

## THE LIFE BEYOND THE GRAVE IN HOMER, VERGIL AND DANTE

### I

IT IS NO accident that Homer, Vergil and Dante have each left us an account of his conception of the life beyond the grave. Apart from the interest which such a subject naturally excites, there was between these poets direct connection of so close a nature, that the fact that the first of them had treated this topic was quite sufficient to suggest it to the other two. It is not unprofitable for the history of the development of human thought to compare the way in which these great writers, who lived at epochs in the history of mankind differing so widely one from the other, treated a matter of such universal importance.

The Homeric poems are the only literary record which have come down to us from the time which witnessed the dawn of distinctively Western civilisation and its final severance from the older, but relatively unprogressive, civilisation of the East. Their very perfection shows that they are the ripe fruit of a long period of growth. When they were written man was beginning to observe and to ask questions about himself and the world in which he lived. People were simple and credulous and fond of tales of wonder. They were gifted with a vivid and childlike imagination which personified natural objects under the form of some god or goddess, and peopled earth, sea and sky with supernatural beings endowed with human forms of surpassing beauty and power, and, in many cases, with more than a human share of jealousy, cruelty and lust; but at the same time they were sophisticated enough to laugh at some of the stories that they told about their gods, and took few of them really seriously. They were aware of the distinction between right and wrong, but their list of heinous crimes was a short one, and they regarded with indifference many actions which their successors, especially those of them who came under the influence of philosophic, Jewish, or Christian teaching, regarded as definitely sinful.

Vergil lived at the period which witnessed the fall of the Roman Republic and the rise of the Roman Empire. The men

of his age were highly cultured, sceptical and world-worn. It fell to his lot, at the instigation of his patrons Augustus and Maecenas, to endeavour to inaugurate a religious or, at least, a patriotic revival, and to galvanise into some sort of life the forms of a religion from which the spirit had long passed away.

In spite of the prevailing wickedness of the time, there was far more sense of sin than in the days when the Homeric poems were written. To take only one example, many of the heroes of Homer at times show some joy in battle, and the poet obviously takes pleasure in writing about it and expects this pleasure to be shared by his audience; but Aeneas goes to battle unwillingly, while Vergil clearly sees the pity and horror of war, and only devotes so much space in the later books of his poem to detailed and disgusting descriptions of wounds and death, because he felt in private duty bound to imitate what Homer had done before him.

But for most men in those days the endeavour to follow the teaching of philosophy, and to attain to a manner of life which was widely felt to be the only manner of life worthy of a man, ended in the confession which the frivolous and licentious Ovid put into the mouth of Medea:

Video meliora proboque; deteriora sequor.<sup>1</sup>

The dawn was not yet. Although mediaeval writers saw in Vergil one of the prophets of the coming of Christ, they did this on the slightest possible grounds. What a poet who was no Puritan really thought about that age is faithfully reflected in the words of Horace:

Damnosa quid non imminuit dies?  
Aetas parentum peior avis tulit  
Nos nequiores, mox daturos  
Progeniem vitiosiore.<sup>2</sup>

Vergil, "majestic in his sadness for the doubtful doom of human kind", gave voice to the earnest expectation of creation waiting for the manifestation of the sons of God, even if he did it unconsciously and in a mood of almost hopeless despair.

When Dante wrote, Christianity had almost wholly swept away the old religion and repeated invasions of northern tribes

<sup>1</sup> "I see and approve what is better; I follow what is worse" (*Metamorphoses* vii. 20f.).

<sup>2</sup> "What is there that wasting Time does not impair? The age of our parents, worse than our grandparents, has borne us yet more wicked; and we in turn shall later produce a yet more evil progeny" (*Odes* iii. 6, 45-48).

had infused new blood into the effete peoples of Europe. The Papacy was at the height of its power. The Empire was almost on the point of being finally discredited. There was much civil and international strife. Although there was much secret scepticism and more open vice, the dogmatic teaching of the Church was generally respected and exercised a decisive influence on the minds of most men. The Franciscans had done much to revive the spirit of Christian love and self-sacrifice among all classes. Scholasticism still ruled supreme at the Universities, and heretics were severely repressed by the secular arm at the bidding of the Church. The black death had not yet produced the morbid despair nor had later Franciscan preaching produced the sentimentality which marked the later half of the fourteenth and the whole of the fifteenth century.

A deep respect was felt for what was known of Greek and Latin literature. Aristotle had come to be regarded as "the master of those that know", and Vergil was looked upon as the prince of poets; but the Renaissance had not yet begun to produce that slavish copying of ancient models in art and literature, both on their best and their worst sides, which vitiated much of the poetry, painting and architecture of a later period, and made so much of Italy openly pagan, and proud to be so.

The age of Dante was not merely an age of "rebirth": it was an age of new creation. It witnessed the production of such works as the *Divina Commedia*, written not in the barbarous Latin of the time, but in the vernacular Italian of Tuscany, and the paintings of Giotto in which the stories of the Bible first came to life and shook off primitive symbolism without assuming a sensuous pagan garb.

Dante and Giotto built on old foundations, as all wise men must do; but their work was new. The abiding interest which is felt in it is due to the fact that they not only interpret their own age to us, but also supply the link which alone makes intelligible the connection which exists between our age and the more remote past.

## II

In the *Odyssey* of Homer we are told how Odysseus went to the world of the dead to ask the advice of the seer Teiresias as to the means by which he was to return to his home. He sailed to the land of the Cimmerians, a land of mist and clouds, where the sun never shines, but where deadly night is ever spread over

wretched mortals. There he sacrificed sheep and let their blood run into a trench; for the dead were but shadows of their former selves and could not speak with a living man until they had tasted blood. When the shade of Teiresias had come up and had tasted the blood, he told Odysseus how and in what way he would return to Ithaca.

Odysseus had seen the shade of his mother among those which came up to the trench, but apparently she did not know him. He asked Teiresias how she might be enabled to recognise him, and how he could have speech with her. He was told that all the shades which he allowed to drink the blood would be able to speak to him; but that those whom he drove from the trench would return to their own place.

When he allowed his mother's shade to taste the blood, she knew him immediately and they conversed one with the other, but when he tried to embrace her, she escaped from his arms like a shadow or a dream. She told him that when mortals die, the sinews no longer bind together the flesh and the bones, but the fire of the funeral pile abolishes these, and the spirit, like a dream, flies forth and hovers near.

So it was with all the other shades of the former companions of Odysseus who had preceded him to the lower world. Agamemnon tells him how he was slain by his wife, and asks tidings of his son. Ajax still cherishes his wrath against Odysseus which caused him to go mad and commit suicide, when the Greeks did not give him the arms of Achilles. When the shade of Achilles drew near, Odysseus hailed him as blessed among men; for in the days of his flesh the Argives gave him honour equal to the gods and now he is a great prince among the dead. But the shade answered him and said: "Nay, speak not comfortably to me about death. Rather would I live on earth as the hireling of another, and he a landless man who has no great wealth, than be a chief among all the dead that be departed."

After this, in a part of the poem which may belong to a later stratum, we are told that Odysseus saw Minos, the son of Zeus, giving sentence from his throne to the dead, while they stood round about the prince asking his dooms. He also saw Orion driving the wild beasts together over the mead of asphodel, the very beasts that he had himself slain on the lonely hills in his lifetime. He also saw Tityus, Tantalus and Sisyphus in grievous torment, and Hercules—"his phantom, I say; but as for himself

he hath joy at the banquet among the deathless gods and hath to wife Hebe of the fair ankles; and all about him there was a clamour of the dead, as it were fowls flying every way in fear, and he, like black night, with bow uncased and shaft upon the string, fiercely glanced round like one in act to shoot."

Fain would Odysseus have stayed longer, that he might have seen other of the famous men of old, but the myriad tribes of the dead thronged up with a wondrous clamour and he was afraid lest Persephone should send against him the head of the Gorgon and turn him to stone.

It is noticeable that this is the only mention in Homer of any horrible creature in the lower world which acts as a tormentor. The idea was not Greek, although it does occur in the myth of Er at the end of the *Republic* of Plato, but this almost certainly had an Eastern origin and has marked Pythagorean characteristics. It is also put in the mouth of a native of Pamphylia. It is noticeable also how often the Gorgon appears in Etruscan tombs together with the demons Charun and Tuchulcha.

The Homeric picture of the after-life is one of unrelieved gloom. Hades is a pale and miserable reflection of this present life, where the lot of a great hero who is a prince among the dead is inferior to that of the most miserable hired servant on earth. In the original poem there was probably no idea of any difference between the condition of the evil and the good. The torments of Tityus, Sisyphus and Tantalus were commonplaces of rather later Greek legend. The only exception to the description of the miserable state of the dead is made in favour of Hercules. His shade shares the lot of the other shades, while "he himself" banquets with the other gods. But Hercules was the son of Zeus and was believed to have bestowed inestimable benefits on mankind, as a result of his Labours.

The idea of a supreme power which rewards and punishes according to certain fixed rules of morality had hardly developed at all among the Greeks at the time when the Homeric poems were written. According to the ideas then prevalent the world was governed by capricious and often mutually antagonistic gods, whom each man must propitiate as best he might by the advice of priests and seers, who obtained this knowledge by the observation of the flight of birds or the inspection of the entrails of slaughtered animals. These ideas were common both to the

Greeks and the Etruscans, who passed them on to the Romans, and, as far as the ideas of priestly direction and the importance of religious ceremonies is concerned, the Roman Church is not free from them yet.

As time went on the idea that divine justice punished certain sins was developed in the poems of Pindar and Aeschylus. Socrates, and perhaps a few other men, were confident that it was well with the righteous man both in life and after death. Plato put into the mouth of Socrates the myth of Er, which certainly involves a theory of a limited period of reward and punishment in another life, and in some cases of a punishment which is apparently eternal. But this is mixed with a theory of metempsychosis and a power of choice given to souls which have undergone the discipline of the life beyond the grave as to what kind of life they will choose, after this discipline is ended, which is anything but Christian. Aristotle, it seems, cared for none of these things.

We find several details in Homer's description of the lower world which were taken over by Vergil and Dante as part of their scenic background but with little moral significance. The names of the rivers of the lower world, Erebus, Acheron, Pyriphlegethon, Cocytus and Styx, are mentioned by Circe. Cerberus appears in the speech of Hercules to Odysseus, and Hades and Persephone, the deities of the world of the dead, are prominent, as they are in all descriptions and pictures of the life to come. It may perhaps not be altogether unnecessary to mention here that Hades simply means "the unseen" and is properly speaking the name of the god to whose care the dead are committed without any moral distinction. The modern custom of using the word as a polite synonym for Hell is incorrect and absurd.

Vergil and Dante made their own use of Homeric conceptions. It may perhaps be well to anticipate here and to observe one typical instance of this use. To Homer Minos was the son of Zeus, the wise king of Crete. Recent excavations have shown that he was not altogether a fabulous personage. His business in the other world, as in this, was to decide any disputes that arose among the dead. Vergil makes him the judge who decides the lot of all those who depart out of this life. In Dante he becomes a grotesque fiend, who judges only those condemned to Hell (it is not said by whom), and decides to which circle they are to be committed. He announces this by wrapping his tail

about his body as many times as is the number of the circle to which the sinner must go. The damned must confess their transgressions to this "sin-discerner": they then hear judgment passed on them and are whirled downwards:

Dicono ed odono, e poi son giù volte.<sup>1</sup>

Nowhere has Dante departed so far from the tradition of the Church as in this strange passage which is an extreme example of the syncretism which haunted not only the art, but also the doctrine of the Roman Church, even before the Renaissance.

At the time of its greatest activity Greek thought occupied itself mainly with questions of physics, ethics and politics, all treated from a metaphysical rather than from a practical point of view. In its later phases it was more concerned with criticism and a philosophy calculated to make the Wise Man self-sufficient and proof against the assaults of Fortune. But the Stoics taught that man was absorbed into the soul of the Universe, and the Epicureans insisted with the fervour of revivalists that death was the end of all, and that it was better so. Only some oriental religions and the mystery religions which generally had affinity with them had any doctrine of survival after death.

Even the Jews regarded Sheol as a place in which the dead could not praise God, and if at a later date some of them believed in a future life in which the wrongs of this life would be righted, it was rather because they carried to its logical conclusion the question of Abraham, "Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?" than because they had any definite revelation on that subject.

Among the Romans men like Caesar openly expressed their unbelief either in the gods or in any future life. The common people, possibly under the influence of mystery cults or Etruscan ideas, had some vague notions of punishment beyond the grave, and these must have been shared to some extent by more educated people, for Lucretius certainly did not write his great poem for the benefit of the common herd.

Euripides got as far as the sublime lines:

*τίς οἶδεν εἰ τὸ ζῆν μὲν ἔστι καθαγεῖν,  
τὸ καθαγεῖν δὲ ζῆν;*<sup>2</sup>

but they only incited the ridicule of Aristophanes; and Lucian regarded it as a final proof of the folly of the Christians that these

<sup>1</sup> "They tell and hear, and then are whirled below" (*Inferno* v. 15).

<sup>2</sup> "Who knows if life be death and death be life?" (Fragment from the *Polyeidus*).

miserable people thought that they were immortal and would live for ever.

It was into a world like this that Vergil was born: a world hardly recovering from a long period of civil war in which, to use the words of Gibbon: "The people regarded all religions as equally true, the rulers considered all religions as equally useful and the philosophers regarded all religions as equally false." He himself grew up as an admirer of the atheistic philosophy of Lucretius, but he saw that those men were also happy who revered the gods of the country with simple rites:

Felix qui potuit rerum cognoscere causas,  
Atque metus omnes et inexorabile fatum  
Subiecit pedibus strepitumque Acherontis avari.  
Fortunatus et ille deos qui novit agrestes  
Panaque Silvanumque senem nymphasque sorores.<sup>1</sup>

So, whether from temperament or policy, he was ready as a poet and a patriot to assist Augustus to produce a revival of religion, even if it went no further than the worship of Roma and Augustus, in the hope that it might do something to promote unity and to stay the moral decay into which the world was then falling.

As Odysseus was sent to the lower world to seek advice from the ghost of Teiresias, so Aeneas went there to consult the ghost of his father Anchises. His guide was the Cumaean Sybil and the entrance to Hades was through a vast cave near the lake of Avernus. They came to the river Styx where Charon ferried across not only the souls of the lost, as in the *Inferno* of Dante, but the souls of all that die. In the *Aeneid* the souls are eager to cross the river; they stretch out their hands in desire for the other bank: only the souls of the unburied are not allowed to cross until they have wandered on the bank for a hundred years, after which period they are admitted to the land of their desire.

Dante places the souls of those who lived "without blame and without praise" and who were, therefore, "hateful to God and to His enemies", on this bank of the Styx, because neither Heaven nor Hell would receive them. In his poem, only the souls of such as "die under the wrath of God come together from every country" to this place of darkness and

<sup>1</sup> "Happy is the man who has been able to learn the causes of things, and has cast beneath his feet all fears and inexorable Fate and the roar of greedy Acheron. Blest also is he who knows the gods of the countryside, Pan and old Silvanus and the sister-nymphs" (Vergil, *Georgics* ii. 490-494).



lamentation. They curse God and their parents and the human kind and the place of their birth. Divine justice spurs them on to face their doom, but some are driven into the fatal bark by Charon, "the demon with eyes of flame", after they have passed the door over which is written :

Lasciate ogni speranza, voi che entrate.<sup>1</sup>

When Aeneas has crossed the river and Cerberus has been silenced by a drugged cake, and not by a handful of earth, as in the *Inferno*, he comes to a place of wailing in which abide the souls of infants born untimely, those of the unjustly condemned to death, of suicides and of those who have been crossed in love. There is little that has to do with moral discrimination in this description of the state of the departed.

Dante is much more logical. In accordance with the teaching of the Church of his time, he places in the first circle of the *Inferno* all who, for whatever cause, died unbaptised. Here he finds the virtuous, or, at least, the famous heathen and here once were the souls of the heroes of Old Testament history, Adam and Moses and Abraham and David. Vergil tells him that when he himself was but newly come to this place, "a Mighty One, crowned with the sign of victory" came and took away with Him these Hebrew spirits, but that before them no human spirit was saved.

Those who remain behind in this Limbo, "where no lamentation could be heard, except of sighs which caused the eternal air to tremble", live "without torment, but in desire tempered by no hope". The great poets and philosophers of Greece and Rome are here and, strangely enough, also some of the imaginary characters of whom they wrote, such as Electra and Aeneas. Saladin and Caesar, Avicenna and Averroes are not forgotten in this enumeration. Because of their greatness they are allowed the light of a fire "which conquers a hemisphere of the darkness" and may also dwell in a noble castle defended by a fair rivulet containing a meadow of fresh verdure. This conception was not suggested to Dante by anything in Vergil, but is due to the speculations of certain of the Latin Fathers with regard to the fate of the unbaptised, curiously modified by the great respect which Dante had for the poets and philosophers of antiquity.

<sup>1</sup> "Abandon all hope, you who enter" (*Inferno* iii. 9).

In the *Aeneid*, as we have already said, Minos is the judge of all the souls who pass the Styx. Besides the souls already mentioned Aeneas sees here those of the warriors who fell in the Trojan war. The Trojans greet him and converse with him, but the Greeks flee at the sight of him. The shade of Deiphobus is still deformed by the mutilations that he suffered at the taking of Troy. Aeneas also meets the shade of Dido, which turns from him with disdain. In this part of his poem Vergil is closely following the guidance of Homer, but he has omitted the gross idea that the souls of the dead cannot speak to a living man until they have drunk the blood of slaughtered sheep.

However, this part of the description of the lower world is quite inconsistent with what follows, where Vergil either gives free course to his imagination or copies from some source unknown to us. The whole sixth book of the *Aeneid* is a remarkable example of the way in which the Roman mind could absorb contradictory ideas from all sources, add to them little of its own and turn them out in a form so perfect that it hid their incongruities from all but highly critical readers.

This picture of a dim land in which there is little discrimination made between the evil and the good, and in which the dead retain the wounds and the loves and fears and hates which which they had in life, is followed by a description of Tartarus, the place of punishment, and Elysium, the land of happiness.

Dante adapted this part of the *Aeneid* to his own purpose, but he expanded it enormously and made his description of it correspond closely with the teaching of the Church. For example he places the carnal sinners (Vergil's unhappy lovers) in the second circle of Hell, while he thrusts the suicides down to the seventh circle—a significant indication both of Dante's way of thinking and of the difference of opinion with regard to suicide which prevailed among the Romans of Vergil's time and the Christians of the Middle Ages.

At this point the poems diverge widely in other respects. Vergil makes Aeneas reach the parting of the ways which lead respectively to Tartarus and Elysium as soon as he has left "the fields of lamentation" where the infants, the suicides, the unhappy lovers and the warriors dwell; but Dante inserts here the circles of the gluttonous and the avaricious, and the marsh of Styx in which the sullen and wrathful are punished, of which

class of sinner Vergil makes no mention. On the farther side of the marsh of Styx Dante places the city of Dis, the walls of which surround all the lower circles in which the violent, the fraudulent, the traitors and other gross sinners are punished. He enters the city and descends to the lowest circle. This is a necessary part of the discipline by which he is to be purified. Not so Aeneas. To him the Sybil says, "No one who is holy may tread the threshold of the wicked": a most significant difference between the ethical background of the two poems and of the thought of the period at which they were written.

And so Aeneas goes on his way to the Elysian fields, where he meets the spirit of his father Anchises. We need not follow him at any length into the realm of the blessed, for Dante took little or nothing from this part of the poem. It is sufficient to say that he there met holy bards and priests and heroes of olden time, the benefactors of mankind—*quique sui memores alios fecere merendo*—rejoicing in the light of their own sun and stars, and finding employment and delight in those pursuits which gave them pleasure when they were on earth. Their time is spent in listening to music, in wrestling and dancing, they delight in arms and in chariots, in horses, in banqueting and in singing.

All this might well have been suggested to Vergil by the paintings to be seen in Etruscan tombs, and there is also a distant echo of Homer.

It need hardly be remarked that Vergil's Heaven is very different from that imagined by Dante, or even by those members of the primitive Church who painted the walls of the Catacombs and wrote the inscriptions found in them. Aeneas finds his father surveying with studious thought the spirits of the great men of Rome who are kept in Elysium until the time comes for them to appear on earth. It is to be noted that they are not all men held, even by Vergil, to be worthy of indiscriminating commendation, for they include the Tarquins, and Pompey and Caesar, who are exhorted not to ruin the state by civil war.

Anchises gives his son an account of the nature of the world and of souls of men which is partly derived from Pythagoras and partly from Plato, and which includes the doctrine of the transmigration of souls and their consequent punishment or reward for what they have done in each of their successive lives. Vergil here puts forth all his powers to glorify the Roman name and

especially the family and person of Augustus in the most magnificent passage in Roman poetry.

Reverence for the doctrine of the Church, which did not admit the pre-existence of transmigration of souls, naturally kept Dante from following Vergil here. He was writing to warn and instruct the men of his own day; Vergil was writing to magnify the exploits of his city and the glory of his patron.

In studying Vergil's account of the descent of Aeneas to the world of the dead we must remember that, like all other Latin writers of his period, he was deeply influenced by Greek literature. He took the general outline of his story from Homer, but he moralised it by introducing elements from the philosophy of Pythagoras and Plato and perhaps from other sources unknown to us. He was writing about a state of things in which he probably hardly believed, as a court poet assisting at an attempted revival of religion and morality. The real motive behind his poem, the spirit that gave it life and preserved it from being nothing more than an elegant piece of plagiarism, was his intense faith in the glory and greatness of Rome. The climax of the story is the array of Roman heroes and the graceful tribute paid to the memory of Marcellus, and not the empyrean where man approaches most nearly to God and where his desire and will "are rolled as a wheel which moveth equally—the love that moves the sun and the other stars".

The distinguishing features of the *Aeneid* are the enthusiasm of its author for the glorious past of Rome and the perfection of its style. It was these features of Vergil's work which provoked the admiration of Dante. He too was a poet of the Roman Empire, the Holy Empire of which the Emperor and the Pope were joint rulers. To him the history of pagan Rome was a preparation for the day when St. Peter should come to Rome and assume the "great mantle". Every word spoken of the glory of pagan Rome was a prophecy of the greater glory of Christian Rome, and to him Vergil was almost a prophet of the Old Covenant, as far as the secular side of the history of the Church was concerned. As for the fact that Dante admired Vergil because of his style, we have his own witness:

Tu se' lo mio maestro, e il mio autore,  
Tu se' solo colui da cui io tolsi  
Lo bello stile, che m' ha fatto honore.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> "You are my master and my inspirer. You are the only one from whom I have taken the goodly style which does me honour" (*Inferno* i. 85-87).

We return, therefore, to Vergil's description of the city of Dis, or Tartarus, for, although Aeneas does not enter it, it is described at great length by the Sybil. This description is of such interest as an example of the way in which Dante handled his materials and made them the common property of the thought of the Middle Ages and even, to some extent, of more modern times, that it seems necessary to devote some space to it.

The city was surrounded by a triple wall and encircled by a river of flame. Its gates were so strong that even the gods could not break them down. Groanings and the sound of the cruel scourge, clanking iron and dragging chains, were clearly heard through them. Aeneas stood still affrighted and asked what crimes were punished within the city and what was the nature of the punishment. The Sybil tells him that Cretan Rhadamanthus is lord of the city and scourges guilt and hears its story and compels men to confess their crimes, which, in the upper world, exulting in a fruitless craft, they delayed to atone for till the late hour of death. This is a curious echo of the saying of Cephalus in the first book of the *Republic* of Plato that money is of use to an old man, since it enables him to placate the gods by offering any sacrifices that he may have omitted to offer. It probably also is a reminiscence of an Etruscan belief that the priestly caste can advise a man during his lifetime how to placate the infernal gods and can even help him after his death for a suitable payment.

The sinners are tormented by Tisiphone and her ruthless sisters, and they are such men as hated their brethren, or struck their father or mother, or defrauded their clients, or gloated over riches which they found, and gave no share to their friends. Those who were slain for adultery are also found there and those who were traitors to their lords or who took up arms against their country.

Below the city yawns Tartarus and stretches through the darkness twice as far as the eye travels upwards to the firmament. There the ancient brood of earth, the Titans, struck down by the thunderbolt, writhe at the bottom of the pit.

We can see many affinities here with the Inferno of Dante and the Hell of Milton; but Dante arranged his sinners in a logical order in lower and lower circles in accordance with the ethical ideas of his time, and place those who had betrayed their friends in the lowest circle of all to share the torments of Judas.

He also does what Vergil shrank from doing, that is, he describes the tortures of the damned in minute and revolting detail and says how he saw persons either known to himself or his contemporaries suffering pains suitable to their sins. Vergil contents himself with naming a few notorious sinners of mythical renown, such as Theseus, Phlegyas and Ixion.

### III

It now remains to compare these three descriptions together, to consider how they embody the sentiments and aspirations of the ages in which they were written and to consider the object and aim of their writers.

Homer was a great storyteller, and only incidentally a moralist. He wrote to amuse and gratify the kings and nobles of his day, but succeeded also in delighting men of all classes, so that his poems were recited in public and formed a bond of union among the warring Greek states and also their favourite school book.

Vergil's aim was more self-conscious and ambitious. It was to gather together the traditions of the foundation of Rome and of the Latin race in such a form as would please his sceptical and fastidious contemporaries, revive their patriotism, stimulate their interest in religion and make them acquiesce in the rule of the Julian line in the person of Augustus. In one of these aims he certainly succeeded. He has remained for all time the poet of Imperial Rome, not only of the Empire of Augustus, but of the Holy Roman Empire as well. In this he was also in some sense one of the foundations of the idea of the world-wide domination of the Papacy, as Dante clearly saw.

The story of the descent of Aeneas into the lower world is only a small part of the poem, and it is doubtful whether it would have been written at all, if Homer had not sent Odysseus there first, and if Vergil had not seen in it an opportunity to describe the future glories of Rome. It is full of inconsistencies and does not arouse any deep emotion except that of pity for the dead who gather at the Styx, "matrons and their lords and the lifeless bodies of great-souled heroes, boys and unwedded girls and young men laid on the funeral pyre before the eyes of their parents". It is noticeable that Aeneas leaves the underworld by the gate of ivory through which false dreams are sent by departed spirits to the world of light. By this it would seem as if the poet meant to imply that the whole experience of Aeneas must

be taken to be a deceptive dream and that he himself shared the opinions of Lucretius and Juvenal about the future life:

Esse aliquos manes et subterranea regna . . .  
Nec pueri credunt—nisi qui nondum aere lavantur.<sup>1</sup>

The poems of Homer and Vergil have two things in common in which they are sharply contrasted with the *Divina Commedia*. The first is that they were both written to please an audience, and that audience was, in the first instance, a court. The second is that they are both epic poems and therefore strictly impersonal.

Dante did not write to please, but to stimulate. As far as we can see he wrote for the people and not for their rulers, at any rate he wrote in the spoken Italian of his time and not in Latin.

The *Divina Commedia* is personal in the extreme. Dante is its central figure, and the whole poem is an elaborate allegory in which he described in dark and mysterious language the salvation of his own soul. It is full of inconsistencies and does not even always follow the teaching of the Church, as when, for example, it makes Minos the judge of the Inferno and in a sense anticipates the judgment of the Last Day, and when again it speaks of the salvation of one who died under a Papal curse. There is nothing else like it, unless it be *The Pilgrim's Progress*, and even in that Bunyan does not speak in his own person, although there can be no doubt that the story of Christian is an allegory of his own spiritual experience. But he introduces none of his contemporaries by name, as Dante does.

The change of thought which the Christian revelation brought into the world is clearly seen in the difference between the work of Homer and Vergil and that of Dante. The two former had no spiritual experience to relate and only a very confused ethical aim. Both these things are as conspicuous in the work of Dante as they are in that of St. Augustine, although the form of their work is so different.

The Church has always put in the forefront of its teaching the doctrine of the absolute necessity of the salvation of each individual soul and the obligation which is laid on every man to do his utmost to save his fellows. In the *Divina Commedia* Dante shows that he was as fully aware of his duty in these matters as

<sup>1</sup> "That there are shades of the departed and realms below the earth . . . is not believed even by boys, except those who are not yet old enough to go to the public baths" (Juvenal, *Satires* ii. 149, 152).

St. Francis of Assisi, but his method of approach is quite different, as might be expected from the difference between the character and circumstances of the two men.

At some time in his life after the death of Beatrice and the ideal date of his poem he had fallen into some deadly sin. He was lost in the dark and savage wood from which nothing but celestial intervention could save him. He had fallen so low that the only remedy sufficiently potent to restore him was to show him the torments of the lost, the redemptive punishments of purgatory and the joys of paradise. At the instance of the Blessed Virgin, Beatrice, now become the representative of divine wisdom, sends Vergil, the representative of human wisdom, to deliver his fellow poet from the dark wood and to guide him through Hell and Purgatory to the Earthly Paradise. On the journey he answers all Dante's questions, as far as they can be answered by merely human knowledge.

When they arrive at the Earthly Paradise and when Dante's will has become free, upright and whole, he is crowned and mitred as lord and master over himself and given over to the teaching and guidance of Beatrice. Free from the trammels of an evil will, he soars with his companion to the highest heaven and there finds peace in perfect conformity to the will of God.

Such, in brief, is the form in which Dante has presented to us the story of his fall and of his redemption. We may perhaps venture to state the facts which lie behind this form somewhat as follows.

As the thoughts of Augustine were first turned from dissipation to philosophy and a desire to comprehend the nature of God by reading the *Hortensius* of Cicero, so Dante was awakened from the evil courses into which he had fallen by reading the works of Vergil, and it may be other Classical authors as well, of whom Vergil, the personification of earthly wisdom, may be taken as the representative. In this experience he perceived the guiding of God and the protecting care of Beatrice, once his ideal of womanhood; and gradually becoming conscious of the loathsomeness of sin and of his own need of cleansing, he passed through the purgatorial fires of repentance and at last attained to peace under the guidance of divine wisdom and the chastening memories of his love for Beatrice.

He was too proud and reserved a man to tell his story with the outspoken frankness which is found in the *Confessions* of St.



Augustine. He therefore wrote the *Divina Commedia*, which not only tells the story of his own redemption, but also sets a crown of imperishable splendour on the brows of her whose faithful love had saved him from the depth of degradation. In many subtle ways the poem is also intended to be a warning to his countrymen to cease from civil strife and individual wrong-doing and to live in peace and virtue under the joint sway of the Pope and the Emperor, whom Dante believed to be the divinely appointed rulers of Italy.

No poem is so many-sided as the *Divina Commedia*: it would lead us far beyond the subject of the present paper if we were even to enumerate the objects which the poet had in mind when he wrote it. But it would seem that we shall find his principal motive for writing in the seventeenth canto of the *Paradiso* where Cacciaguida foretells his future exile from Florence. "Down in the world endlessly bitter," says the poet, "and along the mount from whose fair summit my lady's eyes unlifted me, and after through Heaven from light to light I have learnt that which if I tell again will have a bitter flavour for many". The reply of the old crusader admits of no excuse: "Conscience darkened by its own or another's shame will in truth find thine utterance grating. But nonetheless set every lie aside, make the entire vision manifest and let them scratch wherever is the scab; for if thy voice be grievous at the first taste, yet vital nutriment shall it leave thereafter when digested."

We may sum up the whole matter by saying that Homer's aim was to tell an enthralling story; Vergil's aim was to glorify the Roman name; but Dante's aim was to save the souls of those who would hear him.

This is one of the many tokens which prove to those who take the trouble to follow the trend of Western thought that the coming of Christianity brought a new conception of the meaning of life into the world. It was no syncretism of what had gone before, or the projection upon the sky of the developing excellences of human nature. That a man should care for the souls of other men so much as to make such a humiliating confession of his own experiences, even in so veiled a form, was unexampled until the time of Dante, as far as concerns a poet, especially a poet who was so learned and so proud a man.

We may find much that is repulsive and much that is tedious in his poem, but we must not fail to learn the lesson that he

would teach us or to follow the example that he has given us. He was a man to whom ten talents had been given: he made with them ten more and laid them all at the feet of Christ. He had learnt the lesson that what a man sows, that he must reap, and that, apart from divine grace, the sowing of tares can only bring after it a bitter harvest. He did not express these thoughts as we should do now, but the thoughts are there.

Even in the dark days of the "Babylonish Captivity" God did not leave Himself without a witness who spoke to the men who lived then in a tongue that they could understand. Let us accept the message, even if we reject the form under which it comes, and so learn the lesson which Dante puts into the mouth of Piccarda:

E la sua volontate è nostra pace;  
Ella è quel mare, al qual tutto si move  
Ciò che ella crea, e che natura face.<sup>1</sup>

"And in His will is our peace: it is that sea to which all moves which it createth and which nature makes."

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<sup>1</sup> *Paradiso* iii, 85-87.