DANTE AND MILTON.¹

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SUMMARY.


'There is no greater sorrow than to remember in misery the vanished bliss.'

Inferno, v. 121.

'His will is our peace; it is that Sea, to which the whole creation moves.'

Paradiso, iii. 85.

'Nothing is here for tears, nothing to wail
Or knock the breast, no weakness, no contempt,
Dispraise or blame; nothing but well and fair,
And what may quiet us in a death so noble.'

Samson Agonistes, 1721.

'The mind is its own place, and in itself
Can make a Heaven of Hell, a Hell of Heaven.'

Paradise Lost, i. 254.

EVERY one knows these sayings; they are among the most familiar, and the most treasured, in modern poetry. In each of them there is an indefinable greatness. Each bears the stamp of a mind that has felt deeply, powerfully thought, and resolutely willed.

Yet the stamp is not the same. The two minds, even in these momentary utterances, are distinguishable. The greatness, whether of the same order or not, is not wholly of the same kind. The two

¹ A lecture based upon this essay was delivered in the John Rylands Library, March 14, 1923.
sayings of Dante suggest, if they do not denote, a richer capacity for sorrow, and for love, and for the vision of divine things. The two sayings of Milton suggest, if they do not denote, a more outspoken faith in man's power to shape his fate, to make his own heaven and hell, and to find heroism more beautiful than death is sad.

If we try to get nearer to these distinctions, it is natural to think first of the obvious fact that the two poets stood for different, and antagonistic, forms of the Christian faith. Yet, while Dante was a devout Catholic, and Milton a very pronounced and militant Protestant, this distinction does not carry us very far. Each was not only far more, but something other, than his creed implies. Dante not only assails the papacy with the sternness of a Hebrew prophet; he reinterprets and spiritualizes Catholic dogma. And Milton fearlessly uses his Protestant liberty of private judgment upon the fabric of Protestantism itself, fashioning not only his own heaven and hell, but his own God and Christ, and his own interpretation of the history and the destiny of man.

With all this, there is a real and close parallel between the two men, their lives, and their works. This may be summarized under the following heads:

1. What I may call the virginal quality of mind is nowhere in literature more clearly manifested than in the young Dante and the young Milton.

2. Each, though supreme in literature, was yet in no sense a 'man of letters' but in the largest sense a statesman, labouring single-souled and in the main single-handed, for the needs, as he understood them, of his country, and of mankind. And each understood his country's supreme need in intrinsically the same way, as a condition which would permit every citizen to attain welfare here and salvation hereafter; a condition which the one called peace and the other liberty.

3. Each pursued this end by a series of writings, in prose and verse, culminating in two great poems which stand alone in literature; for, alone among the great poems of the world, they were meant to be instruments of human liberation by divine discipline, composed by poetic craft out of the inherited ideas and traditions of the Christian faith. And for this high enterprise each was qualified by being himself a great poem; a life set to the rhythm of a noble music, attuned to the ideals of a pure and lofty nature.
'Of all poets,' says Milton, describing his own studies as a youth at Cambridge, 'I preferred the two famous singers of Beatrice and Laura, who never write but honour of them to whom they devote their verses, displaying sublime and pure thoughts without transgression.' And no English reader of that day was better qualified to understand both the purity and the sublimity of the *Vita Nuova* than the young scholar and poet of Christ's, who, a few years afterwards composed the great Puritan hymn of *Comus*. Between *Comus* and the *Vita Nuova* lie countless differences; but there sounds, naive and implicit in the one, eloquent and impassioned in the other, the note of the virginal mind. Let us study for a moment the growth of these two consummate flowers of poetry, and the Florentine and English gardens where they grew.

In the perennial endeavour to subdue his own baser impulses the spirit of man, as reflected in history and literature, has followed one of two courses, enjoined by two distinct schools of moralists and poets. The animal within us may be suppressed, or he may be transformed. The beast may be worked out by muzzling and caging him, or by educating and ennobling him. The ascetic repudiates the senses, the idealist transfigures them. To the young Milton and the young Dante, the beast was equally obnoxious. But it was natural that Dante, approaching from the side of a noble philosophy of love, should take the second way, and that Milton, approaching through Puritanism, should take the first.

In the later thirteenth century, when Dante was growing up, the dominant prepossession and inspiration of Italian poetry was the passion of love. Dante himself notices that the poetry of war, so prolific in the romances of chivalry of Northern France, had no counterpart south of the Alps;¹ and when he wished to distinguish the sincerity of his own poetic speech from the rhetoric of weaker rivals, he described himself as 'one who writes what Love dictates in his heart.'²

Dante's love poetry had taken shape under the influence successively of two schools, the one of immense vogue, personated by a host of famous singers; the other concentrated mainly in the work of a single abstruse and unpopular poet.

¹ *De Vulg. Eloq.*, ii. 2. ² *Purgr.*, xxiv. 52 f.
The love poetry of Provence bore the impress of the brilliant accomplishment, the triviality, and the licence of the society in which it flourished. Like that society it was regulated by an elaborate code of laws; but its polished and often exquisite form was rarely associated with sublime ideas, and its air of aristocratic high breeding thinly veiled its inner sensuality. In Sicily, at the splendid court of Frederick II., and later in Tuscany, in Dante's youth, Troubadour poetry was imitated with inferior skill and without the support of a feudal society like that in which it had grown up.

But by the middle of the century, and especially during the twenty years 1260-1280, traces appear in several quarters of a loftier conception of love. In some of the later Troubadours themselves there are the germs of a reaction from the brilliant banality of the established mode. In Umbria, religious mysticism, borrowing the language of love-passion, imbued love-passion too with a mystic and religious air. In Tuscany, Guittone d'Arezzo intellectualized the purely amatory lyric with discussions of the philosophy of love, and sought to recast its facile style in the nobler mould of the Latin period. But the most original development, and the only one which deeply impressed Dante, was that effected at Bologna, during Dante's boyhood, by Guido Guinizelli. Bologna was a famous seat of the cultivation both of Roman law and of the newly recovered philosophy of Aristotle; and Guido's ideas of love reflect the temper of a philosophical student as clearly as did the Provençal love doctrine that of a feudal court. But they also reflect the democratic temper of a great Italian city. And to both these qualities Guido brought the fire of a true poet. The 'new sweet style,' which he originated, was a fusion of all these things so finely adapted to the spiritual and civic needs of Italy at that moment, that it found instant and joyous acceptance among her choicest spirits. For it supplied the formula of a new life, instinct at once with the gladness of youth and the seriousness of manhood. 'They found in it,' as Parodi has aptly said, 'a way of reaching through love towards an equality in true nobility against the pretensions of aristocratic superiority: a means of allowing full scope to amorous sentiment while making womanhood and the lyric praise of women an instrument of moral perfection.'

1 Parodi, Poesia e Storia nella D.C. I owe this and some other references to modern discussions of the dolce stil nuovo to the kindness of my colleague, Prof. E. Gardner.
The fundamental doctrine of Guido, then, is an exaltation of love such as we are inclined to call Platonic, but which was at least implicit in Christian scholasticism, where it kept at bay the theological dogma that love was an evil, and woman a snare. That love can, like divine possession, quicken the vision of good and the accessibility to noble impulse, was as clear to Guido as to Plato, and he boldly identified love with this exalting potency of love-passion. In his famous Canzone, Love and nobleness are inseparable as the Sun and its splendour; love seeks its place in the noble heart as the bird in the greenery; and as water quenches fire, so love quenches everything mean in the heart at its touch. It was this Guido whom Dante exalted, not only above all his contemporaries and predecessors but above all who had ever rhymed of love. And while he had sat at the feet of the Troubadours, and still admired some of them profoundly even when he had reached the summits of his own poetry (witness his eulogy of Daniel Arnaut in the Purgatory), it is Guido who is, in this poetry of love, and the noble style he had found for it, Dante's master; 'my father and the father of better poets than I.'

And we know, in fact, that in Florence the Bolognese poet had found gifted disciples among Dante's elder contemporaries; particularly in that Chiaro Davanzati, whom recent research is lifting to a place of growing importance in his entourage. A generation senior to Dante, Chiaro had, during Dante's youth, developed the fundamental thought of Guido, and assimilated at least the germ of the 'new sweet style.' It has even been thought that he, rather than Guido, was Dante's inspiring source. Dante's silence is, however, surely decisive.

But whatever he may be thought to owe to Chiaro, whatever he certainly owed to Guido, it is in the Vita Nuova, of course, that we find the noblest, the final, embodiment of the new poetry of love. Dante himself did not indeed reach it at once; for the earlier sections of his narrative, and the poems inlaid in it, are still moulded by the conventions of Troubadour courtship,—conventions of secrecy, of 'screen-ladies,' and the like, which had a meaning in feudal Provence but not in civic Florence. But he begins to be aware that he is not worshipping Love aright. Love appears to him in a dream (§ 12) and tells him with a

1 Purg., xxvi. 97.
sigh, 'My son, it is time to put away these phantoms.' And Love weeps, and at Dante's questioning replies: 'I am as the centre of a circle, to which all parts of the circumference are equally related; but thou art not so.' For Dante's love is still that of the wooer who expects a reward, he seeks Beatrice's pity, and is overwhelmed because he is denied her salute. Suddenly (at the 18th section) the veil is lifted, and he sees that the blessedness of love lies, not in a reward, but in a homage without thought of self; and the first words of the great canzone 'Ladies who have understanding of Love,' come of themselves into his mind. A single stanza will suffice to unfold his high interpretation of Love, one as notable as Plato's in its reaction upon later thought:

'I say that whoso would seem a gentle lady, let her go with her; for when she passeth by the way, Love casteth a chill into base hearts whereby every thought of theirs freezes and perishes. And whoso should endure to stay and behold her, would become a noble thing or else would die; and when she findeth one worthy to behold her, he proveth not her virtue; for this befalleth him, that she giveth him salutation and maketh him so humble that he forgetteth every offence. Also hath God given her for a higher grace that whoso hath once spoken with her cannot end ill.'

Beatrice is thus seen by Dante's ecstatic intuition as a spiritual power, bringing earthly things into compliance with the divine order of the world; and there is more than convention in his eulogy when he declares that Heaven craves her, wanting nothing of perfection but her presence.

But Dante feels that even this praise, which other poets also had used of their ladies, does not exhaust either the nature of Beatrice or the meaning of her love; and the Vita Nuova ends with the declaration that he would speak no more of her until such time as he could treat of her more worthily; hoping, by study, after some few years, to write of her what hath never been writ of any woman.

The few years lasted to the end of his life, for it is only in the Paradiso that this purpose is completely fulfilled. They also witnessed digressions, which retarded or imperilled, its fulfilment. The Convivio and the Pietra sonnets bear witness to passions, philosophic or erotic, which withdrew if they did not estrange. But the final representation only gives fuller and more magnificent articulation to the utterances of that early Canzone. It helps matters little to say that the Beatrice of the Comedy is simply a personification of Theology or
Revelation; as little as to say that she is simply Beatrice Portinari of Florence. However much she symbolizes in Dante's thought, the Beatrice of the *Vita Nuova* lives on in her; as that Beatrice had refused him her salutation, so this one reproves him, and no less pitilessly, for his unfaithfulness to her "school"; as that Beatrice ennobled all whom she encountered, so this Beatrice intervenes to lead her lover through Hell and Purgatory to Paradise. At every stage intellectual illumination and moral purification go hand in hand; and the consummation of Beatrice's work, of the transforming power of that selfless love, is not more to have won for him the vision of God, the crowning experience of the Paradise, than it is to have effected that complete oneness of his will with the Will of the universe, which makes him at length 'concentric with the Love which moves the sun and the other stars.'

II.

These, then, were some of the "sublime and pure thoughts, without transgression" which John Milton in his early twenties at Cambridge found in the "famous renowner of Beatrice," and which led him to prefer Dante and Petrarch above all other poets. Yet even these words betray that Milton had not penetrated the inner shrine of the *Vita Nuova*; that his intellectual sympathy with the poet to whom he paid this sincere and lofty homage, was not complete. The three intervening centuries had created yawning fissures in the culture of Europe, and these were far less easily bridged, even by poetic insight, in Milton's generation than in ours. The *Comedy* itself was in part framed of perishable and perishing materials, and it was less obvious then than now that the edifice itself was immortal. The great scholastic doctors had been driven into disrepute even in the Catholic world by the intoxicating discoveries of Humanism; and Milton, though his strong intellect was by no means without scholastic traits, was a member not only of the foremost of Protestant peoples, but of that left wing of Protestantism which had flung away most scornfully every remnant of the faith of Rome. Humanism and Puritanism met in Milton; and if, as we shall see, their encounter was at certain points a clash, they both fanned his animosity towards the faith of Dante. Of that faith the supreme authority had been the angelic doctor

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Thomas Aquinas; but Milton haughtily avowed that he preferred to Aquinas the wisdom of 'the sage and serious poet Spenser.' Milton's intense and vehement nature was more warped by the negations of his creed than are many minds of far less compass than his own. Newman confessed sadly that Milton 'hated the Catholic Church.' Certainly he was too much obsessed by the monstrous iniquities of its pre-reformation decadence to have eyes for the power and beauty achieved in its creative age. Dante's large sympathy embraced the virtuous heathen whom his dogma required him to damn; but there is no sign that Francis of Assisi, a 'virtuous heathen' for a Puritan, was for Milton more than the founder of one of that brood of mediaeval misbirths,—pilgrims, eremites, and friars 'white, black and grey, with all their trumpery,'—whom he consigns to his limbo of mischievous futility with the Greek Titans and the Biblical builders of Babel.¹

Dante himself was thus too deeply implicated in the scholasticism and catholicism of his age, to be seen by Milton in his full stature even as a poet. Incidental allusions show that he was familiar with the whole Comedy. Perhaps of all seventeenth-century Englishmen he knew it best. The musician in him responded to the entrancing scene where Dante met his musician friend, Casella, 'in the milder shades of Purgatory';² and he remembered Dante's description of Beatrice as she who 'imparadises my mind,'³ when he made Satan envious at the spectacle of Adam and Eve 'imparadised in one another's arms.'⁴ But to judge from the repeated entries in his Commonplace book, Dante engaged Milton's keenest interest less as a poet than as the great ally within the Catholic camp, who had anticipated the thunders of Protestant denunciation of simonist popes and corrupt clergy. Certainly, the Inferno, with its savagery and ugliness, despite the human grandeur which breaks through in the heartening words of Ulysses or the Satan-like defiance of Farinata, must have repelled him; as the mystic and transcendent metaphysics of the Paradiso must have left him cold.

All this has to be remembered when we are trying to enter into the mind of the young Milton as he read the Vita Nuova. He certainly apprehended those 'sublime and pure thoughts,' which he

¹ P.L., iii. 474.
² Purg., ii. 76. Milton's Sonnet to Henry Lawes.
³ Par., xxviii. 3.
⁴ P.L., iv. 506.
so nobly praised. But he praised them as an alien, across a gulf for him impassable. In Italy itself the delicate virginal passion which fills the *Vita Nuova* with the fragrance as of a newly opened flower, had hardly survived its poet; artifice is apparent even in the exquisite grace of Petrarch; and long before Milton the fresh flower had become an embroidered blossom, whose elegant pattern was diligently copied with variations by the legion of fashionable sonneteers. For the love-sonnet as it had been practised in England in the generation before his birth, Milton shows an unqualified disdain. His five Italian sonnets, commonly held to reflect an experience of his Italian journey, are now believed to belong to his Cambridge or early Horton years, and to reflect neither serious passion nor serious art.\(^1\) His English Sonnets, whether of public policy, or friendship, or personal confession, disengage themselves peremptorily in tone and topic from the main current of Petrarcan, and from the whole English, tradition.\(^2\)

In spite of his outspoken homage to Petrarch and Dante, he habitually speaks as if all love-poets were 'vulgar amourists,' and as if the ascetic scholar who resolves to shun delights and live laborious days resigned only the cheap satisfaction of sporting with Amaryllis in the shade, and not also those 'sublime and pure thoughts without transgression,' which had come to Dante and Petrarch, as Milton so clearly recognized, through love.

Now we seem here to have our finger on one of those points at which the poet in Milton, who was not less accessible than Dante himself to 'sublime thoughts,' encountered an inhibition in his own nature; so that the sublimity he found in the virginal love of Dante and Petrarch, though it *touched* his imagination, could not inspire it. We may say, if we like, that this inhibition was the restraining grip of the Puritan in Milton upon the native bent of the poet; and in fact in this glowing tribute itself we overhear the harsher Puritan cadence at the close, adding that these sublime and pure thoughts are 'without transgression.'\(^3\) What modern reader ever rose from the *Vita Nuova* reflecting that Dante had spoken of Beatrice throughout

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\(^1\) Smart, *The Sonnets of Milton*, p. 135 f.

\(^2\) This remains true notwithstanding Mr. Smart's proof of his debt to an Italian precursor, De la Casa, who himself deliberately broke with the Petrarcan tradition (N.S., p. 30 f.).

\(^3\) *Apol. for Smect.*
‘without transgression’? The assertion is almost sacrilege. Yet no coldly ascetic nature would have read and gloried in it at all. Milton’s temper was not cold but ardent; his asceticism was the passionate and immoderate self-control of one by nature impelled to love. By this native bent he had early been drawn to immerse himself in and delight in all the poetry of love, becoming accomplished in the art of the ‘smooth elegiac poets’ of Rome, who had known and told all the secrets of secular erotics; and only, later, at Cambridge, began to ‘deplore the men,’ while still ‘applauding their art.’ If he preferred Dante and Petrarch, then, to Ovid and Propertius, it was as a Puritan no less than as a poet; he found there a love poetry ‘without transgression.’ And the same animus colours his later studies, as reported by himself in the same place. The Romantic in him is drawn to the romances of chivalry, and he must have read, like Dante, of Galeotto and Guinevere, Roland, Tristan, and Iseult; and of those ‘knights of Logres and of Lyonesse, Lancelot, and Pelleas, and Pellémore,’ whose resonant names touch with splendour the grey verse of his old age. But what he now records is only how every knight was sworn to defend the chastity of virgin or matron; ‘from whence even then I learned what a noble virtue chastity sure must be, to the defence of which so many worthies, by such a dear adventure of themselves, had sworn. . . . Only this my mind gave me, that every free and gentle spirit, without that oath, ought to be born a knight, nor needed to expect the gilt spur . . . to secure and protect the weakness of any attempted chastity. So even these books which to many others have been the fuel of wantonness and loose living, I cannot think how, unless by divine indulgence, proved to me so many incitements to the love and steady observance of that virtue which abhors [profligacy].’

And when he goes on to the philosophers, the same inborn attraction is seen, subjected to the same Puritan inhibition. For it is chiefly to ‘the divine volumes of Plato . . .’ that he goes, the master-poet of ideal love. But here too the Puritan in him instinctively swerves aside from the passion even of the noble lover for the beloved, which according to the Phaedrus is the source of his sublime vision of truth, and fastens only on the intellectual and moral benefits which it

2 P.R., ii. 58 f.
is declared to induce. Plato taught him, he declares, of chastity and love: 'I mean that which is truly so, whose charming cup is only Virtue, which she bears in her hand to those who are worthy, ... and how the first and chiefest office of love begins and ends in the soul, producing those happy twins of her divine generation, knowledge and virtue.' Plainly, Plato's thought has acquired a more Puritan colouring in Milton's mind. Plato makes the passion even of the noble lover an intoxication, which is the very condition of his acquiring a reach of vision beyond that of cool reason; Milton, consciously or not, alters the whole purport of the thought; with him it is only the sensual lovers who experience the intoxication of passion, and it is from their intoxication precisely that their fatuous delusions spring;—they are 'cheated with a thick intoxicating potion, which a certain sorceress, the abuser of love's name, carries about.' Milton had the strength and the weakness of his clear rationality; even his loftiest inspirations owed little to the divine unreason which Plato declared to be 'the source of the chiefest blessings among men.'

Thus the virginal mind in Milton has forgone the capacity for such love as Dante's for Beatrice, and while no less noble and pure, has grown more self-conscious, aggressive, and declamatory. His high doctrine of chastity can yield him sublime thoughts, too, but they will be other than those inspired by the love of Beatrice. They are enshrined in the great Masque, composed eight years before the Apology, which we know as Comus.

*Comus* is a Puritan hymn to Chastity. Plot and persons are devised to exhibit its victorious encounter with vice. The humanist Petrarch had glorified such encounters in history and legend in a famous poem under the Roman symbol of a Triumph; and it was in the spirit of the mature Petrarch, not of the young Dante, the spirit of humanist panegyric, not of mystic reticence, that Milton celebrated the shyest of the virtues here. His readings in the ancient poets, in Plato, and in mediæval romance, are drawn with exquisite tact into the service of the single aim. The situation is that which had fascinated him in the romances,—the chastity of a maiden, assailed and vindicated. He, as well as Dante, was nurtured in the traditions of

1 *Apol.* 121.  
2 *Phædrus,* 244A.  
3 The 'Trionfo della Castità' is the second of his *Trionfi.*
chivalry, only it was the knight defending threatened virtue, not the knightly lover, who counted with Milton. The assailant, Comus, son of Bacchus and Circe, is equipped for the purpose with all the intoxicating spells for mind and sense and imagination, which that origin implies. The two brothers are the rescuing knights, and the Elder Brother explains with Plato's help both the philosophical ground of the high doctrine of Chastity, and also the ground of his assurance of his sister's safety. Plato's great doctrine of Love, of which Milton was to speak in the *Apology*, is here ignored altogether. Milton is not concerned with the contrast between noble and ignoble love but with that between the soul which abhors vice and that which yields to it.

He calls in to his aid the great passage in the *Phaedo*\(^1\) which describes how the pure soul becomes a part of the divine and immortal world, while the impure soul is dragged down to and clogged with the body it has served; building upon this a not less splendid passage of his own, where Plato's thought reappears clothed in the yet more transcendent symbols of Christian asceticism:

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\begin{align*}
\text{So dear to Heaven is saintly chastity} \\
\text{That when a soul is found sincerely so,} \\
\text{A thousand liveried angels lackey her,} \\
\text{Driving far off each thing of sin and guilt,} \\
\text{And in clear dream and solemn vision} \\
\text{Tell her of things which no gross ear can hear,} \\
\text{Till oft converse with heavenly habitants} \\
\text{Begin to cast a beam on the outward shape,} \\
\text{The unpolluted temple of the mind,} \\
\text{And turns it by degrees to the soul's essence,} \\
\text{Till all be made immortal.}^2
\end{align*}
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But Chastity, for Milton in *Comus*, is not fully symbolized by this saintly figure, with its protecting angels. She is a militant champion, Diana the huntress with her dread bow taming the lioness and the pard, or wise Minerva with her Gorgon shield, freezing her foes to stone. And at this point we seem, at length, to approach for a moment the *Vita Nuova* which Milton so greatly honoured. When Beatrice goes by the way, her presence freezes and destroys the base thoughts of those who look on her. Was not Milton remembering this passage when he declared that Minerva's Gorgon-

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\(^1\) *Phaedo*, 80-81.  
\(^2\) *Com.*, 458 f.
'wherewith she freezed her foes to congealed stone' was no material buckler—

But rigid looks of chaste austerity,
And noble grace that dashed brute violence
With sudden adoration and blank awe? ¹

But the approach is only for a moment, and there is even, when we look closer, a significant difference in the ethical implication of the two passages. Milton's Chastity, sublime and exalted as it is, is at bottom a self-regarding virtue; his warrior maid is concerned to disable her foes, not to ennoble them; and if a momentary suggestion of the creative and transforming glance of Beatrice has come into Milton's picture, if the Gorgon-shield of her rigid looks does not only freeze base thoughts but awakens wonder and reverence, the change is important not because her enemy has become a 'nobil cosa,' but because he is no longer formidable.

Milton has clothed his ideal in a splendour quite foreign to the naïveté of Dante's youthful art; and his Lady, 'defending the sun-clad power of Chastity,' is not less sublime, in her more secular and militant way, than Beatrice, the desired of heaven, when Comus trembles before her flaming scorn:—

Thou hast nor ear, nor soul, to apprehend
The sublime notion and high mystery
That must be uttered to unfold the sage
And serious doctrine of Virginity; . . .
Yet should I try, the uncontrolled worth
Of this pure cause would kindle my rapt spirits
To such a flame of sacred vehemence
That dumb things would be moved to sympathize,
And the brute Earth would lend her nerves, and shake
Till all thy magic structures, reared so high,
Were shattered into heaps o'er thy false head.²

But great and noble as both are, Dante's spirit is the richer and more humane, for it knows not only purity, but love, a purity that is rooted in love, a love that is rooted in purity; whereas Milton describes a virtue which, with all its dazzling and soaring splendour, only repels and repudiates the humanity below it.

Dante, as I said, had greater capacity for love, Milton for the self-asserting energy of the human mind.

¹ Com., 450. ² Ibid., 784 f.
Both Comus and the Vita Nuova contain the germ of what their poets were in after days to become. The conflict between Comus and the Lady is resumed on a vaster scale, and to a more tragic issue, in Paradise Lost; and in the Comedy Dante magnificently fulfilled the vow recorded in the last lines of the Vita Nuova, to write of Beatrice what had never yet been writ of woman. And that 'new sweet style' itself, which might seem to be only a discovery of a beautiful way of writing, was charged with the ethical and political idealism of democratic Florence; with the conviction that nobility comes not by rank and blood, but by high thinking, open to all. While Milton's no less ethical scorn for the hirelings in the Church breaks out through the flowers and melodies of Lycidas. Between their early manhood and their ripe fulfilment lay, for both men, years of strenuous labour devoted to making these ideals explicit. Both turned from the problems of poetry to the problems of statesmanship, and in spite of the obvious difference both of the political conditions they coped with, the causes they battled for, and the terms in which they thought, both sought one end,—to bring about in the State the conditions of spiritual welfare. Both worked with and through parties, but both stood above party, and each eventually fought, single handed, a party by himself. And both witnessed the seemingly complete frustration of the political causes for which they had fought.

Consider for a moment the political conditions of the societies into which these two great idealists were born, Italy in the thirteenth century, and England in the seventeenth. The Italy of Dante might be described as a ruinous fragment of a palace magnificently planned, of which only a façade or a tower here and there was ever executed. The England of Milton was a small compact edifice built on a corner of the palace area in complete independence of that magnificent plan, but now itself shaken to the foundations by a conflict among its occupants. Dante's Italy was the most civilized and the most anarchic country of Europe; its crowd of cities, focuses of dawning art and poetry, were independent republics or princedoms, constantly at feud with one another, and racked by even bitterer civil feud within; while the deadliest enemies of all, and the most disastrous in their enmity, were two shadows or caricatures of divine omnipotence, the Pope and
the Emperor—wielders in title of the highest authority on earth. For to them, according to mediæval theory, had been assigned by God the government of the whole world: the Pope was God's vicegerent in spiritual things, the Emperor in temporal things. When Charles the Great was crowned Emperor at Rome by the Pope, in 800, when Innocent III. 400 years later laid England under interdict, and excommunicated King John, the palace of world-order so magnificently planned seemed to be rising to the sky; but it was soon apparent that the splendid façade had no solid structure behind it, and by Dante's time to most dispassionate eyes it stood a hopeless wreck. To believe that it could yet be made a mansion for distracted Europe needed the faith and the hope of a visionary poet. That faith and that hope were found in Dante, and they spoke trumpet-tongued in the great treatise on Monarchy, which expounds the magnificent plan of that world-order on the eve of its final and irrevocable doom.

For Milton's England, the world-power claimed by Pope and Empire had become an obsolete memory. In her moated stronghold she had built up a compact and secure independent kingdom, where the Emperor's writ had never run, and for half a century the Pope had wielded merely the menace of a distant foreign power. She was the mother of parliaments, and the chief bulwark of Protestantism. But the claims of Pope and Emperor to absolute authority over the world were now resumed, with far more formidable power to enforce them, over England, by the bishops and the King. And while the Pope and the Emperor had been bitter rivals, both claiming supreme temporal power, the English bishops exercised temporal power with the King's full authority and support. Italy was convulsed by the conflict of authorities, and its need was order; England by the abuse of authority, and its need was freedom. Hence Dante and Milton, each with few rivals the most comprehensive thinker and the most single-souled patriot of his time, seem to be proclaiming different, even contradictory, forms of political faith. What approach can there be between Dante, who longed for the coming of the German emperor, as the promise of salvation for Italy, like a Hebrew prophet longing for the coming of the Lord, and Milton, who made Europe ring from side to side with his defence of the execution of a king? Or what accommodation can there be between Milton, who hated the Roman Church, and Dante, for whom the Popes, with all
their aberrations, were still the spiritual vicegerents of God? Let us look closer, however.

Both men sought in politics neither power, nor wealth, nor the interest of friends, or any other personal end; but the spiritual welfare of the State. When Dante entered political life at Florence, in the last quarter of the thirteenth century, he found conditions more anarchical than could be paralleled in Milton’s England before the civil war. The city was divided against itself by insoluble differences of race, social customs, and legal institutions. The traditions of the Roman municipality and of the Germanic tribe, of democratic citizens and feudal retainers, of merchants in their guilds and military nobles in their fortified palaces, struggled for mastery in the commune of Florence; and in the background loomed Pope and Emperor, intriguing, intervening, throwing the weight of their power on one side or the other, but never attempting to reconcile them. In this turbulent civic arena the rival pretensions of spiritual and temporal power, as such, were of little concern; the pith of the struggle was between citizens and magnates, legality and the right of private feud. Dante, though of noble descent, joined the party of civic legality. But this party was itself split into two factions even more bitterly opposed to one another than they had been to their opponents. During the years following 1292, when the civic party carried a series of democratic ordinances to curb the licence of the magnates, the feud between the ‘Whites,’ who wished to carry out the ordinances strictly, and the ‘Blacks,’ who wished to compromise, almost effaces in Florence the older and larger feud of Guelfs and Ghibellines. Dante, again, attached himself to the party which better maintained the tradition of Roman law and the conditions of civic peace.

And the catastrophe which ruined this party, and involved Dante in its ruin, only gave a more passionate intensity to his demand for peace and law. But the instrument by which they were to be secured assumed a new and startling form in his mind. It was the Emperor, the successor of the Cæsars, whom Dante wished to see entering Italy and forcibly suppressing the disorders rife in her. Only two generations

1 The Ordinances made the entire clan responsible for the murder of a burgher by any member of it. This reform was prepared for by the regulation which in 1282 had constituted the heads of the merchant guilds magistrates for the entire city.
before, the great Hohenstaufen emperor Frederick II. had actually ruled South Italy and Sicily. The actual entrance of Henry VII. in 1310 seemed to augur the crowning of Dante's hopes. He addressed to Henry letters filled with the passionate longing which the imminence of deliverance inspired. And in the great treatise already mentioned, written probably at this very time, he came forward with an imposing defence of imperial authority, probably the most magnificent apologia ever composed for the Roman empire.

Its argument soon makes clear that Dante is no imperialist of any common type. His politics are rooted in his religion. His doctrine of the State is a corollary of his doctrine of the universe and of man. He lays his foundations deep in abstract principle. What is the universal end of human civilization? The complete fulfilment, he replies, of the possibilities of mind, both in speculation and in action. For this, peace is above all needed, and for the maintenance of peace, justice, and this is best secured by a single universal rule from which the antagonisms and quarrels of States are excluded, because they are all merged in one. Have we not an example of this 'Monarchia,' he asks, in the universal rule of God? And he infers, with the sublime naïveté of genius, that the ideal form of government for man, must, then, be one modelled upon that divine pattern of 'monarchy,' an all-embracing 'single government' like his. So intimately were divine and human things wedded in the mediæval mind.

But this abstract reasoning is merely the basis of his practical contention, which is that the Roman Empire, including the existing Empire which claimed to represent it, was divinely established to exercise that universal monarchy. The Roman people ruled by full right, for they were the noblest of the nations, chosen by God for the purpose; a choice proved by signs and wonders all through Roman history,—the shield of Numa, the geese which warned of the attack on the Capitol, the hail which prevented Hannibal's assault upon the City, and finally by the fact that as soon as the Empire had been securely founded by the accession of Augustus, and the ordered mansion thus provided for Christ to be born in, and the Christian Church to have its home, Christ and his Church were born. The Incarnation was thus, for Dante, the one far-off divine event to which the entire history and evolution of the Roman Commonwealth, from Romulus onward, moved; and the divine sanction thus manifested in its earlier stages of
progressive conquest was guaranteed thereby, even in its later stages of disruption and impoverishment, to the Empire, now no more than a single State in the unruly complex of the States of Europe.

And, in the light of these ideas, we understand how the men who had impiously assailed and retarded this divine consummation are, for Dante the most abhorrent of all criminals; how he plunges Brutus and Cassius, who struck down the ‘first and only Imperator,’ Caesar, with Judas Iscariot who betrayed Christ, into the lowest pit of his Inferno, to be champed for ever in the blood-foaming jaws of Lucifer; while every form of treason to the State is branded by him more sternly than any other form of wrong. Milton neither felt nor could feel passion of this kind directed against traitors of this character. For him the State was threatened, if at all, by traitors on the throne.

Whatever we may think of the historic justification of this view of the Roman Commonwealth, its grandeur cannot escape the most fanatic of Protestants, and we can understand the exaltation which Dante felt when this vision of its divine meaning, like a new planet, swam into his ken. For it had not always been his; and he tells us something of the discovery in the glowing dithyrambs which open his Second Book:

"Why did the nations rage, and the peoples imagine vain things? The princes of the world came together against the Lord and his Christ: let us break their chains, and fling their chains far from us!" Even as we commonly wonder at a new effect when we do not understand its cause, so when we know its cause we look with a certain derision on those who continue to wonder. I myself once wondered that the Roman people had mastered the world without resistance, for, to my superficial gaze, it seemed that they had won it not by rightful title, but only by violence of arms. But when I had penetrated to the core, and recognized that this was the work of divine providence, my wonder passed, and a certain derision supervened, when I saw the nations rage against the supremacy of the Roman people, and the peoples imagining vain things, and kings and princes agreeing in one thing only, to oppose the Lord and his anointed, the Prince of Rome." ¹

But the toughest part of the practical problem remained. The Pope as well as the Emperor claimed universal rule, and by a divine

¹ De Mon., ii. 1.
title far more widely acknowledged. It is the object of the third book of
the De Monarchia to rebut these claims, and to demarcate the provinces
rightly belonging to the Empire and to the Church. The Church, he
concludes, is modelled on and limited by the mind and life of Christ;
itits saints are ‘citizens of that Rome where Christ is a Roman’;\(^1\) it
has to care for the welfare of men hereafter, and its kingdom, like
Christ’s, not being of this world, it cannot convey authority, as it
claimed, to a temporal ruler. The Emperor, on his part, derived his
title directly from God, and his whole function, which was also ex-
cursively his, was to care for the welfare of men in this life.

It will be seen, then, that the aims which underlie and determine
Dante’s ardent imperialist faith have nothing in common with imperialism
as now understood. To-day, imperialism is apt to be acutely nationalist
and bellicose; for Dante it was the way, the only way, to inter-
nationalism and to peace. His great word was Peace, and peace
meant for him the State in which men are free to fulfil themselves, to
carry out all the possibilities of thought and action which God put
within their grasp and intended them to exercise; to become, in Peer
Gynt’s phrase, ‘what Master meant them to be,’ and what Peer him-
self so disastrously failed in being. Hence there was the closest and
most organic connexion, in Dante’s mind, between the functions of the
two powers of State and Church, whose conflict, in various disguises,
was convulsing Italy. And though Dante’s great book was primarily
a vindication of temporal supremacy for the Empire, and a summons
to the Church to resign its pretensions to temporal rule, its true in-
spiration was only secondarily political; the final purpose of an
orderly and harmonious State was to provide the framework within
which men could freely make that choice between good and evil.
which would determine their destiny hereafter. Hence, while the
Church was warned off the sphere of governmental control, it was
recognized as the higher of the two powers, to be revered as such by
the lower.

But this last systematic utterance of Dante’s political ideals was
swiftly followed by the event which finally frustrated them,—the death
of Henry VII. in 1314. Political solutions were bankrupt, and
Dante, retiring, grieved but not in despair, from the closed and barred

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\(^1\) Purg., xxxii. 101.
gate of politics, opened for himself and for his countrymen and for the
world, the door into the immeasurably richer and ampler mansion of
the Comedy.

IV.

Milton first decisively intervened in politics at about the same age
as Dante. Both men were in the neighbourhood of 'the midpoint in
life's journey,' their thirty-fifth year, when Dante was resisting the
machinations of Boniface VIII. at Rome, and Milton publishing his
series of pamphlets against episcopacy. The outer circumstances were
unlike enough. Dante was a high State official, attempting to ward off
the menace of a foreign power; Milton a private citizen, contending
single-handed with the champions of a State institution. But they
were fighting for the same cause, the vindication of spiritual liberty
against the usurpations of ecclesiastical authority. Boniface had
menaced the Florentine State from without, but Milton saw a no less
formidable menace to the spiritual liberty of England in Laud en-
throned at Canterbury, and imposing a strict ritual, half copied from
Rome, upon the English Church. He had himself refused to take
office in a Church so ruled; and a little later, in Lycidas, he borrowed
from Dante the device of bringing in St. Peter, the founder of the
Christian Church himself, to rebuke its unworthy ministers. Milton
certainly remembered the terrific passage in which St. Peter, his face
scarlet with anger, denounces Boniface (at the date of the vision still
alive)—'he who usurps my place, my place, my place on earth, which
in the sight of Christ is void, making Rome my sepulchre a sink of
blood and filth, to the joy of the Fiend in hell.'

He remembered,
too, the poet's own stern rebuke of the futile preachers whose ignorant
flocks 'turn from the pastures full of wind.' Milton fuses both these
passages in the great invective pronounced by the Pilot of the Galilean
Lake over the watery grave of Lycidas. It is strong evidence of the
hold of Dante upon Milton in these years that he, the Protestant and
Puritan, should call in the very saint whom the Roman Church

1 Parad., xxix. 103 f.
2 Ibid., xxvii. 22 f. Cf. the no less tremendous passage where Dante
himself bursts into invective against the Simoniacs: 'Ah tell me now, how
much treasure did our Lord ask of St. Peter before he put the keys in his
keeping.' Inf., xix. 90.
claimed specially as her own, to denounce these English hireling clergy who

for their bellies sake
Creep and intrude and climb into the fold,¹

and whose ignorant flocks
Swollen with wind and the rank mist they draw
Rot inwardly, and foul corruption spread;

and finally pronounce the sinister and enigmatic menace:
But that two-handed engine at the door
Stands ready to smite once, and smite no more.

A few months after *Lycidas* (1637) Milton was himself in Italy, making no secret of his Protestantism even in the metropolis of the papacy, and visiting Galilei, a prisoner of the Inquisition, at Dante’s Florence.² And then, called home by the beginnings of the civil struggle, he was presently launching pamphlet after pamphlet at that incubus of episcopacy which in his eyes usurped the temporal power. Events fought for the time on Milton’s side; Laud was tried and executed, the clerical incumbents dispossessed. For a moment a rival church stepped into the authority of the Anglican; but Milton’s ready distrust of all established religion soon concluded that ‘new Presbyter was but old Priest writ large.’

When, after the ruin of the royal cause, and the death of the King, Anglican and Presbyterian establishment alike gave place to the rule of Cromwell, a situation came about not unlike that which, might have ensued had Henry VII lived to carry out the policy of imperial intervention and mastery passionately urged upon him by Dante, and made both the ecclesiastic and the secular governing powers subject to himself. It is probable that Dante, the victory once achieved, and the warring factions of Florence castigated into quiescence, might have had occasion like Milton to remind his triumphant chief that ‘peace hath her victories No less renown’d than war.’ For though Dante passionately implored the soldier’s help, and Milton loftily celebrated ‘God’s trophies’ in the field,—Darwen and Dunbar,

¹ Among the allusions to Dante in Milton’s Commonplace-book is one to his description of clerical avarice in *Inf.* vii.
² Scepticism as to this astonishing visit has recently been expressed; but the alternative is to suppose that Milton published a deliberate falsehood.
and Worcester's laureate wreath,—both poets were at one in abhorring militarism. No other great poet has so little sympathy with war as Dante; he may have fought for Florence as a young man, but he threw in his lot, as we saw, with the Florentine party which stood for civic law against sword-rule. The heaven of Mars in the Paradiso, which in other hands might have been peopled with great soldiers, is almost dominated by the single figure of Dante's great ancestor Cacciaguida; and the story of Roman conquest (Par. vi.) is significantly put in the mouth of Justinian, for the whole task of the Roman sword had been to prepare the way for the dominion of the Roman law. The emperor had to curb the secular usurpations of the priest, but Dante was no less resolute to oppose his intrusions upon spiritual privilege. In the English Commonwealth the situation which Dante dreamed of was, as I said, for a few years approached. Cromwell was not only a far abler soldier than Henry, but an immeasurably greater ruler and nobler man. Between Milton and the Protector there subsisted the mutual regard proper to spirits of such rare calibre. But Milton was acutely alive to the dangers of even the best-intentioned autocracy. And if he had caught from Homer and Tasso a zest of battle unknown to Dante, and could make a great military disaster—the débâcle of the rebel host—sublime even beyond Homeric parallel, he was even more acutely alive than Dante to the dangers of that military rule which Dante had so passionately invoked. And he addressed to Cromwell, at the height of his power, words of grave warning. 'You cannot be truly free unless we are free too,' he tells him, towards the close of the magnificent Second Defence of the People of England, 'for such is the nature of things, that he who entrenches on the liberty of others is the first to lose his own and become a slave.' It is interesting to compare the language which the two great poets held to the two great captains. Milton merely warns a powerful friend who has the same cause as he at heart; Dante, with an impatience ill concealed under that show of ceremonial phrase, exhorts and reproaches the emperor like a Hebrew prophet confronting some capricious Jewish king who might at any moment desert Jahve for Baal: 'Knowest thou not, most excellent of princes, from the watchtower of thy altitude hast thou not perceived, where that stinking fox lurks, recking not of hunters? Not by the Po, nor by the Tiber, but by the Arno is her haunt, and the name of this pest
(wotst thou not?) is Florence. . . . Ah then, bestir thyself, great offspring of Jesse, take confidence from the eyes of the Lord of Hosts who beholds thy deeds: and lay low this Goliath with the sling of thy wisdom and the pebble of thy might; for on his fall night and the shadow of fear will cover the camp of the Israelites; the Philistines will fly, and Israel be delivered.'  

But unlike as are these utterances, the ultimate purpose behind both was the same; and when Milton goes on, in that great peroration of the Second Defensio, to which only certain pages of Burke and a few of Wordsworth in English can be compared, to warn his fellow countrymen, also, that no outer freedom would avail them if they were without the inner freedom of self-mastery and disciplined obedience, he uttered, in the altered idiom of his time, the very spirit of Dante:—

'Unless the liberty you win, fellow-citizens, be of such a kind as arms can neither procure nor take away, the liberty which alone is the fruit of piety, justice, temperance, unless this liberty have taken deep root in your minds and hearts, there will speedily come one who shall snatch from you treacherously what you have won by arms. Your peace will be only a more distressing war. Unless you will subjugate the propensity to avarice, to ambition, and sensuality, and expel all luxury from yourselves and your families, you will find that you have cherished a more stubborn and intractable despot at home than you ever encountered in the field; and even your very bowels will be continually teeming with an intolerable progeny of tyrants. . . . Unless you are victors in this service it is in vain that you have been victorious over the despotic enemy in the field. . . . From such an abyss of corruption into which you readily fall, no one, not even Cromwell himself, nor a whole nation of Brutuses, if they were alive, could deliver you if they would, or would deliver you if they could. . . . If, after such a display of courage and vigour, you basely relinquish the path of virtue, if you do anything unworthy of yourselves, posterity will sit in judgment on your conduct. They will see that the foundations were well laid; that the beginning was glorious; but with deep emotion they will regret that those were wanting who might have completed the structure. . . . They will see that there was a rich

1Ep., vii.
harvest of glory, and an opportunity afforded for the greatest achievements, but that only men were wanting for the execution."  
Milton, if he were living to-day, might have used these words with even greater emphasis.

Dante certainly would have endorsed them; for his lofty imperialism was but an instrument for creating and preserving the conditions under which men by their inner virtue might achieve that kind of liberty which arms and governments as such can neither procure nor take away.

But Milton, like Dante, saw his political aims utterly frustrated. Cromwell died, in the fullness of his work, and the Restoration swept all English Puritanism to ruin.

V.

Yet it is in their adversity that both poets are most widely remembered, and that their memory is most moving to us. And both have allowed us to see in noble poetry something of what they suffered. Dante, in the grandest of his Canzoni (written at an earlier period of his exile, but applying with even added force to this), tells how he saw in a vision Righteousness and her children, beggared, ragged, starving and wayworn, come, seeking shelter, to the dwelling of Love, who is the lord of Dante's life:

'They were so fair and of such surpassing goodness that Love my lord scarce dared to speak of them. Righteousness stood before him loudly wailing. Her head rested on one hand, like a broken rose on its stalk, her bare arm, a pillar of grief, felt the storm of tears that broke from her; the other hand hid her weeping face. When she had told her story, Love was for a while mute with pity and anger. Then at length, saluting the sorrowful kindred, he took out two darts: 'These are the weapons I need, they are dulled as you see by disuse. Generosity and Temperance and the other sisters of our blood go begging their bread. But if that is grievous, let theirs be the weeping eyes and theirs the mourning lips whom it concerns, . . . not ours, who are hewn of the eternal rock; for, though now we be pierced, yet we shall endure, and there shall come again those that shall make

¹ In the same spirit Milton makes Christ, in Paradise Regained, answer Satan’s offer of imperial power:—

‘Who can of inward slaves make outward free?’
this dart eternally bright." Then, Dante adds, as I listened to the sorrow and consolation bestowed in this divine converse by fugitives so noble, I counted as glory the exile vouchsafed to me; and if justice or destiny will that the world turn the white flowers dark, to perish among noble comrades is yet worthy praise.’

And we see Milton projecting the shadow of his own isolation and of the ruin of the Puritan cause in the figure of the ruined hero Samson, in the prison of the Philistines,—

Ask for this great Deliverer now, and find him
Eyeless in Gaza, at the mill with slaves.

And Milton too finds consolation, not only in Samson’s heroic end—

Samson hath quit himself
Like Samson, and heroically hath finished
A life heroic,

or in the overthrow of the Philistine power, or in his own eternal fame, but above all, in the proof that God was not parted from him, as was feared,

But favouring and assisting to the end.

But for a full understanding of what Dante and what Milton meant by the refuge they found in the catastrophe of their political hopes, we must turn to a nearer comparison of their two great poems of Heaven and Hell.

Immeasurably different in almost every other way, the Commedia and Paradise Lost have always challenged comparison for the sublime poetry, which, in both, is won from a most reluctant and difficult subject matter, the Christian Heaven, and the Christian Hell. And this comparison is in reality one of immense and still unexhausted interest. For both poets lifted Heaven and Hell out of the category of poetic convention. The visionary journey to another world was a convention of mediæval poetry, especially in Ireland, long before Dante; and long before Milton gods and demons had mingled, as indispensable machinery, in the epic fray. Dante created from that naive legend a symbol, of overwhelming power, for the world-dilemma of good and ill. Milton forged from the ‘machinery’ of epic a symbol,

1 Cans., civ. (Opere ed. Soc. Dant.). The above is compressed paraphrase.
only less tremendous, for the ways of God to man, and the ways of
man to God.

Dante and Milton thus approached the poetry of Heaven and
Hell by totally different routes; and it is at this point, where they
most obviously challenge comparison, that we have most vividly re-
called to us the gulf of time which divides them, and the stupendous
things which happened in the interval. *Paradise Lost* presupposes
Protestantism, and it presupposes too that vast development of man's
awareness of himself, of his history, and of his powers, which we call
the Renascence, or Humanism, of which Protestantism was, in some
aspects, a special form.

How did these two great European movements, in both of which
Milton was thus deeply rooted, affect his execution of what he himself
felt to be his stupendous task, his song

That with no middle flight intends to soar
Above the Aonian mount, while it pursues
Things unattempted yet in prose or rhyme?

It must be replied that Milton's Protestantism, so far as it is a dis-
tinguishable influence, has on the whole damaged *Paradise Lost*;
while his Humanism has, on the whole, supported and nourished its
greatest qualities. Both Protestantism and Humanism destroyed as
well as rebuilt; they blotted out all that was beautiful and glorious in
Catholic tradition, and all that was sublime in the scholastic philosophy.
Whatever new spiritual springs they opened, to see in Rome only the
Scarlet Woman of Babylon, and in the great doctors of scholasticism
who were Dante's masters, only spinners of vain sophistry, meant an
impoverishment of thought and knowledge which has palpably warped
even the rich culture of Milton. On the other hand, the Humanist
Renascence, by recovering the splendid picture of Greek antiquity,
with Plato, and Sophocles, and the dazzling beauty of the Homeric
gods and heroes as its crown, had not only inspired such impassioned
outbursts as Marlowe's address to Helen—' Was this the face that
launched the thousand ships, and burned the topless towers of Ilion,'
or Hamlet's ' What a piece of work is a man, how noble in reason !
how infinite in faculty ! in action how like an angel, in apprehension
how like a god !'—it had not only inspired these and similar ecstatic
utterances, it had permanently made the form and mind of man the
measure and standard, when it was not the theme, of serious art.
Among other consequences was the banishment from that art, even where it lingered in belief, of the grotesqueness, the ugliness, and foulness of the mediaeval Hell. And the great legislator of antiquity, Aristotle, had powerfully enforced this disposition when, in the one work which the age of Dante did not know, he treated poetry as an 'imitation' (however idealized), of men in action.1

Had Dante known the Poetics, with its pervading assumption that Homeric epic and Sophoclean tragedy are the only possible ways of great poetry, would he have designed the Commedia as he did? Probably; since his aim was not primarily to write a great poem, but to show the way to salvation here and hereafter. And we see with what sovran security of judgment he sets aside, as irrelevant for his purpose, the work of the poet whom he hailed as the honour and the light of other poets, the book which had so long been the object of his devoted study.2 Milton's haughty self-esteem would never have permitted him to address even a great poet of antiquity in these terms of devout discipleship. But he is far too deeply rooted in the Renascence to be able thus without effort or hesitation to set aside antique example. He had resolved to write a great poem which the world would not willingly let die, and both form and subject were long in doubt. But one point was fixed from the first; the great poem was to be one of the two kinds counted supreme by Aristotle—epic and tragedy—conceived as Aristotle conceived them. Milton's poetic originality was perhaps not less than Dante's, but it showed itself in astonishing transformations of traditional classic forms, not in new creation. Paradise Lost is, in all essentials, a classical epic, with a hero, who errs and suffers, a conflict in which divine beings take part, and a tragic catastrophe. Powerfully as Dante must have appealed to him, he can never for a moment have thought of 'imitating' his poem any more than he thought of imitating the poem of another poet whom he deeply honoured; a Protestant Commedia is as inconceivable from Milton as a Puritan Faery Queene. For neither of these great poems was an epic in the classic sense; though the modern will be apt to say, in Dante's case, that this was because the conception of classic epic is transcended in that of a poem of which the 'hero' is

1 Poetics, § 2.
2 Inf. i. 79 f. The Aeneid, as a whole, is not the less set aside because the Commedia is based upon one of its episodes.
not a man but humanity; in which the poet, instead of effacing himself, as Aristotle requires, is in the centre of the picture throughout; and in which, instead of watching in suspense the vicissitudes of a great conflict of men or of peoples, we follow step by step the disclosure of the operation, in the universe, of eternal law.

VI.

How then did the Humanism and the Protestantism of Milton affect his presentation of Heaven and Hell? Roughly, by setting upon both the stamp of classical Humanism, and effacing the stamp of mediæval Catholicism. The mind of Dante, we know, in many ways reached far beyond his mediæval environment, to Humanist days and to our own, but not in this way. We must not be misled, by his in-effably beautiful reverence for Virgil, and for Virgil's beautiful style, from which he thought he had learnt his own, to suppose that he is Roman in temper. With unconscious irony he has made Virgil his guide through a Hell in which every trace of the Virgilian Hades has been replaced by the intenser horror, grotesqueness, and loathsomeness of the mediæval Inferno, whereas Milton's Hell, though far from being Virgil's, is full of Virgilian reminiscence.

Almost as decisively as from the mediæval Inferno, Milton turned away from the singular compromise between the mediæval and classical Hell familiar to him in Tasso. The fiends of the Gerusalemme Liberata are in essence mediæval devils disguised under the names and characteristics of the more monstrous figures of Greek myth:

'Here were to be seen a thousand foul Harpies, and a thousand Centaurs and Sphinxes, and pale Gorgons, hosts of greedy Scillas barking, Hydras and Pythons hissing, and Chimaeras vomiting black sparks, and horrible Polyphemes and Geryons, and different semblances blended together in new monsters never seen or heard before.'

Pluto sits in the midst, and he bears clear marks of the mediæval devil: the great horns, the flaming eyes, and mouth foul with black blood, whence stench and dark blasts and sparks, and sulphurous fumes. He is also of colossal scale, so that Atlas and Calpe would seem small beside him.

But human dignity and grandeur are visibly struggling through these traits. The great horns rise from a 'great brow,' the sign of

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1 Poetics, § 24.  
2 G.L., iv., 4 f.
intellect (reserved in medieaval painting for saints). The awful (orrída) majesty of his fero aspetto heightens terror and his own pride: and his eye flashes venomously like a comet of ill omen; the great beard descends tangled over his shaggy breast.

And he is human in his grief for the lost heaven; and not as a place of physical satisfactions only; but for the golden sunlight, and the fair revolving stars (iv. 10). His oration to the assembled fiends has all the dignity of lofty counsel; and his hearers too acquire the elevation of fallen angels. His opening words recall their former state:

‘Tartarean Powers, worthier to sit above the sun, your original seat.’

In these human touches Tasso’s tender nature anticipated Milton. And on the other hand, while discarding all the other monstrous traits of sub- or super-humanity, so carefully collected by Tasso, Milton has retained that of colossal scale (‘His staff, to equal which,’ etc.). Chateaubriand (Génie du Christianisme, iv., 9) thought this a regrettable lapse (‘Milton a eu un moment le mauvais goût de mesurer son Satan’), in a description which as a whole he thought unmatched by anything in Homer. And he contrasted both Dante and Tasso, to their great disadvantage, with Milton in this point:

‘L’imagination de Dante, épuisée (!) par neuf cercles de tortures, n’a fait de Satan enclavé au centre de la terre qu’un monstre odieux; le Tasso, en lui donnant des cornes, l’a presque rendu ridicule.’

In the same spirit Macaulay contrasted Dante’s devils, ‘ugly spiteful executioners,’ with Milton’s glorious fiends. Dante’s position was, from a modern standpoint, naive enough. The devils were embodiments of evil; they must, therefore, look like what they are; so he denudes them of every grace and charm, and makes them not only ugly, but loathsome. His Hell knows not only the poetic tortures of fire and ice, but the revolting ones of foul stenches, and swallowed ordure. But even the indescribable grossness with which a devil takes himself off at the end of Canto XXX. is not a blot on the exquisite delicacy of the poet; Dante laid a patch of black on his canvas simply because he was painting devils, and meant to paint them just as black as they were.

But clearly this is not the method that controls the artistry of Comus or of Paradise Lost. So jealous is Milton of the flawless
beauty of his Masque, that 'the rout of Monsters' who follow Comus, and even the 'Country Dancers' who towards the close intervene with their rustic 'duck and nod,' are kept out of the verse and disposed of in a line or two of contemptuous stage direction; while Comus himself, the chief sinner, is clothed in every attribute of grace and brilliance. This first Miltonic devil has the fascination of his mother Circe, and the 'clustering locks with ivy berries wreathed' of his father Bacchus; he has the soul of music in him, as Milton himself had, and at the Lady's Song he forgets the mischief he is out for in that wonderful outburst—

Can any mortal mixture of earth's mould  
Breathe such divine enchanting ravishment?  
Sure something holy lodges in that breast,  
And with these raptures moves the vocal air  
To testify his hidden residence.  
How sweetly did they float upon the wings  
Of silence, thro' the empty-vaulted night,  
At every fall smoothing the raven down  
Of darkness till it smiled! . . .

In the lower logic of common sense, too, if not in the higher logic of the spirit the pleading of Comus in the great temptation scene surpasses that of the radiant champion of Chastity herself. And when Milton, a quarter of a century later, gathered himself together to depict the powers of evil not contriving the harms in a gracious idyll, but frustrating the purposes of God in the creation of Man, he is no less remote from the mediæval presentation of devilry. No one who reads Milton's superb vindication of the purity of his life, can doubt that this Puritan abhorred evil as intensely as did the Catholic Dante. Something other than moral laxity must therefore be called in to explain how differently Satan, the author of evil in the world, and arch-rebel against God, fares at the hands of these two great poets. They used the same legends and meant fundamentally the same thing. Why is it that Milton's Satan, though fallen from heaven, remains a magnificent embodiment of the heroic character, who compels us to think, not of any embodiment of Evil, but of the Greek Prometheus, the champion of humanity tortured by a tyrannic and offended God, like him? Why is his vindictive stubbornness glorified as that resolution never to despair or yield, which nerves the martyr and the patriot to endure to the end? Why, again, are our nerves never harrowed by the
torments of this hell in which he is plunged? The ‘penal fire’ gives no light; but it also seems to give no pain; physical anguish is alluded to, not described; what tortures Satan, as it does Shelley’s Prometheus, is ‘the thought’ of pain ever for ever, and this is less bitter than the thought of his ‘lost happiness.’ But turn to Dante. His Satan is encountered at the end of their awful descent into the yawning City of Dis, frozen fast in the lowest depth of Hell, the ‘Emperor of that dolorous realm.’ And this ice, unlike Milton’s flame, is real. Was ever a sudden horrible cold made more thrillingly real than by Dante’s words:—

“How icy chill and hoarse I became, ask not, O reader. . . . I did not die and did not remain alive; now think for thyself, if thou hast a grain of wit, what I became, being deprived both of death and life.” And this Satan is ruthlessly despoiled of all the glory of his former state, not only of its ‘excess.’ Of ‘his original brightness’ his form retains not a trace. He is as ugly now, says Dante, as he was beauteous once. He has three faces, fiery red, whity-brown and black, on the same head, and six wings like a bat’s, and shaggy sides tangled and frozen, and he weeps with six eyes, and down three chins gush tears and bloody foam, for his three mouths champ three sinners—the most abhorred by Dante in the whole Inferno—Judas, Brutus and Cassius, the traitors to God and to God’s vicegerent Caesar. Note in passing that Milton gives his archangel Raphael six wings; but this only marks once more the relative failure of Milton’s art in heaven. His Satan neither has nor needs these decorations.

Now if we compare these pictures of Hell, we must recognise that the artistry of Humanism has not, after all, superseded that of the middle ages without much compensation. The Greek doctrine that as the deeds and sufferings of man are the proper matter of poetry, so the human form and personality, the most perfect that we know, ought to be the controlling type even in portraying supernatural beings, had the strength and also the weakness of the postulate that man is the measure of all things, on which it rests. Passion and thought, even in the gods, must be our passion and thought if they are to move us; even the Hebraic Jahve, declaring to Job how unfathomable his ways are to human apprehension, must declare it in speech that not only finds

1 P.L., i., 56 f. 2 Inf., xxxiv. 22 f. 3 P.L., 276.
access to the human intellect, but thrills it with 'sacred and home-felt delight.' And even more, the attempt to give outward shape to passion and thought like ours, or greater than ours, must borrow, if only as symbol, the human form divine. The three faces, with three champing mouths and six wings, are monstrosities which destroy the terribleness of Lucifer instead of multiplying it, as Dante meant, and are, therefore, an artistic blunder provoked by his hate. Conversely, the one noble touch is that where, with his superb sense of justice, Dante tells us, in the midst of this picture of hideous torture, how the Stoic Brutus, possessing his soul as ever, traitor to Caesar though he was, 'uttered not a groan.' And it is the glory of the Inferno that, though the tortures are real, as they are not in Milton's Hell, Dante again and again breaks free from the theological implications of his theme, and allows the Spirit of man to emancipate the victims from their doom, as when Farinata rears himself up in his icy pit, as if in scorn of Hell; or when Ulysses in the midst of the flame, remembers the great heartening words he had uttered to his desponding comrades, as he was leading them out on that last voyage to discover 'the un-peopled land towards the sunset.'

Now the same emancipating spirit of man which lifts so many of Dante's eternally damned above the implications of their condition, has lifted Milton's entire Hell, with some reserves, out of the traditions of the mediaeval Inferno. Not only Satan, but his companions, are human warriors and counsellors of the grandest type. These fiends, in their frozen or fiery abode, hunt and climb, hold sports like the comrades of Aeneas, discuss philosophy like the Stoic academe; and the debate in Pandemonium is worthy of the loftiest achievements of the Roman Senate or the English Parliament, while Pandemonium itself is a pillared fabric like the Forum or the Parthenon.

Milton's classic humanism here found magnificent, and it may well be thought triumphant, expression. But one can imagine Dante saying to Milton in the after-world: 'Yes, your fiends are certainly more sublime and intellectual, and your Hell altogether more humane, more civilized, than mine. But do they express evil as intensely?' And Milton felt this himself. For he had the Hebrew hate of sin as well as the Greek passion for beauty, and instead of being brought into

1 Inf., x. 36.  
2 Ibid., xxvi. 112 f.
wonderful accord as they are in the vast synthetic soul of Dante, and the synthetic universe of the Comedy, these instincts jostle and contend and invade one another’s territories. So Milton, after creating his glorious Satan, felt compunction lest the author of Evil should be taken for the hero of his great poem; and besides stripping him of his noble human form, and transforming him into a serpent, pursues him all through the later books of the poem with fierce abuse and reproof. But this was not the only disharmony which has left its mark in the great poem. Milton’s Puritanism was not only at odds with his Hellenism, it was divided against itself. If its ethical and religious element, the Hebraic passion for righteousness, made for the degradation and humiliation of Satan, the political passion of the republican involuntarily ennobled and glorified the assertor of liberty against the enthroned despot in heaven, thus concurring, though from a different angle, with the poet and the Hellenist. The magnificence of Milton’s style creates an aura of illusion in which these dissonances are scarcely perceived; but the psychological rifts they denote Milton never overcame.

VII.

But when he approached the problem of representing, not Hell, or Earth, but Heaven, not fiends or men, but the central mysteries and Persons of the Christian faith, both his Hellenism and his Protestantism were put to far severer tests. We might well imagine when we read the sublime prologue of Paradise Lost, or the yet more explicit Invocation at the opening of the Seventh Book, that Milton was in reality breaking free from the compelling magic of those antique poets, and that his song, pursuing ‘things unattempted yet in prose or rhyme’ would not only soar above the Aonian mount,—the classical Parnassus,—but would radically reject its inspiration. We seem to be listening to the trumpet-blast of one stepping out on an undiscovered shore; we think (as Milton himself obviously thought) of Lucretius, proclaiming with an ardour more ingenuously ecstatic than Milton, that he is setting foot on the virgin soil of a new poetry, to cull flowers never borne on a poet’s brow before. But the very phrasing of that invocation betrays how conservative Milton’s poetic radicalism really is. His ‘heavenly’ Muse, Urania, is no angel, but a true sister of the Nine; and the ‘Aonian mount,’ though he soar above it, determines the locus of his
path. It is the epic masters of Greece with whom he hopes to be equalled in renown.\footnote{Cf. Dante's description (\textit{Inf.}, iv. 94 f.) of the five great ancient poets of his reckoning—Homer, Virgil, Horace, Ovid, and Lucan—welcoming him in limbo as the ‘sixth’ in their company. Of Lucretius he knew nothing. Carducci similarly enumerated five great Italian sonneteers,—himself ‘not sixth but last.’} So, in the Nativity Ode of his youth, you hear through all the eloquence of the young Christian, triumphing in the birth of Christ, the pathos of the scholar mourning with the Nymphs and Tyrian maids over the passing of the pagan world.

But was the Hellenic, or humanist, method of rendering the divine necessarily inadequate? We remember the Zeus of Phidias, the glorious Hermes of Praxiteles, and hesitate perhaps. Certainly the fundamental dilemma of reconciling divinity with anthropomorphism is not removed by any such examples. The infinite presence which the mystic apprehends, the something deeply interfused in Nature and in the mind of man, is not even distantly suggested by these radiant beings. Milton, no doubt, did not approach the divine by the mystic way at all. But he has lost needlessly in richness and depth of suggestion by clinging, we are tempted to say superstitiously, to the anthropomorphism of his Greek masters where a totally different poetic method, a bolder use of symbols, which do not denote but suggest, would have enabled him to capture more of those mysterious overtones which we hear so rarely in Milton’s heaven. With this ‘superstitious’ fidelity to Hellenism—notwithstanding the lofty professions of his prologue—where Hellenism no longer avails, we cannot but contrast Dante’s quiet but unquestioning dismissal of his beloved pagan Master when Virgil has performed his charge and reached the boundary of his power. Virgil passes out of the story at the gate of the Earthly Paradise, and Beatrice is henceforth Dante’s guide, through a Paradise utterly alien in inspiration as in structure to the Virgilian Elysium. We shall see presently what this means.

In Milton’s rendering of the divine, we find the stamp certainly of great poetry and of profound religion. But both in a kind sharply contrasted with Dante’s. His cosmic imagination was no less vast in compass; the Miltonic universe is, even in mere scale, far vaster; for the whole planetary system is there suspended like a drop from Heaven. None the less, its material bigness rather obstructs than contributes to
its religious expressiveness; its height and depth do separate us from that love of God of which Dante’s universe is but the visible and articulate embodiment. Of the mystic intuition so richly possessed by the Vaughans and Crashaws of his time, Milton had not a trace; and nothing of all that he writes so magnificently of the infinite and eternal God approaches Dante’s vision in power of symbolizing that secure oneness under the shows and changes of the world which the mystic apprehends.

And unfortunately Milton does not, in this crucial part of his work, blind us by splendour of workmanship to these imperfections of his spiritual tools. It is just here that his Protestantism occasions the two gravest flaws in the whole poem,—the argumentative ‘School-divine’ God; and the grotesque satiric cartoon of the Limbo of fools—the destined abode of the fatuous drift of the future world,—

Embryos and idols, eremites and friars,
Black, white, and grey, with all their trumpery.

Can this Limbo, on ‘the backside of the World,’ beyond the planets and the fixed stars, really be the same place as Dante’s Empyrean? When we reflect that the same ascent through circling spheres which for Dante led to the presence and the immediate vision of God, leads for Milton to a kind of waste dumping-ground for all the human rubbish of the world, we have a measure—not, it is true, of any difference in the genius of the poets,—but certainly of the decay which, a hundred years after Copernicus, had stricken that once magnificent mediæval dream of the circling heavens penetrated by the splendour of God.

And if his Protestantism here injures Milton’s work, his Hellenism may be almost said to break in his hands. Certainly it fails to give his human God the full glory of humanity. The divine Father is irresolute; mercy and justice towards men strive in his countenance; he is like a man of two minds, not like Bacon’s God, who sees, whole and indivisible, the truth men see in fragments and warring antitheses.

How unlike Dante, who with sublime daring, made the eternal bliss of Paradise and the eternal torment of Hell equally the creation of the divine Love, a doctrine which shatters every anthropomorphic conception. Nor is there a trace of anthropomorphism in the vision of God which Dante himself at the close of his great poem attained.
There is no voice nor sound, such as Hebrew prophets had ascribed to their Jahve when he passed by in the storm or rebuked the questioning of Job. Divine exhortations, much more explanations of the divine attributes, could not, for Dante, even in figure, be ascribed to God Himself. All that is told of God before his supreme vision is told by the mouth of saints and apostles, or by the inspired lips of Beatrice. Only one of the senses is allowed to provide a symbol for the divine nature, as Dante understood it,—the sense by which we receive the first-created ‘offspring of God,’ the splendour of light which penetrates the universe; the splendour by which Mystical seers have constantly sought to express the ineffable; the Light to which Milton, to whom it would never more return, addressed his majestic adoration as he prepared to tell, less worthily, of the debate in heaven. And Milton himself uses this image when he makes the angels address God as—

\[
\text{Fountain of light, thyself invisible} \\
\text{Amidst the glorious brightness where thou sitt' st} \\
\text{Throned inaccessible.}
\]

But this God, who ‘sits throned,’ is already made ‘accessible’ and familiar in a fashion which seems almost profane when we set it beside the awful absoluteness of Dante’s God as conveyed to us by Dante’s symbol. Many others had conceived a God who is infinite, beyond time and space, transcending the universe, but also immanent in it; but the empty negations in which they sought to express this absolute nature left the mind cold. Dante found a symbol of an intensity which creates a soul under the ribs of these abstract negations, and compels us to see that his God is only aloof from all the determinations of human existence because He is at the heart of reality, and that He is beyond Time and Space only because He is the concentrated essence of every Where and every When. And what is this symbol? A point of dazzling light, ‘so small that the smallest star would seem a moon beside it,’ but radiating splendour through the universe. It is introduced, not as Milton introduces his God, as the object of a hymn of adoring angels, but in one of those homely images which at every step, even in the Paradiso, almost persuade us that Dante is telling us of what had happened to him, not of what he had dreamed:

1 P.L., iii. 1 f. 2 Ibid., 375 f. 3 Par. xxviii. 16 f.
‘As in the mirror a taper’s flame, kindled behind a man, is seen of him ere itself be in his sight or thought, and he turns back to see whether the glass speak truth to him, and finds that it accords as music with its time, so it chanced to me, gazing upon the beauteous eyes of Beatrice; and when I turned, and mine own were smitten by the glory of heaven, a point I saw which rayed forth light so keen that the eye it flamed upon must needs close because of its strong poignancy.’

Dante cannot yet bear the intolerable splendour; he is not yet qualified for the supreme vision. By gradual steps, which heighten our suspense of expectation, that crowning experience, the goal of all his longings, is approached. It is Bernard, the saint of ecstatic contemplation, who guides and supports him when—‘clothed in the glory of Mary as the morning star in the glory of the sun’—his eyes, at length purged of illusion, begin to penetrate further and further into the deep light which is very truth. Nor does it now blind him; on the contrary, his sight has become so at one with that eternal radiance that it would have been blinded had he turned away. The vision was momentary. But memory, divinely reinforced, made him aware by the throb of an ampler joy (91-93) that he had seen in the depths of that light,—the scattered leaves of the universe gathered into one book by Love; all existences and their attributes and relations fused, as it were, together in a single flame, the universal essence of all Being. And as his mind hangs suspended on that inner vision, from which it is utterly incapable of turning away, it penetrates deeper yet and discerns in the Innermost that for which speech is as an infant’s babble,—but which his stammering tongue can only call three Circles, distinct in colour, equal in dimensions, of which the Second seemed to reflect the First, but also to bear within it the semblance of the human form. How can the circle and the image, the divine and the human, consort? He grapples vainly with the mystery like a geometer striving to square the circle. For he is there to learn not absolute Truth, but perfect Will; and in the irradiating flash which smites his brain, that Will is born. The vision breaks, for power to sustain it fails. But already all desire is at one with the Love which moves the sun and the other stars.

In this great closing and culminating scene of the *Comedy*, Dante has reached the heights both of religion and poetry. He had the soul

1 *Par. xxxii.* 106.
of both in him. In his poet's imagination the universe was mirrored with unapproached intensity and articulateness. The circling spheres of heaven, and the crowded pages of history, were all reflected there. But this living and moving universe was the figured veil of a spaceless and timeless infinity, whose robe of reflected splendour man could ecstatically contemplate, but whose mysterious being he could never, save in a great imagined experience like this, approach. This is Dante's Cod,—the God of Catholic theology, released from the abstract formulas of the schools by the transfiguring imagination of a sublime poet and the awestruck reticence of a great mystic; so as to become at once more overwhelming and more impalpable, more all-pervading and more utterly unapproachable, behind the half-revealing, half-veiling symbol.¹

VIII.

From these striking divergences let us turn to a point, more fundamental, but less often if ever noticed, in which the two great poems converge. What is their underlying purpose? What are they about? Each poet has told us plainly. The Divine Comedy is the story of how Dante, baffled by the failure of the State to govern and of the Church to guide, was shown by Virgil 'another way' to the lost Paradise of earthly happiness, and finally by Beatrice to the heaven of eternal welfare. Its aim, as Dante tells us, was to show how men at large might thus escape from misery in this life, and win happiness hereafter. He shows it by revealing with an intensity and range of power unapproached in poetry elsewhere, the nature of good and evil, and what the choice between them means. And Milton's Paradise Lost, in its final effect if not in original intention, is an intimation, also, to the ruined army of Puritanism, that there was another way which the individual soul could traverse by its own insight and resolution alone. His subject gave no help here; for the legend of Eden is a tragedy of moral failure and outer ruin,—the very opposite of Dante's glorious ascent from the gates of Hell to the heights of Paradise. But through the pessimism of the legend there blows an impalpable wind of fortifying hope and heroic resolve, felt

¹ Dante's symbol of the point of intense light was perhaps suggested by St. Augustine's description in the Confessions (vii., 10), of the mysterious eye of the soul as it gazes on the light that never changes.
henceforth by every combatant in a forlorn but divine cause. We
cannot compare this impalpable breath with the magnificent spiritual
armour fashioned for the whole world by Dante. But is there no
parallel intention? Consider a moment two memorable Scenes in
the two poems.

At the brink of the Earthly Paradise Virgil, unable to guide him
further, takes leave of Dante. It is a kind of emancipation; Dante,
until the coming of Beatrice, is authorised to be guided by his own
judgment and assured that it will guide him right.

'Free, sound and upright is thy will, and it were an error not to
follow it; wherefore I crown and mitre thee king and bishop of thy-
self.'

To the modern reader this is one of the most thrilling moments in the
whole Comedy, and we may be sure that Milton, who had struck
such formidable blows at kings and bishops, found it as stirring as we.
And I think that Milton remembered that sublime parting and those
parting words when he planned that other farewell scene, the parting
of Adam and Michael at the gates of Eden near the close of Paradise
Lost. Led by Michael, whom he repeatedly addresses as his 'Guide'
(xi. 371, 674), Adam too has climbed a hill to the highest point of
Paradise whence he is about to be driven; there he has the vision of
the future of the newly created world. Adam instantly grasps the
meaning of what he sees; his inner vision has been purified, and he
knows how the Paradise lost by disobedience can be regained by
heroic suffering for Truth's sake. To which Michael replies:—

This having learned, thou hast attained the sum
Of wisdom; hope no higher, tho' all the stars
Thou knew'st by name. . . . only add
Deeds to thy knowledge answerable; add faith,
Add virtue, patience, temperance; add love,
By name to come called Charity, the soul
Of all the rest: then wilt thou not be loth
To leave this Paradise, but shalt possess
A Paradise within thee, happier far.\(^1\)

His 'one bad act,' he is expressly told, he may 'cover by many
good.' Adam may in fact redeem himself. He too is, in being ex-
pelled, at the same time emancipated, and made, like Dante in the
Earthly Paradise, king and bishop over himself.

\(^1\) *Purg.*, xxvii. 140 f. \(^2\) *P.L.*, xii. 575 f.
We must not push these suggestions, or these parallels, too far. Milton beyond question believed in the Redemption by Christ; Paradise was lost for Man until a greater Man restore us and regain the blissful seat. And Dante’s emancipation was a limited emancipation valid only until the coming of Beatrice. But the words of great poets are apt to be pregnant with larger meanings than they express or intend. The conviction that man in the last resort must choose his faith is not contained in Dante’s words, but it is not foreign to them. And the way in which Milton has handled that regaining of Paradise in his second poem may well warn us that the doctrine of Christ’s Atonement for Man on the Cross did not appeal to the deepest part of Milton’s nature or to his most passionate faith. Christ there wins Paradise not by his death but by a victorious conflict between his nobler reason, in obedience to God, and the seductions to appetite and ambition offered by Satan.\(^1\) It is a victory such as every man is daily called to achieve. And Milton sees behind the figure of his Jesus the whole great company of saintly men, who similarly by Conscience, fortified and illuminated by divine grace, had conquered in that struggle. For his larger faith, Paradise is regained by Greater Man, indeed, by holy souls, as he says in the great prose Treatise on Christian Doctrine, ‘of widely separated countries and of all ages from the foundation of the world.’ Man, in other words, for Milton, must be saved by Humanity. The framework of the doctrine of the Fall and the Redemption stands intact in his mind, but its implication, the radical badness of fallen human nature, is undermined by the invincible faith which Humanism had restored to Christianity, that human nature, being created by God, cannot be radically bad; that matter itself, and thence ‘the flesh,’ was created by God out of his own nature, and must thence be divine.\(^2\) Milton does not break into Hamlet’s ecstasy over this wondrous piece of work, Man, and this goodly frame the earth; but working wholly with theological arguments, and supporting his assertions at every step on biblical texts, he arrives at a view as fully emancipated as Shakespeare’s from the mediaeval condemnation of matter, and even foreshadowing, as Shake-

\(^1\) Saurat, *La Pensée de Milton*, 183.

\(^2\) *Treatise on Christian Doctrine*, p. 180 (Bohn): ‘Matter . . . proceeded incorruptible from God; and even since the fall it remains incorruptible in essence.’
Shakespeare does not, the modern conception of a continuous evolution from the lowest forms of being to the highest. It is not that he had a trace of scientific interest or vision; his thinking was utterly aloof from that of Bacon or Hobbes. He was simply a poet, with a poet's instinct for discovering everywhere, by whatever name he call it, the divine; and a fearless Christian thinker, who dared to draw logical conclusions from S. Paul's assertion 'that of God, and through Him, and to Him, are all things.' Dante in the same spirit, and with the security of his mediaeval faith, had quoted even Lucan's assertion that 'Jupiter is all that thou seest and whithersoever thou movest.' So the created world, as described by Raphael to Adam, is not only a collection of radically diverse kinds, but a 'gradual scale' up which every order of being strives to ascend, and does ascend.

So from the root
Springs lighter the green stalk; from thence the leaves
More aerie; last the bright consumate flower
Spirits odorous breathes; flowers and their fruit
(Man's nourishment) by gradual scale sublimed
To vital spirits aspire, to animal,
To intellectual; give both life and sense,
Fancy, and understanding; whence the Soul
Reason receives; and reason is her being.

Thus 'body up to spirit works'; for Milton, as for Tyndall two centuries later, 'matter' held the promise and the potency of life, and of life in its highest spiritual reach.

Thus the great poem which Milton gave to the English people in what he thought, and we shall hardly dissent, one of the darkest hours of its spiritual life, was grounded on an implicit faith in the power of man to reach the heights of being. This faith is not proclaimed, it was hardly perhaps consciously formulated; but it breathes like a subtle uplifting atmosphere through the framework of dogma, tacitly altering its complexion and accent.

And this faith in man's power of unlimited spiritual advance was the presumption and the basis of all that Milton had to say to his people in their present catastrophe.

It was, and had always been, the ground of his demand for liberty

1 Treatise on Christian Doctrine, p. 178.
2 Epist., x.
3 P.L., v. 469 f.
in Church and State; for the liberty he claimed was liberty to follow the leading of his inner light, without interference or compulsion. The conviction that man, left unconstrained, would, through trial and error, follow the lead, inspired the Areopagitica. The decade of momentous political experience which divides the Areopagitica from the close of Paradise Lost left Milton perhaps less assured of the capacity of ‘God’s Englishman’ for self-guidance than of old. Bitter jibes at the multitude escape him; and his last desperate plan for a republican government, on the eve of the Restoration, is the reverse of democratic.

But the overthrow of outer political liberty could never touch the inner liberty of the choosing spirit. Comus cannot touch the freedom of the Lady’s mind, with all his charms,—

\[
\text{altho’ this corporal rind}
\text{Thou hast immanacled while Heaven sees good.}
\text{Nor can Church and State in league}
\text{unbuild}
\text{[God’s] living temples, built by faith to stand,}
\text{Their own faith, not another’s.}
\]

For ‘true liberty,’ as Michael tells Adam,

\[
\text{always with right reason dwells}
\text{Twinned, and from her hath no dividual being.}^1
\]

To fail in that freedom of right reason, of disciplined obedience to a divine command, was to incur Milton’s impassioned scorn. Adam had so failed, and the very place and scene of that failure, the Paradise he had betrayed, is visited with that scorn. Dante shows us the Paradise to which he is led by Virgil, arrayed in all the blissful loveliness of the Paradise which Adam lost. Dante certainly did not imagine the Italy he longed for and laboured to shape, as at all like the Earthly Paradise he described. But he accepted it as a symbol of the beauty and the guarded security of his ideal. Whereas Milton, bent on making clear that the new Paradise, when won, would be not only better than the old but utterly unlike it, dismisses Eden as a vain and useless remnant^2—

\[^1 \text{P.L., xii. 83 f.} \quad ^2 \text{P.L., xi. 831 f.}\]
DANTE AND MILTON

pushed by the horned flood
With all his verdure spoiled, and trees adrift,
Down the great River, to the opening Gulf,
There to take root, an island salt and bare,
The haunt of seals, and orcs, and sea-mews clang,—
To teach thee that God attributes to place
No sanctity, if none be thither brought
By men who there frequent or therein dwell.

IX.

The divergence, slight as it seems, is one of those that often pro-
vide a clue to the profoundest distinctions in the temper and make of
genius. Milton, with all his massiveness and range of mind, is a
radical of genius and faith, pushing on to the things that are before
and rejecting, often with contumely, the things that are behind. Dante
too looks before, but with a yet more devoted gaze he looks behind,
and giving his life to the task of bringing cosmos out of the chaos of
his country, yet conceives the cosmos as the restoration of a shattered
harmony, the building up once more of the spoiled and ravaged City
of God. Both men had, to a degree hardly paralleled in modern
poetry, the prophetic fire, and Dante’s fire blasted with even more
deadly effect than Milton’s the evil things he assailed. But Dante had
also, and in yet more surpassing measure, the sympathetic and synthetic
imagination which enables a poet of the Sophoclean or Shakespearean
type, so far as we can judge, to bring all the elements of a vast culture
harmoniously together, to ‘see life thoroughly and to see it whole.’ It
is clear, indeed, that this synthetic unification of experience, so impres-
sive in the Divine Comedy, was immeasurably more difficult for a
Puritan scholar of the seventeenth century than for a Catholic of the
fourteenth. The universe, as interpreted by the Catholic philosophy
in which Dante grew up, was already an ordered whole. The
elements of future disruption were still innocuous. Aristotle had
been built into the fabric of Catholic doctrine. The Roman empire
had prepared the cradle for the Church; Christ and Moses did not yet
‘clash.’ The Earth, still circled by the Sun and the other stars, did not
yet ‘move.’ For an English Puritan scholar of Milton’s time, a syn-
thesis so comprehensive was impossible. He had access to domains of
experience unknown to Dante or Aquinas; he saw more clearly some
things in the domain they knew. But his vaster field was illumined
by cross and conflicting lights. Humanism and religion, man and
God, antiquity and the modern world, were no longer elements in an
ordered whole but centres of unresolved contradiction. By substitut-
ing belief in the letter of the Bible for belief in the Church, Protestant-
ism, whatever advantage it gained in other ways, drove a fissure
between Christian and antique thought which for Dante did not exist.
Hence Milton’s allegiance to Scripture and antiquity is an uneasy and
never completely reconciled compromise, whereas Dante with com-
plete consistency and unclouded serenity can present himself as at
once the follower of Virgil the supreme poet, the disciple of Aristotle,
‘master of those who know,’ and the servant of Christ. Milton,
standing where he did, could not have escaped these dissonances; but
they were accentuated in him by a deficiency in the imaginative
sympathy in which Dante, with all his dogmatic limitations, was so
rich, and with which lesser contemporaries of his own, like Donne,
and Sir Thomas Browne, were more abundantly endowed than he.
In prophetic grandeur Milton at his highest is unsurpassed. But it is
the grandeur of a lonely prophet, of a voice in the wilderness, inspired
by God only, of a star that dwells apart. Whereas the prophetic
grandeur of Dante is that of one who, if his voice has for the time no
echo, knows that he is choragus of an unnumbered multitude, that he
has on his side all history and all knowledge, the nature of Man, and
the Love that made and moves the universe. The sustained mag-
nificence of Paradise Lost was meant for an audience fit but few;
the Comedy, charged with a message for humanity, was adapted to
the loguntio vulgaris in qua mulierculae communicat, and reaches
the heights of poetry in lines and phrases of ineffable simplicity.

And Milton, with all that commanding force which makes us wish
that he were living at this hour, to stir this fen of stagnant waters;
which makes us feel that we must be free or die who hold his faith;—
Milton with all this is a lesser spirit than Dante; in part because Pro-
testantism, it may be, in its historic compass and richness, is less than
Catholicism, and because this inferiority is not outweighed by the
superior range and freedom of Milton’s Humanist outlook. Dante won
the reward which belongs to those whose whole being is set upon the
things that go to the root of life: however perishable the materials
which he built into his work, it remains and will remain; though his
outer life was a ruin, and his citizenship a hunger and thirst for duties
denied him, and his speculation thriddled with untenable propositions, yet the soul of Dante emerges from those fragments and failures a marvel of rounded completeness, rich alike in the fruit it garners up and in the seed it scatters. Well might Dante's most kindred spirit among Italians, Michelangelo, cry: 'The work of Dante and his noble aim were ignored by that ungrateful people among whom all prosper but the just. Yet were I only in his place! Had I been born to a like fate—

To have his bitter exile, and his worth,  
I'd give the lot most blessed upon earth."  