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The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri: Inferno

Dante Alighieri

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The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri: Inferno Dante Alighieri
The "Divina Commedia" is an allegory of human life, in the form of a vision of the world beyond the grave, written avowedly with the object of converting a corrupt society to righteousness: "to remove those living in this life from the state of misery, and lead them to the state of felicity". It is composed of a hundred cantos, written in the measure known as terza rima, with its normally hendecasyllabic lines and closely linked rhymes, which Dante so modified from the popular poetry of his day that it may be regarded as his own invention. He is relating, nearly twenty years after the event, a vision which was granted to him (for his own salvation when leading a sinful life) during the year of jubilee, 1300, in which for seven days (beginning on the morning of Good Friday) he passed through hell, purgatory, and paradise, spoke with the souls in each realm, and heard what the Providence of God had in store for himself and to world. The framework of the poem presents the dual scheme of the "De Monarchiâ" transfigured. Virgil, representing human philosophy acting in accordance with the moral and intellectual virtues, guides Dante by the light of natural reason from the dark wood of alienation from God (where the beasts of lust pride, and avarice drive man back from ascending the Mountain of the Lord), through hell and purgatory to the earthly paradise, the state of temporal felicity, when spiritual liberty has been regained by the purgatorial pains. Beatrice, representing Divine philosophy illuminated by revelation, leads him thence, up through the nine moving heavens of intellectual preparation, into the true paradise, the spaceless and timeless empyrean, in which the blessedness of eternal life is found in the fruition of the sight of God. There her place is taken by St. Bernard, type of the loving contemplation in which the eternal life of the soul consists, who commends him to the Blessed Virgin, at whose intercession he obtains a foretaste of the Beatific Vision, the poem closing with all powers of knowing and loving fulfilled and consumed in the union of the understanding with the Divine Essence, the will made one with the Divine Will, "the Love that moves the sun and the other stars". The sacred poem, the last book of the Middle Ages, sums up the knowledge and intellectual attainment of the centuries that passed between the fall of the Roman Empire and the beginning of the Renaissance; it gives a complete picture of Catholicism in the thirteenth century in Italy. In the "Inferno", Dante's style is chiefly influenced by Virgil, and, in a lesser degree, by Lucan. The heir in poetry of the great achievement of St. Albertus Magnus and St. Thomas Aquinas in christianizing Aristotle, his ethical scheme and metaphysics are mainly Aristotelean while his machinery is still that of popular medieval tradition. It is doubtful whether he had direct acquaintance with any other account of a visit to the spirit world, save that in the sixth book of the "Æneid". But over all this vast field his dramatic sense played at will, picturing human nature in its essentials, laying bare the secrets of the heart with a hand as sure as that of Shakespeare. Himself the victim of persecution and injustice, burning with zeal for the reformation and renovation of the world, Dante's impartiality is, in the main, sublime. He is the man (to adopt his own phrase) to whom Truth appeals from her immutable throne, as such, he relentlessly condemns the "dear and kind paternal image" of Brunetto Latini to hell, though from him he had learned "how man makes himself eternal" while he places Constantine, to whose donation he ascribes the corruption of the Church and the ruin of the world in paradise. The pity and terror of certain episodes in the "Inferno" — the fruitless magnanimity of Farinata degli Uberti, the fatal love of Francesca da Rimini, the fall of Guido da Montefeltro, the doom of Count Ugolino — reach the utmost heights of tragedy.

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