

ON VIRGIL

In the letter to Lady Violet Lebas, the author delves into a personal and reflective discussion on the appreciation of literature, specifically focusing on Virgil. Initially, the letter highlights a resistance to conforming tastes to critical acclaim, using personal disinterest in renowned authors like Gibbon, Racine, Wordsworth, and Amiel as examples to argue for a more natural, spontaneous appreciation of art. This prelude serves as a foundation for the main subject: Virgil, whose work, despite not evoking a passionate admiration in the author, is recognized for its enduring beauty and influence.

Virgil is portrayed as a figure whose sweetness and moral serenity traverse the ages, endearing him to readers centuries after his time. The author describes a personal connection to Virgil that originated from a school experience, where a marble bust of Virgil captured the author's affection, overshadowing even the tedium of studying his works. This affection sustains despite acknowledging the perceived limitations of Virgil's poetry, including its imitative nature and occasional lack of original passion. Yet, Virgil's ability to invoke the beauty of his homeland, his love for the natural world, and his reflections on peace and rural life are highlighted as elements of genuine connection between his work and the reader.

Further, the letter explores Virgil's commentary on the troubles of his time—the inner turmoil within the Roman state and external threats—drawing parallels with contemporary concerns of empire and societal unrest. Through describing Virgil's yearning for a simpler, past Golden Age, the author connects with the poet's escape into a pastoral idyll free from contemporary horrors, echoing a universal desire for peace amidst chaos.

In critiquing the "Aeneid," the author acknowledges its status as a commissioned piece, suggesting a lack of genuine enthusiasm from Virgil compared to the vivid, lived experiences that fuel Homer's epics. Despite this, Virgil's moments of personal reflection and descriptive brilliance, notably in his portrayal of romantic love and mystical underpinnings, are celebrated. The letter closes on a contemplative note, envisioning Virgil in a serene afterlife, mingling with past sages and poets, forever in the realm of his own making—a testament to the undying legacy of his work and spirit.