historical value of his testimony? This is not settled by our showing either his existence, or his excellence in his art. No man doubts Ariosto's, or Boiardo's, or Virgil's personality, or their high rank as poets; but neither would any man quote them as authorities on a point of history. To arrive at a right

view of this further question, we must be reasonably assured alike of the nature of Homer's original intention, of his opportunities of information, and of the soundness of his text. To these subjects I shall now proceed; in the meantime, enough may have been said to explain the aim of these pages so far as regards the more fruitful study of the works of Homer, the contemplation of them on the positive side in all their bearings, and the clearing of a due space for them in the most fitting stages of the education of the youth of England.

SECT. 3.

—*On the Historic Aims of Homer.*

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For the purposes of anatomy every skeleton may be useful, and may sufficiently tell the tale of the race to which it belongs. But when we come to seek for high beauty and for approaches to perfection, of how infinite a diversity, of what countless degrees, does form appear to be susceptible! How difficult it is to find these, except in mere fragments; and how dangerous does it prove, in dealing with objects, to treat the whole as a normal specimen, simply because parts are fine, or even superlative. When, again, we pass onward, and with the body regard also the mind of man, still greater is the range of differences, and still more rare is either the development of parts in a degree so high as to bring their single excellence near the ideal standard, or the accurate adjustment of their relations to one another, or the completeness of the aggregate which they form.

Now, it appears to me, that in the case of Homer, together with the breadth and elevation of the highest genius, we have before us, and in a yet more remarkable degree, an even more rare fulness and consistency of the various instruments and organs which make up the apparatus of the human being—constituted as he is, in mind and body, and holding, as he does, on the one side of the Deity, and on the other, of the dust. Among all the qualities of the poems, there is none more extraordinary than the general accuracy and perfection of their minute detail, when

considered with reference to the standards at which from time to time they aim. Where other poets sketch, Homer draws; and where they draw, he carves. He alone, of all the now famous epic writers, moves (in the Iliad especially) subject to the stricter laws of time and place; he alone, while producing an unsurpassed work of the imagination, is also the greatest chronicler that ever lived, and presents to us, from his own single hand, a representation of life, manners, history, of morals, theology, and politics, so vivid and comprehensive, that it may be hard to say whether any of the more refined ages of Greece or Rome, with their clouds of authors and their multiplied forms of historical record, are either more faithfully or more completely conveyed to us. He alone presents to us a mind and an organization working with such precision that, setting aside for the moment any question as to the genuineness of his text, we may reason in general from his minutest indications with the confidence that they belong to some consistent and intelligible whole.

It may be right, however, to consider more circumstantially the question of the historical authority of Homer. It has been justly observed by Wachsmuth^[12], that even the dissolution of his individuality does not get rid of his authority. For if the works reputed to be his had proceeded from many minds, yet still, according to their unity of colour, and their correspondence in ethical and intellectual tone with the events of the age they purport to describe, there would arise an argument, founded on internal evidence, for the admissibility of the whole band into the class of trustworthy historical witnesses.

But, first of all, may we not ask, from whence comes the presumption against Homer as an historical authority? Not from the fact that he mixes marvels with common events; for this, to quote no other instance, would destroy along with him Herodotus. Does it not arise from this—that his compositions are poetical—that history has long ceased to adopt the poetical form—that an old association has thus been dissolved—that a new and adverse association has taken its place, which connects poetry with fiction—and that we illogically reflect this modern association upon early times, to which it is utterly inapplicable?

If so, there is no burden of proof incumbent upon those, who regard Homer as an historical authority. The presumptions are all in favour of their so regarding him. The question will, of course, remain—In what proportions has he mixed history with imaginative embellishment? And he has furnished us with some aids towards the consideration of this question.

The immense mass of matter contained in the Iliad, which is beyond what the action of the poem requires, and yet is in its nature properly historical, of itself supplies the strongest proof of the historic aims of the poet. Whether, in the introduction of all this matter, he followed a set and conscious purpose of his own mind, or whether he only fed the appetite of his hearers with what he found to be agreeable to them, is little material to the question. The great fact stands, that there was either a design to fulfil, or, at least, an appetite to feed—an intense desire to create bonds and relations with the past—to grasp its events, and fasten them in forms which might become, and might make

them become, the property of the present and the future. Without this great sign of nobleness in their nature, Greeks never could have been Greeks.

I have particularly in view the great multitude of genealogies; their extraordinary consistency one with another, and with the other historical indications of the poems; their extension to a very large number, especially in the Catalogue, of secondary persons; I take again the Catalogue itself, that most remarkable production, as a whole; the accuracy with which the names of the various races are handled and bestowed throughout the poems; the particularity of the demands regularly made upon strangers for information concerning themselves, and especially the constant inquiry who were their parents, what was, for each person as he appears, *his* relation to the past? and further, the numerous legends or narratives of prior occurrences with which the poems, and particularly the more historic Iliad, is so thickly studded. Even the national use of patronymics as titles of honour is in itself highly significant of the historic turn. Nay, much that touches the general structure of the poem may be traced in part to this source; for all the intermediate Books between the Wrath and the Return of Achilles, while they are so contrived as to heighten the military grandeur of the hero, are so many tributes to the special and local desires in each state or district for commemoration of their particular chiefs, which Homer would, of course, have to meet, as he itinerated through the various parts of Greece.

Now, this appetite for commemoration does not fix itself upon what is imaginary; it may tolerate fiction by way of