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Dante
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The Divine Comedy



ed with a bold and confident, but of course an able, hand. They are instructive and entertaining, and the sooner the rest follow, the more welcome they will be. Considering his Lordship's mathematical tastes and talent, it might have been well to have devoted himself exclusively to men of science; yet few will be inclined to complain that his range was more extended.

- ART. III. — 1. *La Divine Comédie avant Dante.* Par M. CHARLES LABITTE. [La Revue des Deux Mondes. Septembre, 1842.] Paris.
2. *Études sur les Sources Poétiques de la Divine Comédie.* Par A. J. OZANAM. Paris: Lecoffre & C^{nie}. 1845.

THE object of these two interesting essays is to show the sources whence Dante drew his poetic inspiration. Such an undertaking would have excited general disapprobation some forty or fifty years ago, and the two learned persons whose works we have before us would have been accused of wishing to depreciate the genius of the great Florentine poet. No such feeling is now entertained; literary criticism having made so much progress of late years, we are all convinced, that to subject the works of men of genius to such an analysis is not to diminish their glory, but rather to add to it, inasmuch as it shows their superiority to their predecessors. In the proper sense of the word, it is not given to man to create; God alone possesses this power. The man of genius, like the architect who in executing the plan he has conceived makes use of the rough stone, may collect and arrange those materials which he finds dispersed in the world, but he can never give life to that which is not. His task is to put order in the place of disorder, to give light to that which was veiled in darkness. Thus it is with Dante. He found the materials which he used for the composition of his immortal poem, he collected them, and gave them the unity and harmony which the man of genius alone can impart to his works. To require that he should lead us through the three regions of eternal life, without following any other light than that of his own genius, without having gathered any of

the flowers which bloom so profusely through the works of the ancients, without any precedents to justify the bold imaginings of his Muse, and without having profited by those legends so frequent in the poetic and imaginative religion of the Middle Ages, is to ask more than man can give.

On studying with attention the *Divina Commedia*, it is impossible not to see that Dante was indebted to his predecessors and contemporaries for some of the greatest beauties of his poem. The treasures of antiquity, as well as those of Christianity, were made to contribute to the formation of

“the sacred work that made
Both heaven and earth copartners in the toil,”*—

a work which, after a lapse of five hundred years, still excites the admiration of all, of the Protestant as well as the Catholic, and even of those who are, in general, averse to meditating upon death and eternity, the two great subjects which Dante sang.

We may trace in the *Divina Commedia* three distinct sources of inspiration;—the writings of the ancients, the poetic visions of the Middle Ages, and external circumstances, including the works of art which in Dante's time were so plentifully scattered throughout Europe. We shall endeavour to examine successively how far Dante was indebted to each of these sources. To those who, from their admiration for the great poet, or from their taste for literary antiquities in general, may feel interested in this subject, we recommend the perusal of the two works now under review. They are, we believe, with the exception of an article in the *Edinburgh Review* for September, 1818, written by Ugo Foscolo, the only attempts which have as yet been made to elucidate a subject of so much interest to the literary world.

The first source from which sprung the *Divina Commedia* is to be found in the works of antiquity. At all times the imaginations of the Greeks were accustomed to visions of things beyond this world. Homer had led Ulysses into the realms of Pluto; Euripides, in the *Alcestis* and the *Hercules Furens*, had represented his heroes descending into Hades; Sophocles had shown the son of Jupiter and Alcmena carrying off

* “Il poema sacro
Al quale ha posto mano e cielo e terra.”—*Paradiso*, Cant. XXV.

Cerberus. Similar marvellous narratives formed the subjects of two tragedies of Æschylus, the *Psychagogia* and the *Adventures of Sisyphus*, both unfortunately lost to us. These fables were well adapted to please the imaginative inhabitants of Greece, who were always inclined to look beyond this world for that retribution which cannot be found in our present state of existence.

But we must not seek in the works of the Greek poets for any thing beyond fine descriptions and poetical images of a future state. We must not look for those pure and spiritual delineations of eternal life which Plato alone had dimly conceived before they were fully brought to light by divine revelation. The Greek poets, in so frequently laying the scene of dramatic and epic action in another world, have merely shown that this was a favorite subject with the people for whom they wrote. Plato has done more; he has led us still farther into the kingdom of Death. He has shown, with a sense of justice which had never before been witnessed in pagan antiquity, the punishments and rewards reserved for those who have left this world. In the narrative of Her, an Armenian soldier, Plato has given a description of the invisible world.* This soldier, says Plato, was killed in battle. Ten days after his death, his body was found on the field in a perfect state of preservation. It was placed on a funeral pile to be burned, when life returned, and Her rose to relate to the bystanders what he had seen.

“As soon as my soul had left the body,” said he, “I arrived, together with a great number of other souls, at a most wonderful place. In the ground were two openings, close together, and in the heavens were two other openings, which corresponded with those in the earth. Between these two regions were seated the Judges. As soon as they had passed sentence on a soul, they ordered it, if it was one of the just, to take the road up to heaven, which was to the right; they had previously placed on its breast a label inscribed with the judgment which had been pronounced in its favor. If, on the contrary, it was the soul of one condemned, it was ordered to turn to the left, and to enter one of the openings in the ground; each carried on its back an inscription enumerating all the wicked actions it had committed during its life. When I presented myself, the judges decreed that I should return to the

* *The Republic.* Book X.

world to relate what I had seen, and ordered me to hear and to notice every thing that should take place."

Her then describes the manner in which the souls were punished or rewarded. His narrative does not at all resemble the descriptions of the infernal regions so common among the poets of antiquity. There is something in it more elevated, more pure, more terrible; it seems to be the first step towards that doctrine which, a few centuries later, regenerated the world. We must not say that Plato placed unlimited trust in such narratives; but he knew the vast importance of these symbolic representations of moral truths. In his *Phædo*, he has said, — "To maintain that all these things are as I relate them would not be possible for a man of sense; but whether all I have said about the souls and the place of their abode is true or not, if the soul is really immortal, it seems to me that it may be believed without danger."

Five centuries after Plato, we find a similar narrative in a work of Plutarch: *De his qui a numine sero puniuntur*. Thespesius of Cilicia returns to the world after his death, and relates what he had seen. "He had lived," says Plutarch, "in the indulgence of sensual pleasures. His vision of eternity sanctified and purified him."

The Romans, whose literature is, after all, but an admirable imitation of that of Greece, the reflection of a brilliant light, naturally transferred to their works the taste of the former for the marvellous. Cicero, in the last book of his *Republic*, has given us the *Dream of Scipio*, which, in the work of the Roman philosopher, takes the place of Plato's *Vision of Her*. Scipio the younger, in a dream, imagined that his ancestor, Scipio Africanus, appeared to him, and, after pointing out to him the brilliant career which awaited him, prepared him for his destiny by explaining to him the economy of the system of the universe. Transported to the top of a celestial temple, Scipio, in the midst of the souls which are wandering along the milky way, listens to the seven notes of the eternal music of the spheres. He gazes upon the stars which surround him, and contemplates with awe the immense spaces in which they are suspended; and when at last he discovers our little world, and the small space which the Roman empire occupies, he turns away to hide his shame. Struck by the admirable spectacle which he has

witnessed, he vows to rise above this world, and to aspire with all his power to this supreme felicity. In this admirable fragment, Cicero has collected all his doctrines on God, on nature, and on man.

But the images of a world of spirits are still more vivid in another and more popular work, Virgil's *Æneid*. In the sixth book of this poem, the Roman poet has given an epitome of the whole religious system of his country. He has shown the origin and destiny of the soul, and has combined the philosophical doctrines of his times with all the pomp and majesty of the Greek mythology. In fact, he may be said to have opened the road to the infernal regions; for all his imitators faithfully crowd after him, and follow him to the cavern of the terrible sibyl. The descent to the regions of death and darkness becomes an easy undertaking, — *facilis descensus Averno*. Ovid leads Orpheus and Juno to them; Silius Italicus shows Scipio visiting Avernus; Statius has given no less than three descriptions of the infernal regions; and Valerius Flaccus and Claudian have followed the common example. The dramatists are not in this respect outdone by the epic poets. It is remarkable, also, that in the fights of the gladiators a figure bearing the attributes of Pluto, with a hammer in his hand, came into the arena to take away the bodies of the dead. The poets of the time of the decline of the Roman empire treat these popular descriptions, and the belief of the multitude, with the greatest contempt. Seneca says, that they are nothing but words devoid of sense.* In the eyes of Juvenal, they are fables to be believed only by "children too young to pay at the public baths."†

Dante, it is probable, was only indirectly indebted to the Greeks for the general conception or the details of his poem, for it is still a question how far he was acquainted with the Greek language; but to the Romans he certainly owed much. He tells us, that, after the death of Beatrice, he sought for consolation in the works of Cicero.‡ He then read the *Somnium Scipionis*, and, like the great Roman general, overpowered by the admirable vision there related, he determined to rise above the world, and to concentrate all his thoughts on

* "Rumores vacui, verbaque inania." — *Troad*, Act II.

† "Nec pueri credunt, nisi qui nondum ære lavantur." — *Juv.*, Sat. II., 152.

‡ *Convito*, 11, 13.

the mysteries of another life. But to Virgil he was particularly indebted. There is ample evidence of this in the first canto of the *Inferno*, for there he has himself said, in speaking to Virgil:—“Thou art my master and my guide, thou art he from whom I took the beautiful style which has done me so much honor.”* The part which he has ascribed, in his poem, to the great Latin poet shows how well he must have been acquainted with the *Æneid*. In his eyes, as in those of most men of the Middle Ages, Virgil was the representative of the religious belief of the ancients, in its purest form. He had, as it was then believed, prophesied in one of his *Eclogues* the advent of Christ. As we have already said, he did not, in the sixth book of the *Æneid*, follow exclusively the precepts of any one school of philosophy. Whilst he professed the pure and spiritual doctrines of Plato, he did not express any contempt for the mysteries of Eleusis, or the poetic conceptions of the Pythagoreans. These considerations had given rise during the Middle Ages to a peculiar veneration for the name of Virgil. By the people he was considered as a magician; by the men of learning, as a prophet. On the subject of his life and death the most curious legends were in circulation. He figured in the old *Mysteries*, and there is even an old Spanish ballad entitled *Vergilios*. It is not surprising, then, that Dante should have chosen him for his guide during the first part of his supernatural initiation in the mysteries of eternity. He was probably acquainted, also, with a number of the minor Latin poets; for, notwithstanding the religious zeal of these times, and the treasures of learning and eloquence which Christianity had given to the world, the cultivation of Greek and Roman letters was never entirely abandoned. In 1325, we find a master of grammar, named Vital, employed in the University of Bologna, at a fixed stipend, to comment upon the works of Cicero and of Ovid. In the monasteries, the passion for antiquity was carried to such an extent, that, even as early as the eleventh century, a German monk complains bitterly of the great abuses to which this taste for Juvenal and Horace might give rise, and accuses himself of having given too

* “Tu se' lo mio maestro e 'l mio autore,
Tu se' solo colui da cu' io tolsi
Lo bello stile, che m' ha fatto onore.”

Inferno, Canto I., 85–88.

much time to the reading of Lucan. But, as M. Ozanam very justly observes, it is in Latin and in making use of the same measure as these poets, that this monk expresses his complaints and regrets.

Such are the sources, in the ancient literature of the Greeks and the Romans, to which Dante is chiefly indebted. If we now turn to the literature of the East for descriptions of another world, we shall find an abundance of curious and instructive material. But it must be remarked, that the Jewish and Hindoo writers can have exercised on Dante's poem but an indirect and rather vague influence, and that it is only when we consider them as one more link of that chain which unites the inspiration of the Florentine poet with those traditions which have occupied and interested the human race at all times, that they can be studied in connection with the *Divina Commedia*. A rapid analysis of these works will show what were the notions of these people on the subject of a future state.

Although full of the most poetic images, the Hebrew Scriptures contain little or nothing on this topic. There is no complete description of hell to be found, and the few expressions which are used to designate it convey but a vague idea to the mind of the reader. Even the visions of Elias, of Ezekiel, or of Enoch, do not give any details respecting it. In the Hindoo literature, on the contrary, there is much on the subject. In the *Maha-Barata*, we find the description of the journey of Ardjuna to the heaven of India. In the *Atharva-Veda*, that most ancient of poems, we see the young Brahmin Tadjkita sent by his father to the king of Death, from whose kingdom no living man ever returned. The king, touched by the obedience of Tadjkita, sends him back to earth, after having granted him three gifts, which he may choose as he likes. After he has asked for two, which are granted, the conversation between them continues thus. Tadjkita says, — "This is my third request; among those who discuss these matters, there are many contradictions. Some say there is nothing beyond this world, and that, when the body perishes, nothing remains; others think that the soul is distinct from the body, and that, when the body dies, the soul enters another world, where it is treated according as it has merited. I therefore wish that you should instruct me, in order that I may learn which

of these opinions is true." The king of Death replied, — "On this subject the gods themselves are in doubt ; it is a subtle matter which escapes the powers of the intelligence." Tadjkita said, — "O King ! this is my great desire, and I have no other desire stronger than this." The king of Death replied, — "Ask me to grant you a great number of children, and that they may live a long time, each one living to the age of a hundred years ; ask me to give you the world and all its riches ; ask me to grant you a long life, or any thing else you like ; only do not ask me to answer that one question, — What happens after death ? For none of those who are dead ever return to the world to tell this to the living." Tadjkita rejoined, — "You say, Ask me to grant you a long life. But if in the end I must die, what shall I gain by living many years ? Keep therefore for yourself the world and its riches, and a long life. I have but one wish ; that is, that you should instruct me. I ask this because I live in the world, and because I fear death and old age. I ask you to teach me something which shall prevent my fearing either old age or death." The king, touched by the earnestness of his request, informs him of the state of the soul after death, and sends him back to the world with the certainty of a future existence.*

Similar scenes are to be found in some of the songs of the Edda. In the *Vafthrudnis-mal*, the giant *Vafthrudnir* informs *Odin* of what he has seen in the *Valhalla*, and in the darker regions of death.† In the *Vegtams-quida*, *Odin* mounts his horse, *Sleipner*, and descends into the infernal regions, there to consult the spirit of a prophetess respecting the fate of *Balder*, the youngest and the fairest of the human race.‡ Thus we find analogous ideas on the subject of a future state in the literature of all nations, even of those the most remotely connected. This is not surprising, when we reflect that the earliest application which was made of poetry was to religious subjects. *Quintilian* tells us, that poetry was destined to preserve sacred doctrines, to express the decrees of the oracles, and to animate devotion. Thus the common origin

**Oupnek 'hat*. Vol. II. 37.

† For an analysis of this part of the *Vafthrudnis-mal*, see *Wheaton's History of the Northmen*, p. 68.

‡ See a translation in verse of this *Saga*, in *Spenser's Miscellaneous Poetry*, Vol. I., p. 50.

of all poetry explains the singular resemblances we find between the Hindoo and Scandinavian literatures, resemblances which would otherwise be inexplicable.

We have seen how far the ancients succeeded in penetrating the mysteries of our spiritual nature and future destiny. We have witnessed the isolated attempts of poets and philosophers, and the combined efforts of whole nations, to explain what is to be the state of the soul after death. How vague and unsatisfactory are the results of these undertakings ! But life and immortality were brought to light by the gospel, and what had been the subject of the doubtful meditations of men of science since the beginning of the world was made evident to the followers of the new religion. Still, as a society of men cannot exist without some kind of poetry to gratify their imaginations, the New Testament soon became the source of poetic inspiration. All the narratives, which in the sacred books had been designedly left unfinished, were soon completed, according to the taste of the early ages of our era. We need mention but one example of this, that of the legends relative to the Virgin Mary. The mother of the Saviour is mentioned but once in the New Testament after the death of her son, because at the foot of his cross all the interest she inspired vanishes ; her sacred character disappears, she is no longer superior to any other woman. The legendary spirit, however, which at so early a period sprung out of the new faith, did not respect the silence of Scripture on this subject. A narrative of the life and death of the Virgin was invented ; the popular belief penetrated into the church ; and even at the present day, all Roman Catholics celebrate the 15th of August as the day of the ascension of the Virgin. The multitude had free access to the sanctuary ; consequently the sanctuary was not always respected. The mysteries of another life had been laid open to all men ; they no longer feared to gaze upon those secret regions where retribution awaits those who have left this life. Our Saviour and his apostles had never attempted to give any description of heaven or of hell ; the poetic and zealous spirit of the new Christians did not hesitate to supply this omission. Hence the vast number of legends and visions which pervade the literature of the Middle Ages, and which were not destined to receive a definitive and permanent form until Dante combined them in his immortal work, and gave to them the sanction of genius. We

shall endeavour to show how much influence they exercised on Dante's invention, to give a general idea of the nature of these legends, and to analyze as rapidly as possible some of those which may prove the most illustrative of our subject.

Among the legends of the Middle Ages, it is necessary to distinguish those which belonged in common to all nations from those which seem to have been the property of some particular race. In the collection of poetic traditions entitled *Legenda Aurea*, published during the thirteenth century, by Giacomo de Varaggio, we find many legends that were popular throughout all Europe. Such are the narratives of the visions of St. Carpus and St. Christina, which were in circulation during the first centuries of our era. We are struck by the mildness of spirit which pervades these early legends. But if it is remembered, that, when these legends were composed, Origen was teaching that all the sufferings of hell are but expiatory, and inculcating the doctrine of the final redemption of mankind, we shall not be surprised at this.

The most striking of the legends given by Giacomo de Varaggio is that referring to the descent of Christ into hell. This legend was taken from the apocryphal Gospel of Nicodemus. The narrative commences on the day of the resurrection of the Lord. While the Jewish priests are in deliberation, two men, Lucius and Carinus, risen from the dead, are introduced into the synagogue. They relate, that, as they were in darkness with the patriarchs, a brilliant light suddenly appeared, and the father of all men, Adam, was filled with joy, and exclaimed, — "This is the light of the Author of all things, who promised to send us his light." And Isaiah said, — "This light is that of the Son of God, of which I prophesied that the people which was walking in darkness should see the splendor." And Satan, the Prince of death, said to Hell, — "Be prepared to receive Jesus, who prided himself on being the Son of God, and who is but a man who fears to die; for he said, 'My soul is sorrowful even unto death.' I have tempted him, I have excited the people against him, and prepared his cross; the moment is at hand when I shall bring him prisoner to this place." And Hell answered and said, — "Is it the same Jesus who ordered Lazarus to rise from the dead?" "It is he," replied Satan. "Then," cried Hell, "I beseech thee, by my power and thy own, not to bring him here; for when I

ward his voice, I trembled and could not hold Lazarus, who suddenly escaped and rose in the air, like an eagle." But while Hell was thus speaking, a voice like thunder was heard say, — "Princes, open your gates, your eternal gates, and let the King of Glory enter." At the sound of this voice, the demons shut the gates of bronze with iron bars. But David, on seeing them, said, — "I prophesied that he would break the gates of bronze." And the voice was again heard say, — "Open your gates, and let the King of Glory enter." Hell then said, — "Who is this King of Glory?" And Daniel answered, — "The Lord strong and powerful, the Lord of Hosts; it is he who is called the King of Glory." At that moment, the King of Glory himself appeared, and, taking Adam by the hand, said to him, — "Peace be with thee, and all those of thy race who shall be just." And the Lord left Hell, and all those who were just followed him. The archangel Michael opens the gates of paradise to the multitude. There appears a man bearing on his shoulder the sign of the cross; this man was the thief who was crucified with Christ, and to whom our Saviour had predicted that he should be that day in paradise with him.*

Here ends this curious legend, which, if it had but little authority in the eyes of the theologian, has at least been a source to which Milton and Klopstock did not disdain to look for poetical descriptions. Another curious legend, among those which belonged in common to all the nations of Europe, is that of the vision of the three monks, Sergius, Theophilus, and Hyginus. They wished to discover the spot where heaven and earth touch each other; that is to say, the terrestrial paradise. After having travelled through India and Persia, they arrived in a most delightful country, where seemed to reign an eternal spring. They here found a fawn and a dove, who led them through hell, — where they heard cries of "Mercy! mercy!" and a formidable voice saying, "This is the place of punishment!" — into the blessed regions where the just enjoy the perpetual contemplation of God. After having thus visited all the mysteries of eternity, they returned to their convent, but other monks had taken their place. They saw their own names nearly effaced on the list of persons who had previously inhabited the convent;

* *Legenda Aurea, De Resurrectione Domini.*

seven centuries had elapsed since they had left it.* This legend, says M. Labitte, shows "something of the stories of the Golden Age, mingled with the splendors of the Arabian Nights, and the aspirations of an ascetic life." These two fictions are among the most important of those in general circulation. We have now to consider those which differ from each other according to the peculiar genius, or the degree of civilization, of the people among whom they had their origin. Each of the great nations of Europe had its own cyclus of legends, as it had its own laws, and its peculiar manners and customs.

In Germany, religious visions are found in greater number than in any other region; and they bear a character of severity and terror which seldom belongs, at least in the same degree, to the legendary poetry of other nations. It was natural that it should be so in the land where the Catholic faith had encountered the greatest difficulty in taking root. It was deemed necessary to use terror as a means of conviction with a barbarous people, who lived in an open state of polygamy as late as the eleventh century, and whose emperors made the most corrupt use of ecclesiastical patronage.

The monk Othlo mentions no less than seven visions of the punishments reserved for the wicked.† He also relates the curious adventure of a knight named Vollark. As he was going to a nuptial festivity with some of his friends, he lost his way in a forest. Presently a knight dressed in black accosted him, and offered him shelter for the night. Vollark accepted the invitation, and entered the castle of his host. The tables were covered with gold, silver, and precious stones, and around them were seated the most hideous figures. This sight filled Vollark with astonishment and fear. "Al these riches," said his host, "are those taken by men from their churches; they work for me." The poor knight then remembered that his host had called himself *Nithard*, that is to say, the Evil One; but as Vollark lived in the fear of God, Nithard had no power over him, and he was enabled to return to his companions.

One of the most remarkable among the German visions is

* Manuscript in the Royal Library of Paris, fifteenth century, No. 7762.

† Othlonis monachi Ratisbonensis *Liber Visionum tum suarum tum aliarum.*

that of Wettin, monk of the monastery of Reichenau.* Two days before his death, Wettin was transported in spirit, and conducted by his guardian angel through the three abodes of immortal life. He there saw the condemned given up to the most dreadful punishments, rolled in torrents of fire, buried in coffins of lead, and surrounded by clouds of smoke. Among those who were condemned to suffer he recognized many priests and monks.† He ascended the mountain of purgatory, where bishops who had been remiss in the discharge of their duties, and rapacious noblemen and princes, were condemned to expiate their sins. Among the latter, he saw Charlemagne punished for incontinence. At last, he entered heaven, and, having passed through the midst of the holy martyrs and virgins, he arrived at the throne of God, who promised him eternal life on condition that he should return to the world to relate what he had seen. In the vision of St. Ansharius, we find, in the description of paradise, much of the spirituality which pervades the narrative of Dante. "He saw neither sun nor moon, nor the heavens nor earth, for every thing there was incorporeal."‡ In the visions mentioned by St. Boniface,§ the founder of the church in Germany, one is struck by the gentleness of spirit which seems to have dictated them; still, the principal aim of the legends of Germany, as already said, was to strike terror into the heart of the believer.

The same gloomy and severe character is stamped upon many of the French legends. The French, who had derived many of their manners and customs from their neighbours the Germans, preserved them down to a very late period. We find a manifesto of the thirteenth century, in which the Sicilians complain of the barbarism of the French, because, instead of taking their instruction from Italy, they sought on the other side of the Rhine for their laws and customs.|| At the period of the decline of the Carolingians, the French legends were particularly

* *Acta Sanctorum Ordinis S. Benedicti*, IV., pars 2, p. 268.

† Compare these punishments with those described by Dante in his *Inferno*, Canto XI.

‡ *Vita S. Ansharii*, auctore Remberto. "Sol vero nec luna necquaquam lucebant ibi, nec cœlum ac terra ibidem visa sunt, nam cuncta erant incorporea."

§ *S. Bonifacii Epistolæ*.

|| Vide Amari, *Storia del Vespro Siciliano*.

fearful. The descent into hell of a woman named Frothilda is recorded. She there foresaw the exile of Louis d'Outremer, and the consequent disturbances which were to spread grief and sorrow throughout the kingdom.* Berthold visits the abode of the damned, and there sees Charles the Bald, an archbishop, and several priests, punished for their crimes.† Andrade is present at the council of God, and hears him ask the angels what is the cause of all the wickedness which exists on earth; he is told that it is the fault of the bad kings who reign in the world. "But who are these kings? for I know them not." The emperor Louis and his son Lotharius then appear, and God tells them that they must obey the church, if they wish to preserve their crowns.‡ One of the most celebrated French legends is that of the vision of Charles the Bald. One night, he saw before him a figure dressed in white, which placed in his hand the end of a thread that seemed to be all of fire, and ordered him to follow it. He thus enters the infernal labyrinth, where he witnesses the punishment of bishops who had misused the authority given to them by their clerical character; passing through the midst of molten lead, he hears dreadful lamentations, and distinguishes these words:—"The punishment of the great is great." In purgatory, he sees his father, Louis, plunged in a caldron of boiling water. At last, the heavens open, and his grandfather Lothaire appears, and predicts to him the fall of his race and his own abdication.§ In these legends we are particularly struck by the courage with which the vices and crimes of the great were attacked by their contemporaries; they formed the morality of history. But this opposition to the encroachments or abuse of power not only existed in the legends of France; it passed into the church, and mass was said against tyrants, *missa contra tyrannos*.

In England and Ireland, we find two very celebrated legends, the Purgatory of St. Patrick, and the Vision of St. Tundale. The first mentioned was one of the most popular legends of the Middle Ages. It was well known in France, and was translated both into Italian and Spanish. || An

* Ampère, *Histoire Littéraire de France*, Tom. III., p. 263.

† Ibid., Tom. III., p. 117.

‡ Ibid., Tom. III., p. 119.

§ Ibid., Tom. III., p. 120.

|| Calderon adapted this legend to the stage, and as late as 1764 we find

English knight is the hero of this legend. He undertakes to visit purgatory, and for this purpose enters a cavern in an island of lake Dungal, which had formerly been opened to St. Patrick. Hence the legend is called the Purgatory of St. Patrick. The terrible threats of the demons who strive to prevent him from entering do not intimidate him; he continues to advance, and sees the condemned suffering the most horrible punishments. Some of them are crucified, or devoured by serpents; others, quite naked, are exposed to the cold winds of winter. Among those thus tortured he recognizes many of his friends and companions. At last, he comes to a narrow bridge thrown over the abyss; as he approaches, it grows wider, and he is enabled to pass. He then enters the garden of Eden, peopled by those who are not sufficiently pure to enter the kingdom of God, and lastly he sees the glory of the Lord in all its effulgence. Then he returns to the world, where he lives a better life than he had previously done.

The vision of St. Tundale, and that of the Northumbrian, Drithelm, are very similar to that of St. Patrick, and we shall therefore not attempt to analyze them.* The legend of St. Brendan deserves, however, to be noticed. It is one of the most curious of all the legends of the Middle Ages. St. Brendan had left the island of Erin in search of the land promised to those who should lead a holy life. After having seen the island called the Paradise of Birds, — the abode of those half-fallen angels who neither took part with Satan nor resisted his audacious undertaking, — he discovers hell, whose volcanic summit rises above the ocean. He here sees Judas, who betrayed the Lord, and to whom in his infinite mercy Christ has granted one day of respite from his sufferings. At last, he discovers the terrestrial paradise that he was looking for, and then returns to his country. Dante was unquestionably acquainted with this legend, for among all the poetic effusions of the Middle Ages not one was better known. It was popular as late as the sixteenth century, for at the time of Luther many rich men were

the ballad of *La Cuera de San Patricio* published at Madrid. There is on this subject a learned essay in English by Mr. Wright.

* See the Vision of St. Tundale, published by Mr. Turnbull, Edinburgh, 1843; and that of Drithelm, in Bede, *Hist. Eccles.*, Lib. V., c. 13.

ruined by the immense sums of money they expended in order to discover the unknown country of St. Brendan. This apocryphal land also figures in a diplomatic negotiation between Spain and Portugal ; and in 1721, we find a ship sailing from Spain in the direction of the Canary Islands, in search of this fabulous island.*

There are but few religious legends to be found in the annals of Spain. The romantic and chivalric ballads so popular in that country excluded all other poetry. The Cid had too much to do on earth to be able to visit the mysteries of another world ; and it is worthy of remark, that, instead of transporting him to heaven, as other poets have done with their heroes, Sepulveda, in one of his ballads, represents St. Peter visiting him thirty days before his death, in order to prepare him for his end.

In the cursory view we have taken of the different legends of European nations on the subject of another world, we have now reached the country of Dante, and, as might be supposed, we find traditions which must have exercised a still greater influence on his poem. He was acquainted with the poetic legends of other nations from the books which he read, or from the narratives of travellers who had visited the different countries of Europe. He found those of his native land at every step. During the Middle Ages, Italy may be said to have been itself a legend. If he opened a book which was in every one's hand, the *Fioretti di San Francesco*, he must have seen some of those touching stories which were related of the holy man ; he must have become acquainted with that charming legend of three thieves who came one day to the monastery of Monte Casale. The porter had refused to open the gate to them ; St. Francis ordered him to go and look after them, and when he should have found them to ask their pardon, and to offer them bread and wine, at the same time recommending them to reform and to lead in future a more holy life. The porter obeyed, and the thieves were so much touched, that they began to reflect on the sinful life they had hitherto led, and went immediately to ask pardon of St. Francis. He received them, and shortly after they took

* M. Labitte supposes that this legend may have indirectly inspired Columbus, and that in the unknown land of St. Brendan, whilst Dante sought for his invisible world, Columbus looked for the New World.

orders. Two of them soon died, and their souls went to heaven; the third survived, and, after doing penance for fifteen years, he one night had a vision. He fancied that he was transported to the top of a high mountain, to the brink of a precipice which filled his soul with terror. The angel who led the way threw him into the abyss, and, following him, ordered him to rise and to come with him. They traversed a long valley, filled with sharp-pointed stones, at the end of which a troop of horrible demons seized upon him, and threw him into a blazing furnace. When he had got out of the furnace, he came to a narrow and slippery bridge, under which was rolling a torrent full of scorpions and serpents. In the middle of the bridge, the angel rose in the air and alighted on a mountain. The good thief, on finding himself thus alone, was filled with terror, and, not knowing what to do, he recommended himself to God; he presently began to feel wings growing on his shoulders, and, without waiting for them to have attained their full growth, he sought to fly. Twice he fell, but at the third attempt he succeeded in rejoining his companion. At this moment, St. Francis, who had died a short time previous, appeared to him, and introduced him into a magnificent palace situated on the mountain, where, having shown him all the treasures it contained, he ordered him to return for seven days to earth. The good thief then awoke; seven days after this vision, he died.*

When Dante visited the convent of Benedictine monks at Florence, he must have found in their library the celebrated vision of Alberic, who, having passed through purgatory, finds himself before the dread tribunal where the human race is finally judged. A sinner was awaiting his sentence; his crimes were inscribed in a book by the angel of vengeance. But in the latter days of his life, the sinner had shed one tear of repentance; it had been gathered up by the angel of mercy, who lets it fall on the book, and it effaces all trace of what was written there.†

But it was not only in the legendary and poetic traditions of his country that Dante found those doubts and elevated

* *Fioretti di San Francesco*, cap. 25.

† This legend was written by the monks of Monte Casale, and published for the first time by Mr. Cancellieri, at Rome, in 1818. It reminds one of the beautiful passage of Sterne, where the recording angel washes out the oath of Uncle Toby with a tear.

speculations respecting the particulars of another life, which agitated the Middle Ages. In one of the sermons of Gregory the Seventh, which Dante was doubtless acquainted with, there is a remarkable passage concerning the sufferings which await the sinner in another world. When, in the little town of Arezzo, Gregory, then only cardinal, preached this sermon, he was not preoccupied with any poetic thought; his aim was only to convince his auditory that neither prince nor baron could, with impunity, touch the possessions of the church. In order to attain his object, he recounted the following fiction in his sermon. A holy man who had descended into hell had there seen a ladder standing in the midst of the flames and fire of everlasting justice. All the men who belonged to the family of a certain German baron, who had usurped the domains of the church of Metz, were condemned to come on this ladder after their death. The latest comer placed himself on the uppermost step of the ladder, and those who had preceded him descended a step, so that one after the other they were plunged into the horrible abyss.

In the chronicle of Malaspina, Dante no doubt read the adventure of the Marquis Hugues of Brandenburg, who, having followed the Emperor Otto the Third to Italy, got lost, by the visitation of God, in a forest, in the neighbourhood of Florence, and there discovered a forge, in which several men seemed to be at work. But he soon saw that the workmen were quite black, and that, instead of iron, they were beating human beings on the anvil. He was told that these were condemned souls, and that his would be treated in the same manner, if he did not repent. On hearing this, the Marquis recommended himself to the Holy Virgin, and after his return to Germany, he sold all his property in order to found seven new monasteries.*

The Dialogues of St. Gregory the Great, however, was the classical book of Italian legendary literature; but it would detain us too long to analyze all the legends in it, and others which were in circulation in Italy. Those that we have mentioned suffice to show the spirit of the religious poetry of that country. They are full of that energy so natural to Italian poetry of all ages, but at the same time a spirit of mildness pervades them, which is not to be found in the

* Ricordano Malaspina, *Istoria*, c. 48.

legends of Germany or of France. The higher degree of civilization of Italy, and the vast authority which the Catholic faith had in that land, naturally imparted more of the mild and humble spirit of the gospel to its poetry. The visions of paradise are more numerous than in the more barbarous countries of the North, and it may safely be said that such legends as that of Alberic could have been found in no other country than Italy.

We have now seen how much the works of the ancients and those of the Middle Ages contributed towards the formation of the *Divina Commedia*. But there remains yet another source from which Dante may have drawn much of his inspiration. During those ages when the Roman Catholic faith prevailed universally, the mysteries of a future state were not only celebrated by poets and men of letters; they were sculptured by the great artists of the time. The cathedrals which then rose up, as if by magic, in all parts of Europe, were filled with images of another world. It is impossible that Dante should have entered any of the churches of Pisa or Rome without being powerfully impressed by all that surrounded him. On the doors of the church of Santa Maria di Orvieto, he must have seen the bas-reliefs sculptured by Nicholas of Pisa, aided by some German workmen, in which the artist had represented the last judgment, the joys of paradise, and the tortures of hell. It was very common thus to represent on the exterior of great religious monuments the visions of a future state; it seemed as if the artist wished the passer-by to be struck by the spectacle of the sufferings which awaited him if he erred from the right path in this world, and thus to induce him to enter the church, there to prostrate himself before the altar, and humbly to acknowledge his frailty. If he actually entered, another spectacle immediately caught his eye; consolation seemed to surround him on all sides. On the stained glass of the windows, he discovered the holy virgins who had suffered martyrdom; and above the organ he saw the rose, which generally represented the nine choruses of angels surrounding the throne of God.*

* It was, no doubt, in visiting some church that Dante conceived the idea of representing heaven in the form of a rose, on the leaves of which were seated the blessed.

“ In forma dunque di candida rosa
Mi si mostrava la milizia santa,
Che nel suo sangue Cristo fece sposa.”
Paradiso, Canto XXXI.

But the imaginative people of those times would not have been satisfied to behold these supernatural images merely carved in stone or marble. They wished to see them animated, and a soul breathed into them. Hence those Mysteries in which the legends of the wise and foolish virgins, or the history of the Virgin, were performed. A Mystery representing the infernal regions was acted at Florence in 1304, at the foot of the bridge *alla Carraia*. Demons were seen persecuting the condemned. The number of persons assembled on the bridge caused it to give way, and a great many were drowned. "Thus," says Villani, "what was announced as a mere amusement became a reality, and many persons actually went to visit the invisible world." *

The subject that Dante chose was, as we have seen, far from being original. Like all men of genius, he understood, that, to be illustrious, it is not necessary to work with materials which have never before been used, but that the only subjects worthy the meditations and the labors of a great mind are those which have at all times agitated the human heart, and filled it with the strongest emotions. The materials of the *Divina Commedia* were everywhere to be found. Dante was surrounded by images which awakened and kept alive in him the habit of meditating on these awful subjects. The prophecies and visions of futurity were scattered throughout Europe; they only required that a master mind should appear, capable of embodying them in one great poem. Dante appeared; from his very youth he had deeply meditated the problem of human destiny, and in the life of an exile, where he had learnt "how salt is the bread of others, and how hard the road is going up and down the stairs of others," he acquired that strength of character and power of thought which adversity alone can give, and without which even the man of genius cannot bring forth all that his intelligence conceives. Nothing was wanting but to decide upon the moment when he should commence his great undertaking. This moment was at hand.

On the 21st of February, 1300, Boniface the Eighth pub-

* Villani, *Storia*. Dante was already banished from his native land when this Mystery was performed. It is nevertheless probable, that this tragical event may have had some influence on his ardent imagination, and some persons have even gone so far as to suppose that this Mystery first gave rise to his immortal poem.

lished a bull, granting plenary indulgence to all those who should visit the tombs of the blessed apostles St. Peter and St. Paul during a fortnight. The capital of the Christian world was thronged with strangers from all parts of Europe. Not less than two millions of persons are said to have visited Rome during this period. Among the strangers who then went to that city were two Florentines, both of whom were forcibly struck by this extraordinary spectacle. One of them was Giovanni Villani, who there first conceived the plan of his great historical work; * the other was Dante, † who, amazed and confounded at the sight of this vast multitude crowding round the tombs of the two great apostles, to seek for the pardon of their sins, then resolved to put in execution the plan he had so long meditated. He felt how much he required the pardon of his own faults, for he too "had lost the straight path." He resolved to repent, and to make known his repentance to the world; he determined to write the *Divina Commedia*. Thus, having for years studied the works of the ancients and the poetic legends of his own times, having long meditated upon the mysteries of eternal life, a single event sufficed to induce him to commence his immortal task. The death of Beatrice had first given him the idea of describing the terrors and felicities of another world; the Jubilee of 1300 filled his soul with that ardent faith and spirit of penitence so necessary for the execution of this design. Thus it is with the man of genius; events which to ordinary minds bear no peculiar stamp impress his imagination; and things, which seem in general to be of no importance, receive from him a life which they did not before possess. Michel Angelo could shape the rude stone into a Venus or an Apollo; Dante could compose the *Divina Commedia* out of the discordant materials which he collected, and make the world forget the sources from which he had gathered them, till the curious researches of a later generation should again rescue them from oblivion.

* *Storia Fiorentina.*

† There can be no doubt that Dante was at Rome at this time. We know that he was several times intrusted with diplomatic missions to the papal court, and many passages of his poem prove that he was an eyewitness of the imposing spectacle of the Jubilee.

ART. IV. — *The Life and Letters of Thomas à Becket, now first gathered from the Contemporary Historians.* By the REV. J. A. GILES, D. C. L., late Fellow of Corpus Christi College, Oxford. London: Whittaker & Co. 1846. 2 vols. 8vo.

THERE are three great names in the history of the twelfth century, — Abelard, St. Bernard, and Thomas à Becket. Two of these were entered in the same year on the Calendar of Saints. But this is almost the only coincidence between their lives or characters. The ascetic enthusiast, Bernard, had little in common with the splendid dignitary of the English court and church. Both were, indeed, great sufferers; but the heroic “passion” of the English saint has eclipsed the daily martyrdom of the recluse in the “valley of wormwood.”

Thomas à Becket was a man of no vulgar qualities. The remarkable combination of an iron will with the most supple versatility, of towering arrogance with companionable grace, of courtly diplomacy with rugged violence, required no less than the friendship and the hatred of a king to afford it full scope. Exile, martyrdom, and canonization enlarged the circle of his influence, and domesticated his name in every cottage of England. Translation and jubilee, miracle and pilgrimage,* kept fresh the godly savor of his memory; and though the dearest saint of the English people could not preserve his too precious shrine for his canonized bones from England's most brutal despot, the furrowed floor of his cathedral yet records the devotion of kneeling thousands, and his tenure of renown cannot quite expire, till the Canterbury Tales shall cease to be read.

A character of this stamp, with history and tradition,

* In the year 1220, the famous Stephen Langton, Archbishop of Canterbury, removed the body of Becket and placed it in a splendid shrine. This was called the “Translation of the Martyr.” Not only did the 7th of July, the day on which it took place, become a holyday, but every fiftieth year a jubilee was held for fifteen days together, and indulgence was granted to all the pilgrims to the shrine. From the record of the sixth jubilee it appears, that about one hundred thousand strangers came to visit the tomb. The ornaments of the shrine were of immense value; “gold,” according to Erasmus, “being the least precious thing.” The cupidity of Henry the Eighth did not overlook this prize; in 1538, it was plundered by his agent, Cromwell, and the martyr's bones were burnt.





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