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Dante.

Oration delivered in the

Sophomore Contest

of

The Union Philosophical
Society of Dickinson College.

Raphael Benham,
Carlisle, Penna.

May, 24th, 1878.

A spirit has been of late floating in the atmosphere of Italy, and its whisperings have been caught by the whole world. If in the hush of night, a few months ago, you would have stolen into the Pantheon, at Rome, under whose vast dome the corpse of Victor Emanuel lay stretched on a royal couch; or into St. Peter's which enclosed the purple-clad remains of Pius the Ninth; you would have beheld a dark, mediæval personage wrapped in a black gown, a wreath of laurel wound round its head, its feet wearing the wooden shoes of the XIII century - gazing with fiery eyes on two funereal banners floating above the skulls of the two dead. The one bore this epitaph: "Victor Emanuel, Messenger of God, come to fulfil the long-delayed prophecy of Dante Alighieri"; the other, "Pope Pius the Ninth - crushed temporalities". That figure was Dante, the hero-poet, the author of the "Divina Commedia"; the same immortal man whose spirit hovers to-day above the blazing discussion of future punishment!

Dante's great national aim had been that: to behold Italy one, under one king - freed from the iron grip of Papal despotism. He is, therefore, looked upon to-day as the hero of Italy, as its true political prophet. The whole world begins

(1) This is the actual epitaph, lately composed and carved on his (V. E.'s) tomb.

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to understand the man; and his wonderful work, acquiring more momentous significance, sheds greater light on the darkness of the Middle Ages. That is the destiny of great men; it takes long generations to understand them; gone ahead of their own time, it requires ages to reach the lofty platform where they stood.

All truly great geniuses have been martyrs: some, intellectually - some, physically. Dante has been both: his soul was racked, his body was tortured. And who has the courage, I ask, to resuscitate, to-night, from his grave lying yonder at Ravenna, the bitter story of his genius? Alighieri, perhaps, may look at us and weep again - yet, he will forgive us.

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His life cannot be written; it has never been. It is lost in fragments in the chaos of the Middle Ages. His youth was, comparatively, a very sweet thing. Born in Florence in 1265, from unimportant parents, - from whom he, surely, did not inherit that fiery and melancholy temper which characterizes him - he began from early boyhood to cultivate his soul: now listening eagerly at the scholastic lectures of Brunetto and Cavalcante; now lost in a reverie side by side with Giotto, the great Florentine painter; at another time translated already into the realms of immortality by the melodies of Cavella, the musician. Later, we meet

the young poet, one starry night, reciting some of his love sonnets, on a terrace overlooking the silvery Arno, to a certain Beatrice Portinari. Yes, Beatrice, the soul of his life, the soul of his Divine Comedy! Poor, heart-broken Dante, this was the only being left upon whom to lavish all thy strong affections when every body had despised thee, had banished thee in hatred! She only after Italy, beloved Italy! Her celestial influence only to soften and make melodious thy fierce, embittered nature! It is through her intercession that he is permitted to wander through the regions of Death. The gloomy portals of Hell had never been opened to any mortal; they swing on their roaring hinges for him. When on the Terrestrial Paradise Virgil and Statius, his guides, leave him, this young Florentine girl descends from the lofty Heavens; she is veiled and she smiles. The seraphim cast before her a cloud of flowers. The poet trembles before her.

Their conversation is the whispered dialogue of Romeo and Juliet on the edge of the Infinite in the eternal dawn. He looks into her eyes and is transported to Paradise.

The death of this lady is the first blow on Dante's heart, and it is followed by a hundred. He is the plaything of the political vortices sweeping then over Flo

rence and Italy. He is the victim of party spirit. The Guelphs and the Ghibellines, the Blacks and the Whites meet each other in a tremendous explosion and Dante is the spark which flies out of it. He is banished—forever an exile, a homeless wanderer, "a vessel without sail and rudder, driven about different ports by the dry wind of dolorous poverty!" (1) With a scowl on his brow, with eyes fiery by indignation or suffused with tears of tenderness, a curl of godlike disdain playing about his thin, firm lips, how often do we hear the poor wanderer cry out, "Oh, how hard to climb other people's stairs!... how much salt in bread that is not our own!" (2)

Is there any wonder, then, that such a desolate man without home, without friends to love or to be loved in return, did cast his gaze upon the Eternal World—the realm of Immortality, of the Infinite? He had no home on earth, he could find one beyond the veil. Death, henceforth, is forever before him—it stares and points out with its shrivelled fingers to the mysterious regions which he was preparing himself to visit. There had been doubts on all things except

(1) From Dante's Letters.

(2) " " " "

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on the future life of the soul. It was the blazing theme of the times; the true topic of Poetry; and Dante grasped ^{it} with his colossal genius.

The Divine Comedy resembles one of those weird musical compositions of Chopin: it begins with strains of distress and agony and fades away into infinitude with the most melodious tunes of heavenly bliss. In Hell, black abysses; rains of fire; shrieks of agony and claspings of hands in despair; pools of blood; red hot tombs; satanic yells - in Purgatory, infernal sufferings quenched by songs of repentance, of hope for Heaven - Paradise, "a universe that smiles"; never-ceasing enrancements; blue-winged angels hovering around the Deity itself; all music, all light. In short this wonderful Poem is the "Odyssey" of the Christian, - the Progress of the Pilgrim, first lost in the forest of sin; afterwards repenting; and, at last, reaching the goal of eternal joy.

Each part of the Poem corresponds to an epoch of his life, and is a complete picture of its character. Hell he composed immediately after his exile; each verse is a bloody wound; you hear the howlings of the civil war; you hear, now and then, the Poet cry: "Ah! slavish Italy, thou inn

of grief! Vessel without ~~storm~~ pilot, in loud storm!" Purgatory, on the other hand, was written in foreign countries; it is, then, at the accession of Henry the Seventh, that his hopes are revived; his spirit looses somewhat of its bitterness; he yearns to see his beloved Italy once more; he writes letters of pacification; you hear him cry for forgiveness; you see him at twilight wandering in ^{an} old convent seeking after a vague something, and when a monk asks him what he is looking for, the poor poet, with tears rolling down his cheeks, exclaims "Peace!" Paradise, on the contrary, breathes a sense of mystic sadness; his aspirations are again crushed; he has been too much abused; he feels life ebbing away, and more than ever the home of his soul is Heaven.

And was this marvellous Poem an imitation or a creation? It is both: the fusion of the spirit traditional with the spirit creator; the fusion of the old poetry with the new poetry; the fusion of Paganism with Christianity. Virgil and Statius are his guides; Cato is the warden of Purgatory; Minos and Pluto are the rulers of Hell, Charon the boatman of its dark river; Centaurs and Furies are the diabolical agents of his countrymen. Dante is the last in the procession of bards; he casts a shadow on all the rest;

only one 7
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which passed from hand to hand in the
Roman games; it is never put out; Virgil
took it from Homer, Dante from Virgil, Mil-
ton from Dante.

All true poetry is the blending of the
supernatural with the real. Homer and Vir-
gil did it, Shakspeare and Milton did it;
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Like Shakspeare he has not been so
much the poet of Nature as the poet of
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O Dante, we still hear thee cry in ago-
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the smothered shrieks to thy Muse, inexorably driving thee headlong into the most infernal abysses, bearing thee up to the most heavenly planets! Crushed by thine own gigantic thought, we still hear thee, when crying, "O reader, I assure thee I have seen it, and my hair stand still on end for fear!" Yet, conscious of thine colossal tenacity and all-daring spirit, conscious of the force of thy imagination, thy soul did stand the most tremendous shocks and remained hard as steel! The conflict of thoughts going on in thy volcanic brain was a tremendous one. Thine was the victory; thou didst come out of it a hero-poet and didst immortalize not only Italy, but the whole world of Poetry and of Art! O Michael Angiolo of Poesy, o Homer of Italy, thy "mystic, unfathomable heart-Song" will never die! Thou didst inspire Michael Angiolo, Spenser, Tasso, Milton - and thy inspiration will live for ever and ever!... Thou didst leave the whole lump. Thou wert above party-spirit, and didst work with grim intensity to raise the monument of Italy Independent, of Italy of to-day - to make her the United States of Europe! O Poet hero and martyr, glory to thee! Thy prophetic "voice of ten silent centuries" is still heard when

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"My exile endless seemed; but yonder, bright
And tremulous in the Southern light,
Beyond a smiling and untrembling sea
I saw my love, my life, my Italy!"

Union Philosophical Society Sophomore Contest Oration of Raphael Benham, Class of 1880
Transcribed by Tristan Deveney, May 2008
Edited by Sarah-Hazel Jennings, June 2008

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