

## ARTICLE IX.

## CRITICAL NOTE.

## DANTE'S VISION OF SIN.

IN these days when the consciousness of sin is waning, it is an encouraging sign, that the study of Dante is becoming increasingly popular, and that the circle is rapidly widening of those who are beholding the sovereign realities of life through the clearest eyes that for ten centuries looked into the heart of man. The women of Verona whispered to one another as the lonely exile, grim, swarthy, with hair and beard black and crisp, passed along the street, "See, he has been in hell!" He had been deep in the heart of things, and there had first seen sights of woe, and then visions of unspeakable glory. What he saw he spoke in words of rarest melody, and they survive the centuries because he uttered elemental truths in forms of exquisite beauty.

It is the common opinion of those who know the great Florentine simply through Doré's illustrations of the *Inferno*, that Dante was a savage-souled mediæval poet who gloated over the grotesque, and sought to frighten timid souls into obedience to the church by vivid descriptions of the torments of the damned. Dante was to a degree the child of his time, and undoubtedly believed in a prison-house of everlasting torture; but this was not the inspiration of his poem. He considered himself a prophet sent from God to startle a frivolous world by lifting up before its eyes a commanding vision of actualities. He must show men what sin is, how to escape from it, and what is the supreme beatitude. This burden which God had laid upon his soul found imperishable expression in the "*Divine Comedy*": in an *Inferno*, which is a vision of sin; a *Purgatorio*, a description of the way of purification; and a *Paradiso*, a powerful delineation of the raptures of the redeemed.

This poet-prophet left it to theologians to define sin; he would reveal it in its monstrosity and naked hideousness. The scene must be laid in the next world, for it is there iniquity comes to its awful growth. The seed is sown in this life, the harvest ripens in eternal woe: hence he must needs go among the "truly dead" for prophetic as well as artistic purposes. What did this deep-souled, clear-visioned man tell the world that sin is?

In the architecture of the infernal region he sets forth his conception of the different degrees of iniquity. Sitting behind the great tomb of Pope Anastasius, while they were becoming accustomed to the horrible

excess of stretch which was coming up from the deep abyss of the pit, Virgil unfolds to Dante the structural plan of hell. It is constructed so that those who have sinned most heinously are the deepest down, and thus farthest from God; for sin separates from the Most High. There is a broad distinction between sins of impulse and those of settled habit. Of all the dispositions which heaven abides not, incontinence is the least offensive. Therefore the outbreaks of the turbulent and untaught passions—carnality, gluttony, anger—are punished in the upper circles; the pit of hell is reserved for sins of malice. Malice wins the hate of God, because it seeks the injury of others, either by force or fraud. Of the two, fraud is the worse; therefore, the fraudulent are in the lowest circles, and more woe assails them. Thus the great Tuscan passes judgment upon the fundamental division of wrong-doing: incontinence, violence, and fraud.

We make the same general distinctions. Sins of the flesh are less culpable than those of the spirit. Warm-blooded, impetuous faults are not so damnable as reptilian craft and sneaking deceit. The publicans and harlots go into the kingdom before the Pharisees. Dante differs from our modern thought, however, in this. We usually consider that guilt lies in the intention rather than in the act. He adopts the elemental principle of Roman jurisprudence, that punishment shall be proportional to the evil effects upon society from wrong-doing. The individual is accountable, not for the nature of the crime *per se*, but for the injury done to others. Hence treachery, being the most devastating in its consequences, is the blackest of all sins, and the arch-traitors against church and state he sees feeding the bloody maw of Lucifer himself.

Dante employs three distinct ways of revealing the nature of each sin. It is symbolized in the repulsive monster presiding over each circle; in the environment in which the sinner is punished; and in the condition and torment of the sinner himself.

For the nine circles there are nine frightful demons, each typifying the sin over which he rules. There is Minos abiding horribly; Pluto with his swollen lips, clucking his cry of alarm as Reason invades the domain of avarice; Geryon, type of fraud, with the face of a just man, a serpentine body and stinging tail. But it is Lucifer, at the very bottom of the pit, at the center of the earth, and therefore at that part of the universe farthest removed from God, who is the perfect type of sin in its essence. Huge, bloody, loathsome, grotesque, self-absorbed, every moment sending forth chilling death, making others woeful in his own woes, punishing his followers with frightful torture, and thus undoing himself; what more fitting personification could this Italian seer have devised to show evil in its real deformity and folly? The unsightly and self-centered Lucifer is a truer characterization of sin in its last analysis than either Milton's Satan or Goethe's Mephistopheles. In *Paradise Lost*, sin is audacious rebellion, challenging our admiration by its daring and

strength; Faust finds Mephistopheles a very attractive companion; but it was reserved for Dante to show sin in its true nature as hideous and foul loathsomeness, sacrificing others to its own appetite, and concentrating all its energies toward a blind self-indulgence. No one can read the *Inferno* and bear away the impression that sin contains any element of beauty or profit. It is ludicrous, sterile, detestable.

The environment in which the sinner is punished also indicates the general character of the sin. The incontinent dwell in murky darkness, signifying the condition of their minds darkened by fleshly lusts; the violent are in a zone of fire, for violence is a flame; the treacherous are in a sphere of barrenness and arctic cold, because sin at its worst is not fiery torment, but frigid and filthy deadness. The clear-seeing Tuscan prophet did not make the common mistake of representing the depth of sin as burning torture. The lowest pit of hell is a field of bloody ice.

The condition of the sufferers is perhaps the most graphic portrayal of the nature of the sin for which they are in woe. Dante believed that the penalty of sin is to dwell in it. Man is punished by his sins rather than for them. Hell is to live in the evil character one has made for himself. "Wherewithal a man sinneth, with the same also shall he be punished." Therefore, we have but to observe the appearance, the action, the feelings, of these denizens of hell, to know what the preternatural insight of the poet had discerned the sin to be. He teaches that the delights of illicit love seem sweet, but in reality they are a smiting storm, whirling and driving onward the shrieking and blaspheming spirits forever more. Violence against God is most powerfully painted. On a floor of dry and dense sand, blasphemers were lying supine; usurers, mere lumps of selfishness, were crouching; sodomites were raging about in their carnal passion, while "over all the sand, with a slow falling, were raining down dilated flakes of fire, as of snow on Alps without a wind." This indicates that that life is barren that is hostile to God, and against such God is a consuming fire. What sin is in its essential nature and its inevitable consequences, this grim painter portrays in the terrible nocturnes that make up the *Inferno*.

What did this austere prophet find out sin to be, as, following the light of reason, he penetrated to its very depths? He learned first of all that the woe of the lost is to lack a knowledge of God. When they reached the gate of hell, Virgil said to him: "We have come to the place where I have told thee that thou shall see the woeful people, who have lost the good of the understanding." It was Dante's thought that heaven is to vividly realize that God is in all things, and that all things are in God, bound in one volume of love. To lose this sense of God and his love, not to see his justice in punishment, to be forever blind to his compassion and truth, this blackness of darkness is hell.

He found that the soul given over to evil does not seek to escape to the light. The Greek tradition placed the monster Cerberus at the gate

of the lower world, but Dante found it unguarded, for the souls who have rejected the life of God tend downward.

Sin is unreasonable. After he had once passed into the gloom of the lost, the poet carefully avoids speaking the name of Virgil, the symbol of reason, for sin is the abnegation of reason. We may fabricate innumerable excuses, but can give no valid reason for sinning.

It is thoroughly selfish. The souls on the banks of the livid marsh of Acheron blame God, their parents, the human race, and everybody but themselves, for their cruel fate. Sin is thus a denial of selfhood. It is a repudiation of responsibility and a surrender of freedom. As before indicated, the most perfect type of sin is the self-indulgent Lucifer, entirely engrossed in his own feeding.

Dante was certainly no believer in the popular modern teaching, that the rejection of God ultimates in the annihilation of the wicked. Sin demonizes, but does not destroy the strength of the will. This is taught in many lurid pictures. When Farinata rose in his burning sepulcher and "straightened himself up with breast and front as though he held hell in great scorn," and in his disdainful patrician pride first asked the poet, "Who were thy ancestors?" ere he entered into conversation, he certainly showed no abatement in the force of his imperious will. In this Dante agrees with Shakespeare and Milton. Villainy did not weaken the intellectual cunning of Iago or cripple the rebellious energy of Satan.

The vision of Sin is not a fiction, created to delight or terrify. Neither is it a nightmare dream of horror, born in an age of superstition, and fated to pass away with the creed that gave it birth. It is sober reality. We have all beheld in a lesser degree what Dante saw with his keener sight. We, too, have seen the unstable blown about "like the sand when the whirlwind breathes," stung by the pestering gadflies and wasps of petty passion and annoyances. We have seen "people of much worth" carry intellectual culture to its highest point, yet lacking Christian faith, live without hope in a limbo where "sighs made the eternal air to tremble." We have seen the slaves of anger with look of hurt smiting one another as they stand in the foul fen of the river of hate. We have seen the violent shut the gates of the city of Dis in the face of Reason, but open them at the touch of some heavenly messenger of grace. We have seen flatterers wallowing in their own filth; and many an Alberigo, whose body lives, but whose soul is shrouded in icy death. All these and much more have we seen in our own experience, and perhaps we have felt them too; for who is he who has never put his feet into the ways of death, and walked in the paths of darkness and of fire? Happy have we been, if Reason has led us out of sin to behold "those beauteous things which heaven bears," and we have come forth to see again the stars, and have humbly washed the grime from off our faces in the dews of repentance. We have all had our visions of Sin; but it was reserved for one rare and

solitary spirit, exiled from his beloved city, stripped of all deadening luxuries, kept by dolorous poverty near to the deep heart of reality, to have his sight so clarified by years of study, of wandering, and of bitter disappointment that he could comprehend the sin of the world in all its dark horror, its fiery lawlessness, and its cold monstrosity, and then with almost superhuman genius set forth the vision, burned upon his brain, in a picture so lurid and darkly magnificent that it could never fade from the thought of man.

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